

# The War of the Two Jeannes: Rulership in the Fourteenth Century

Katrin E. Sjursen

THE BRETON CIVIL WAR began late in the summer of 1341 and should have been over before the new year began. King Philip VI of France sent in his son John of Normandy (the future Jean II) to capture and remove the rebel claimant to the duchy, John of Montfort, which was accomplished by December. But Jeanne of Montfort, the wife of the defeated claimant, refused to give in, directing the rebel forces and seeking an ally in King Edward III of England, and so the war dragged on for six more years. In 1347, Edward's forces captured Philip's choice for the duchy, Charles of Blois, and *his* wife, Jeanne of Penthièvre, took over to lead their party in much the same way as Jeanne of Montfort had. This episode in Breton history immediately captured the imagination of contemporary chroniclers, the most famous of whom was Jean Froissart, who recounted breathtaking adventures involving last-minute escapes on horseback and intense skirmishes at sea.<sup>1</sup> The allure of the "War of the Two Jeannes" lived on beyond the Middle Ages, providing fodder for an epic poem in the nineteenth century,<sup>2</sup> a play in 1949, a *bande dessinée* (or illustrated history book) in the early twenty-first century, and a *spectacle historique* performed in Vannes, Brittany in 2012.<sup>3</sup>

1. Froissart relied heavily on the chronicle by Jean le Bel for Book I of his chronicle. Only one copy of le Bel's history survives today. See below for more on both writers.

2. The poem, Émile Péhant's, *Jeanne de Belleville* (Paris: Auguste Aubry, 1868), focused on yet a third Jeanne, Jeanne of Belleville, who, among other activities, took to piracy off the coast of Brittany to avenge her husband's death during the Breton Civil War.

3. Robert Bellanger, *La guerre des deux Jeanne: Drame historique* (Paris: Tour du guet, 1949); Pierre Stéphane, *Les boucliers noirs: L'épopée bretonne revisitée par Superbigou*, Tome 1, *Du Guesclin et la Bretagne du XIV<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Spezet: Breizh, 2004).

Yet almost no serious scholarly interest has been paid to these women, nor to the many other women who took part in the Breton Civil War,<sup>4</sup> even though the conflict itself has attracted the attention of historians writing in both French and English and can be usefully employed to expose how couples successfully wielded and shared power.<sup>5</sup> In fact, the

---

The Fédération Françaises des Fêtes et Spectacles Historiques put on a spectacle commemorating the “War of the Two Jeannes” in 2012. <http://www.ffsh.eu/spip.php?article317>, accessed March 19, 2013.

4. In the 1850s, the Breton scholar Arthur de La Borderie published a transcription of Jeanne de Penthièvre’s will. Arthur de La Borderie, “Inventaire du mobilier de Jeanne la Boiteuse, duchesse de Bretagne (1384),” *Revue des provinces de l’ouest (Bretagne et Poitou): Histoire, littérature, sciences et arts* 1, Part 2 (Nantes: A. Guéraud, 1853), 202–11. To my knowledge the only recent treatment devoted specifically to either woman is an unpublished conference paper, and I thank the author for generously sharing a copy with me. John Leland, “Heroine or Lunatic: The Alleged Madness of the Duchess of Brittany,” (Bowling Green State University, 1986). Each woman does gain attention within more general works on Breton women. See Jean-Christophe Cassard, “Les princesses de Bretagne. Approches matrimoniales d’une politique de souveraineté (XIIIe - XVe siècles),” in *Reines et princesses au Moyen Âge: Actes du cinquième colloque internationale de Montpellier Université Paul-Valéry (24-27 novembre 1999)*, ed. Marcel Faure, 2 vols. (Montpellier: Les Cahiers du C.R.I.S.I.M.A., 2001), 1:187–203, and Jean-Pierre Leguay, “Les duchesses de Bretagne et leurs villes,” in Faure, *Reines et princesses au moyen âge*, 1:151–86.

