



*Princely Power in Late Medieval  
France: Jeanne de Penthièvre and  
the War for Brittany*

**Erika Graham-Goering**

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*Princely Power in Late Medieval France: Jeanne de Penthièvre and the War for Brittany*. By Erika Graham-Goering. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020. ISBN: 978-1-108-77390-4. pp. xiv + 287. £75.00.

As the first monograph of a scholar at a relatively early stage in her career, *Princely Power in Late Medieval France* represents a bold statement of intent. While the book takes as its focus the life and career of Jeanne de Penthièvre, Duchess of Brittany, during the mid to late fourteenth century, when the duchy was embroiled in a lengthy succession crisis, this is not a simple political biography. Indeed, only the opening chapter, which offers a valuable overview of Jeanne's career, is concerned specifically with the narrative of her life. After that, the remainder of the book is thematically arranged, with each chapter using a singular aspect of Jeanne's career as a microstudy of the nature of noble/princely power in this period. From this, Graham-Goering is able to use Jeanne's career as a lens through which to offer a thoughtful reconsideration of the nature of princely power in the later Middle Ages. In particular, she argues that historians are often too hasty to adopt a singular model of princely power when, in practice, there were "multiple, coexisting standards of princely action, and that navigating between these requirements, ideological as well as practical, was more important for the exercise of power than adhering to any single approach" (8).

Graham-Goering offers plenty of evidence to support this stance. In Chapter 3 she examines how Jeanne and her husband, Charles de Blois, worked both in tandem and individually in the management of their estates, revealing that it was the individual context that surrounded each property, rather than broad social ideals, which dictated how and when power was exerted by these two medieval princes. Similar conclusions emerge from chapters 4 and 5, which focus on the management of people—or, more specifically, political relationships—and law and order, respectively. Together, these chapters reveal how important the "co-lordship" of this husband and wife pairing was to the successful management of the duchy. This is significant because while it is becoming increasingly recognised by historians of medieval France that the exercise of lordly power was often a collective rather than individual effort, as Graham-Goering points out, there has been "no recognition so far of the potential place of spousal interactions within these co-lordship arrangements" (18). The final two chapters, chapters 6 and 7, meanwhile, look more broadly at the theory and practice of power in the period. In particular, Chapter 6 considers the legal arguments for and against Jeanne's claims to the vacant duchy in 1341, arguing that these carefully crafted cases imposed artificial structures that did not "capture the full complexity of political society" (216). Chapter 7 explores what these complexities were in more detail, showing how factors such as one's ancestry and the ability to "act ducally" were more important than the minutiae of legal theory in the exercise of power.

The overall effect of all of this is impressive, and Graham-Goering largely succeeds in her bid to portray princely power as a "kaleidoscope of social structures and ideas," rather than a rigid set of ideals (99). This is not to say that there are not a small number of shortcomings. Parts of the book are too heavily weighed down in the sort of technical

detail that betrays the fact that it has stemmed directly from the author's 2016 doctoral thesis. Likewise, the conclusion could have been longer to thoroughly bring together the different strands of the book. Nevertheless, one cannot help but be impressed by the skill with which Graham-Goering has handled her sources. Indeed, the 416 surviving *acta* from Jeanne's rule that form the main source-base of the book have been extensively mined for both the information they contain regarding the politics of the period, and the insight that they offer into the perception of authority in the fourteenth century. This is most apparent in Chapter 2, where the wording of Jeanne's *acta* are investigated to assess the rhetoric that surrounded power and authority in this period. Likewise, it is impressive to see such parity between English and French scholarship in the bibliography.

Overall, this book makes a valuable contribution to our understanding of noble power in the later Middle Ages. In no small part, this is because Jeanne is such an excellent case study. As Graham-Goering points out, most studies of female power in the late Middle Ages—especially on the continent—have focused on queens, and an extension of this into the nobility is most welcome (12). Moreover, Jeanne's central role in the Breton war of succession is, for the first time here, brought into full view. This leads to a number of important revelations, such as the fact that it was Jeanne's lineage, rather than her husband's politicking, which was central in winning popular support for the Penthièvre cause in the region. Likewise, the part Jeanne played in the negotiations for her husband's release following his capture by the English in 1347 is made plain for the first time. This book thus has plenty to offer historians interested in the nature of noble power in the medieval period, and how this played out during periods of sustained conflict.

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