

Nash, Penelope, *The Spirituality of Countess Matilda of Tuscany*

Quaderni di Matildica 1 (Bologna: Pàtron editore, 2021) 112 pp. RRP € 16.00; ISBN: 9788855535298

As every schoolchild knows, or used to know, Matilda of Tuscany played a key role in the Middle Age's most iconic scene: the three-day penance in the snow performed by King Henry IV before Pope Gregory VII, in January of 1077 at Canossa. Matilda, indeed, was the host: Canossa was her fortress, Henry was her blood relative, and

Gregory her spiritual father. And this was not a one-off cameo. For a generation and more, from the mid-1070s until her death in 1115, Matilda was a formidable figure, arguably the most powerful uncrowned aristocrat in western Christendom.

In modern English-language scholarship, few have done more to burnish Matilda's reputation than Penelope Nash. Her 2017 study, *Empress Adelheid and Countess Matilda: Medieval Female Rulership and the Foundations of European Society* offered a synthesis of modern work (in several languages) on Matilda, and a bold new approach to boot. Comparing Matilda to Adelheid, who had held sway in the Saxon empire in the second half of the tenth century, allowed Nash to test the validity of the reigning orthodoxy about gender and power in medieval Europe. According to this view, current from the 1950s onwards, the position of elite women worsened after the turn of the first millennium. The loose family networks of the early Middle Ages, which allowed women plenty of room for manoeuvre, were seen to have given way to tighter structures, in which dynasties were organised around primogeniture—thus disinheriting younger sons and daughters. Women, supposedly, found it harder to operate in this new patriarchal dispensation. In comparing Adelheid and Matilda, Nash found that, whatever the overall validity of this picture, Matilda defied the trend, and spectacularly so. How did she manage it?

This brings us to the present study. Across barely 100 lucid and trenchant pages, Nash asks what made Matilda tick. Her earlier monograph is focused on power politics, landholding, and military tactics. Here Nash seeks to open a window onto Matilda's soul. This is of course an enterprise fraught with peril, and Nash goes about it with an appropriate sense of caution as to how much pressure the evidence will bear. She leads us through Matilda's letters, her charters, and the lives and treatises with which she was associated—and also the material cultural evidence of the manuscripts and the buildings she sponsored—to build up a picture of a mighty female patron with an acute sense of the limits of her capacity. The paradox is an alluring one, which would bear further exploration.

Lessons in the precariousness of power came with Matilda's upbringing, as Nash well observes. In the early 1050s, before Matilda was ten, her father was assassinated, and then her two older siblings died. With her mother Beatrice, she was imprisoned by the Emperor Henry III, who disapproved of Beatrice's new marriage to Godfrey of Lotharingia. Henry's death in 1056 meant their release, but other kinds of captivity awaited. In 1069, Matilda found herself betrothed against her wishes to her stepbrother, Godfrey's son by his earlier marriage (also called Godfrey). She gave birth to a daughter who died in infancy, after which Matilda looked to separate from her husband and become a nun. It was not to be. In 1076, both her mother and her husband died, and Matilda took up the reins as sole lord of huge estates on both sides of the Alps. To stage the great scene of penance and reconciliation at Canossa just a few months later was a significant moment of muscle flexing on her part.

By this stage, Matilda had gathered around her a circle of advisors, not least Pope Gregory VII. Nash draws our attention to three other figures in particular: Anselm of Lucca, who composed a key collection of canon law in support of Gregory's claims for papal power; John of Mantua, author of a commentary on the Song of Songs, a key devotional text; and, later, Anselm of Canterbury (whom as we should remember

came from northern Italy). These men sought to help Matilda articulate the balance between inner piety and the wielding of power in the world, or between the contemplative and active lives, as they would have put it. Central here was the Virgin Mary, about whom both Anselms composed prayers for Matilda. Mary was at once a humble, otherworldly figure, obedient to the commands of her Lord, and the queen of heaven, whom no one should lightly cross. To put it as its bluntest, Matilda was at war, and Mary was a war goddess, fit for purpose in the era of the First Crusade, as Nash reminds us.

All this came at a cost: Matilda made enemies and had to make sacrifices. There were scabrous rumours about her relationships with Gregory VII and with Anselm of Lucca. Both men came to her defence, but her advisors also urged her to remarry. This she did in 1089, taking Welf of Bavaria as her husband, although with no more enthusiasm than she had shown in her first match. Meanwhile she found that friends could falter. Bonizo of Sutri, for example, wrote in praise of Matilda, but then turned against her when she did not lend her full support to his candidacy of an episcopal see that he sought. In the event, Matilda had both the material and the spiritual resources to face down her detractors.

In her final years, Matilda got to tell the story her way. She ended her days collaborating with Donizo, a monk from Sant'Apollonio at Canossa, who produced a two-volume poem celebrating the house of Canossa, and specifically Matilda. As Nash notes, there are some telling omissions: no mention is made of Matilda's stepfather, her husbands, nor her daughter. The protagonists are her father and mother, and Matilda herself. It is as though she did get to act out her desire to become a nun.

There is in fact an elegiac quality to Donizo's account. Matilda had no surviving heir. She will have died knowing that the tradition of female rulership represented by her mother and herself ended with her. With or without her active acceptance, the lands of the house of Canossa were to pass to the emperor Henry V, son of the king whose will she had bent at Canossa. One hopes that Nash might return a third time to consider this aspect of Matilda's legacy. Was she the last of her kind? In the meantime, we can be grateful for this learned and lively study.

Conrad Leyser
Worcester College, Oxford