The two Jeannes’ female descendants, who appeared in later Breton struggles, have fared better, and though the actions of these women stemmed from disagreement with the outcome of the civil war, their actions are generally considered beyond the purview of the Breton Civil War of 1341–1364. See Michael Jones, “Between France and England: Jeanne de Navarre, Duchess of Brittany and Queen of England (1368–1437),” in *Between France and England: Politics, Power and Society in Late Medieval Brittany*, Variorum Collected Studies Series; CS769 (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2003), chap. 7; Arthur de La Borderie, “Le complot de Margot de Clisson (1420),” *Revue de Bretagne, de Vendée, et d’Anjou* 23 (June 1900): 405–21; Arthur de La Borderie, “Le complot de Margot de Clisson (1420),” *Revue de Bretagne, de Vendée, et d’Anjou* 24 (July 1900): 5–14; A. Bourdeaut, “Jean V and Marguerite de Clisson,” *Bulletin de la Société archéologique de Nantes et de la Loire-Inférieure* 54 (1913): 331–417; Michael Jones, “Marguerite de Clisson, comtesse de Penthièvre, et l’exercice du pouvoir,” in *Femmes de pouvoir, femmes politiques durant les derniers siècles du Moyen Âge et au cours de la première Renaissance*, ed. Eric Bousmar et al. (Brussels: De Boeck, 2012), 349–68.

5. The most prolific author on the Breton Civil War, in both English and

scholarship on fourteenth-century French noblewomen is rather thin overall, with the bulk focusing on individual women from the latter part of the century.<sup>6</sup> A study of the two Jeannes sheds light on a neglected region and time while also offering much material pertinent to issues of lordship, gender, and warfare. By looking at these two women as integral members of the lordship couple that comprised the leadership of the duchy, we can examine the division of labor between the nobleman and his wife and reevaluate the historiography of noble power in this period. Equally important, this article moves beyond arguments that noblewomen's power was relegated to the "domestic" or "private" sphere.

Recent work on noblewomen's experiences argues for greater recognition of women's participation in medieval politics, uncovering their work as mediators, gift givers, diplomats, and regents, among other roles.<sup>7</sup>

---

French, is Michael Jones. For a sampling, see *The Creation of Brittany: A Late Medieval State* (London: Hambledon, 1988); *Between France and England*; "War and Fourteenth-Century France," in *Arms, Armies and Fortifications in the Hundred Years War*, ed. Anne Curry and Michael Hughes (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell Press, 1994), 103–20; "Relations with France, 1337–1399," in *England and Her Neighbours, 1066–1453: Essays in Honour of Pierre Chaplais*, ed. Michael Jones and Malcolm Vale (London: Hambledon, 1989), 239–58; "Nantes au début de la guerre civile en Bretagne," in *Villes, bonnes villes, cités et capitales: Etudes d'histoire urbaine (XIIe–XVIIIe siècle) offertes à Bernard Chevalier*, ed. Monique Bourin (Caen: Paradigme, 1993), 105–20. In English, the fullest account is Jonathan Sumption, *The Hundred Years War: Trial by Battle* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999). For French studies, see Jean-Christophe Cassard, *La Guerre de succession de Bretagne: Dix-huit études* (Spézet: Coop Breizh, 2006).

6. Four colloquia in France have set the scene for a change in this direction, though the work is still at the stage of studies on individual women rather than broader syntheses. See Éric Bousmar, *Femmes de pouvoir*; Armel Nayt-Dubois and Emmanuelle Santinelli-Foltz, eds., *Femmes de pouvoir et pouvoir des femmes dans l'Occident médiéval et moderne* (Valenciennes: Presses Universitaires de Valenciennes, 2009); Faure, *Reines et princesses au moyen âge*; Philippe Contamine and Geneviève Contamine, eds., *Autour de Marguerite d'Écosse: Reines, princesses et dames du XVe siècle: actes du colloque de Thouars, 23 et 24 mai 1997* (Paris: H. Champion, 1999). In the same vein, see Justine Firnhaber-Baker, "The Fonds d'Armagnac: Some Archival Resources for the History of Languedocian Women," *Medieval Feminist Forum* 39, no. 1 (2005): 22–28.

