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Sean L. Field. *Isabelle of France: Capetian Sanctity and Franciscan Identity in the Thirteenth Century*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006. 288p.

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Female independence and individuality in the Middle Ages could, under specific circumstances, be achieved by way of aspiring for a religious life. We know this, of course, from countless nuns and abbesses and to some extent from beguines, anchoresses, and then also from women who achieved the status of a saint. One intriguing case, Isabelle of France (1225-1270), is the focus of Sean L. Field's investigation, apparently based on his doctoral dissertation (Northwestern University, 2002). Isabelle immediately attracted considerable attention when she turned her back to the world, refused to get married, and then established a convent with her own Franciscan rule. Already in 1283, only a few years after her death, a close female member of her household, the third abbess of Longchamp, Agnes of Harcourt, composed the first biography, *Vie d'Isabelle*, which was followed, beginning in the early sixteenth century and extending until the immediate past (1982), by an uninterrupted stream of similar biographical work. The combination of being the member of the royal dynasty and her refusal to participate in the dynastic marriage politics, and ultimately her foundation of a convent (Longchamp, Abbaye de l'Humilité-de-Notre-Dame, 1260), contributed to the development of her fame as a saint. This sainthood, however, was not only instrumental in elevating Isabelle's status in public, it also created an aura of sanctity connected with the royal house (sacred monarchy). Elizabeth of Hungary served as a kind of model, but since she had lost her husband Ludwig en route to join the sixth crusade, and since she lived in Germany as a widow, far away from her family, the religious charisma certainly attributed to Elizabeth did not carry over to a dynasty.

Field at first offers a sort of biographical survey of Isabelle's youth up to the time when she refused to get married, which was a remarkable reflection of her independent mind and her individual authority within the family, especially because her father, King Louis VIII, had died in 1226 and her mother, Blanche of Castile, did not remarry. The author outlines Isabelle's intellectual education and identifies the books that she read and owned, which reveals this woman's high level of cultural development. Then he investigates where, when, and how Isabelle gained her family's acceptance of her decision to remain a virgin and to dedicate her life to God, which seems to have happened in 1244.

The princess demonstrated a strong interest in confessing and self-mortification, thereby demonstrating her religious intentions most vividly in public as well, which

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put her in an interesting parallel to the beguines, as Field rightly observes, insofar as she was most devout and yet still a person of this world.

In 1252 Queen Blanche died, which propelled her daughter to intensify her dedication to the religious life, leaning toward the Franciscans. In 1256 Pope Alexander IV even issued a bull in which he heaped praise on her virginal life, which clearly signals her public fame and the early stirring of her reputation as a saint. This became one of the foundational stones for her decision to establish a women's convent, Longchamp, which was completed in 1259.

Things became rather complicated in the following years because of the Franciscans' refusal to continue their pastoral care for Franciscan nuns. As Field illustrates, the battle really raged over what rules were to be accepted (Hugolino's of 1219, Innocent's of 1247, Clare's Rule of 1253) and who was in charge of the large number of religious women. The author examines the difference in considerable detail, and he specifically points toward the great influence that Isabella exerted in this regard. As the next chapter informs us, already in 1263 a new Rule was introduced at Longchamp, granted by the new Pope Urban IV, apparently under direct influence of the princess herself. This was also the time when the protection of the Franciscans had been divided in 1261 between Cardinal John Gaetano Orsini (men) and Cardinal Stephen of Hungary (women). Isabelle succeeded, as Field underscores, in inserting her own language and concepts into the Rule that applied to her house, which attracted attention far and wide. In fact, it was soon adopted by other women houses and gained high reputation even as far away as England and Italy. At the end there were at least up to twelve other houses across Europe that followed the Longchamp Rule.

We do not know whether Isabelle ever became a nun, but she was buried in her convent after she had lived there for some years before her death. This spurred then a long-lasting cult of the saintly figure Isabelle, which Field explores in the last chapters of his book. Nine days after her death the body was translated into another tomb, and the old robe was retained as a relic, which unofficially initiated a cult of saint worship, although it was the pope's privilege since the thirteenth century to declare a person a saint. Miracles were soon reported, and Isabelle automatically gained the status of a saint by public acclamation, so to speak. However, Field also emphasizes that the Capetian royal house added its weight and promoted this cult on its own because it served its political purposes very well.

This is a solidly researched investigation that focuses on one person but illuminates her far-reaching impact on the French royalty, the Franciscan Order, the papacy, and the populace far into the twentieth century. ✱