7. This body of literature is large and growing. For women of the nobility, this work especially focuses on the High Middle Ages. See Theodore Evergates, ed.,

Whether or not they state it explicitly, these studies suggest a more comprehensive understanding of how lordship functioned, implying, if not arguing, that lordship entailed the active involvement of many parties rather than a single independent and autocratic count or duke. Taking her cue from Ernst Kantorowicz, Theresa Earenfight has explained most forcefully and fully this theory of complementary rulership, asserting that, despite medieval theories that equated monarchy exclusively with the king, in medieval practice “monarchy” necessitated the participation of queens just as much as of bureaucrats, councils, and royal favorites.<sup>8</sup> According to Earenfight, the queen did more than just assist the king; she shared governance with him, though the king’s and queen’s roles were clearly differentiated. The War of the Two Jeannes offers an opportunity to explore the manifestations of this theory of complementary rulership and shared governance on the level of counts and dukes.

Complementary rulership, shared governance, does not negate a hierarchical ordering of society. Medieval conviction of the innate

---

*Aristocratic Women in Medieval France* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999); Kathleen Nolan, ed., *Capetian Women* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); Bonnie Wheeler and John Carmi Parsons, eds., *Eleanor of Aquitaine: Lord and Lady* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); Susan M. Johns, *Noblewomen, Aristocracy and Power in the Twelfth-Century Anglo-Norman Realm* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003). For Brittany, see Amy Livingstone, “Extraordinairement ordinaire: Ermengarde de Bretagne, femmes de l’aristocratie et pouvoir en France au Moyen-Âge, v. 1090-1135,” trans. Mathieu Pichard, *Annales de Bretagne et des pays de l’Ouest* 121, no. 1 (2014): 7–25. For the later centuries, see Michelle Bubenicek, *Quand les femmes gouvernent: Droit et politique au XIVe siècle: Yolande de Flandre* (Paris: Ecole des chartes, 2002), and the studies in the previous footnote.

8. Theresa Earenfight, *The King’s Other Body: Maria of Castile and the Crown of Aragon* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009); Theresa Earenfight, “Without the Persona of the Prince: Kings, Queens and the Idea of Monarchy in Late Medieval Europe,” *Gender & History* 19, no. 1 (April 2007): 1–21, doi: 10.1111/j.1468-0424.2007.00461.x; Ernst Hartwig Kantorowicz, *The King’s Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology*, (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1957). For similar thoughts, see Erin Jordan, “The ‘Abduction’ of Ida of Boulogne: Assessing Women’s Agency in Thirteenth-Century France,” *French Historical Studies* 30, no. 1 (Winter 2007): 1–20, 4, doi: 10.1215/00161071-2006-017.

superiority of men over women is well documented,<sup>9</sup> as is the solidification by the thirteenth century of the diverse social groups into a hierarchical schema, in which the various titles of the nobility were ranked and ordered.<sup>10</sup> I contend, however, that the complementary rulership of a lordly couple allowed for the understanding of the husband's superiority even while recognizing the important contributions of the wife. This pattern of partnership was certainly not the only possible configuration of seigneurial marriage, nor was it new in the fourteenth century; the documentation of the experiences of the two Breton Jeannes, however, enables more precision in the definition of complementary rulership. Specifically, did separate roles for counts and countesses necessarily entail separate spheres of action? In other words, were noblewomen excluded from certain spheres, like warfare and politics, when the male counterpart was present and available?

Most scholars who have acknowledged the political contributions and experiences of medieval noblewomen locate them within the domestic sphere, an area defined as encompassing spouses and children as well as wider kinship networks, retainers, and tenants.<sup>11</sup> While older histo-

---

9. This literature is vast, though a good place to start is Alcuin Blamires, ed., *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended: An Anthology of Medieval Texts* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992).

10. David Crouch, *The Birth of Nobility: Constructing Aristocracy in England and France 900-1300* (New York: Pearson/Longman, 2005), chaps. 7-8. Georges Duby placed this development a century earlier in Georges Duby, *The Three Orders: Feudal Society Imagined*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

11. For the late Middle Ages, see Jennifer C. Ward, "Noblewomen, Family, and Identity in Later Medieval Europe," in *Nobles and Nobility in Medieval Europe: Concepts, Origins, Transformations*, ed. Anne J. Duggan (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell Press, 2000), 245-62; Barbara A. Hanawalt, "Lady Honor Lisle's Networks of Influence," in *Women and Power in the Middle Ages*, ed. Mary Erler and Maryanne Kowaleski (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1988), 188-214; Barbara Jean Harris, *English Aristocratic Women, 1450-1550: Marriage and Family, Property and Careers* (Oxford University Press, 2002). For the central Middle Ages, see Jo Ann McNamara and Suzanne Wemple, "The Power of Women through the Family in Medieval Europe, 500-1100," in Erler, *Women and Power in the Middle Ages*, 83-101; Jo Ann McNamara, "Women and Power through the Family Revisited," in *Gendering the Master Narrative: Women and Power in the Middle Ages*, ed. Mary C. Erler and

riography has viewed the domestic realm as restrictive, newer studies are not as sure. As Barbara Hanawalt argues, “Men as well as women built their careers and their access to power on exactly the same basis: spouse, kin, and connections.”<sup>12</sup> This sentiment acknowledges that the domestic realm did not constrain women so much as act as the base of women’s power, which, as Barbara Harris reminds us, could have wide political and economic effects as well as domestic.<sup>13</sup> For these scholars, noblewomen participated in politics from within a specific sphere, and though that sphere was populated by men as well, women did not venture into other “exclusively male” domains.

In a similar vein, some scholars have used the theory that tied women to the domestic realm to undergird hypotheses that women exercised political power only when husbands were unavailable—thus in a temporary, impermanent capacity. Such hypotheses would relegate noblewomen to very specific, “female” roles and explain politically or militarily active women either as acceptable on a temporary basis or as exceptional (if the activity persisted over time).<sup>14</sup> In these cases, complementary rulership becomes a tag-team strategy, with one person in charge at all

---

Maryanne Kowaleski (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003), 17–31; Georges Duby, *The Knight, the Lady, and the Priest: The Making of Modern Marriage in Medieval France*, trans. Barbara Bray (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1983); Georges Duby, “Women and Power,” in *Cultures of Power: Lordship, Status, and Process in Twelfth-Century Europe*, ed. Thomas N. Bisson (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), 69–85.

12. Hanawalt, “Lady Honor Lisle’s Networks of Influence,” 209. See, also, Kimberly A. LoPrete, “Women, Gender and Lordship in France, c.1050–1250,” *History Compass* 5, no. 6 (2007): 1921–41, doi: 10.1111/j.1478-0542.2007.00474.x.

13. Harris, *English Aristocratic Women*.

14. Megan McLaughlin, “The Woman Warrior: Gender, Warfare and Society in Medieval Europe,” *Women’s Studies* 17, no. 3–4 (1990): 193–209, doi: 10.1080/00497878.1990.9978805; James E Gilbert, “A Medieval ‘Rosie the Riveter’? Women in France and Southern England During the Hundred Years War,” in *The Hundred Years War: A Wider Focus*, ed. L. J. Andrew Villalon and Donald J. Kagay (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 333–63; Marcelle Renée Reynaud, “Deux princesses—et reines—de la deuxième maison d’Anjou-Provence: Marie de Blois Penthièvre et Yolande d’Aragon (ca 1360–ca 1442),” in Faure, *Reines et princesses au moyen âge*, 1:277–90; in the same collection, see also Cassard, “Les princesses de Bretagne,” and Leguay, “Les duchesses de Bretagne et leurs villes.”

times. This theory has begun to face criticism, however. For example, Michel Margue has rightly pointed out that the activities of noble wives when residing with active and present spouses deserve further study in order to balance the plethora of studies of women suddenly thrust into power only as widows or regents.<sup>15</sup> Studies on the activities of Adela of Blois, Jeanne of Valois, and previous Breton countesses when still wives with present husbands have only begun to scratch the surface here.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, as Amy Livingstone's and Kimberly LoPrete's work has demonstrated, women, even as young children, were included in political charters, indicating that girls were reared to rule.<sup>17</sup> Further, Barbara Harris questions whether times of disorder really did offer more power to women. She finds that the Wars of the Roses, a clearly disorderly period of English history in which many noblewomen were left to manage their homefronts, did not really provide new opportunities for women; legal restrictions on women, for instance, remained operational.<sup>18</sup> These correctives to the scholarship force a reconsideration of just how divided rulership could have been if so many noblewomen handily picked up the reins of power when husbands disappeared.

If rulership was shared to a greater extent than previously recognized by traditional scholarship, how should we approach the study of medieval noblewomen? The focus on a domestic sphere of activity is rooted in a theory of a separation between "public" and "private" realms, with women (in domestic spheres) relegated to the private.<sup>19</sup> While scholars have questioned the applicability of a public/private divide for the Middle Ages, the model has persisted, making it easy to assume that women

---

15. Michel Margue, "L'épouse au pouvoir: Le pouvoir de l'héritière entre 'pays', dynasties et politique impériale à l'exemple de la maison de Luxembourg (XIIIe-XIVe s.)," in Bousmar, *Femmes de pouvoir*, 269–310.

16. On Adela, see the many articles and the book by Kimberly A. LoPrete, *Adela of Blois: Countess and Lord (c.1067–1137)* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2007). On Jeanne, see Anneke Mulder-Bakker, "Jeanne of Valois: The Power of a Consort," in Nolan, *Capetian Women*, 253–69. For the Breton wives, see footnote 4.

17. Amy Livingstone, *Out of Love for My Kin: Aristocratic Family Life in the Lands of the Loire, 1000–1200* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010); LoPrete, *Adela of Blois*.

18. Harris, *English Aristocratic Women*.

19. For some examples, see Ward, "Noblewomen," in Erler and Kowaleski, *Women and Power in the Middle Ages*.

participated in politics from within a specific sphere. Recently Erin Jordan has proposed that scholars instead utilize a model predicated on the division between authority (the legitimate right to rule) and power (the ability to get things done).<sup>20</sup> Such a model, Jordan argues, recognizes that politics (frequently defined as public) often was conducted in the domestic (private) realm. For her, the key is to analyze to what extent a noblewoman held political authority and whether she wielded political power. A theory of complementary rulership would suggest that a noblewoman's authority derived from her status as part of the lordship unit rather than her access to a husband or son.

Applying this theory of complementary rulership to lordship, I argue, explains aspects of noblewomen's political experiences, such as how the two Jeannes of the Breton Civil War stepped ostensibly seamlessly into the military and political affairs of the duchy when their respective husbands disappeared into captivity. It also explains why and how the two Jeannes corresponded with major political figures outside their domestic or kinship networks. These two Jeannes participated in military affairs both in conjunction with and in the absence of their husbands, indicating that military activities were part of the job description for noblewomen in fourteenth-century France. Additionally, by focusing on a civil war that involved the kings of France and England, we see noblewomen involved in both internal and external affairs of the duchy and thus active beyond the merely "domestic" realm.

Before we begin with the stories of these two women, however, we must rehearse a bit of background on the war itself. In April 1341, Duke John III of Brittany died without clearly naming a successor to the duchy.<sup>21</sup> Despite three marriages, John had no legitimate children of his own, and after the death of his younger brother Guy in 1331, he proposed to sell the duchy to Philip VI, a plan the Breton nobility vigorously

---

20. Jordan, "The 'Abduction' of Ida of Boulogne," 5–6. Helen Maurer also utilizes this distinction between "power" and "authority," but she links it to the public/private divide by labeling authority as public and power as private. Helen E. Maurer, *Margaret of Anjou: Queenship and Power in Late Medieval England* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell Press, 2005), 5.

21. For the Breton Civil War, see (in addition to the works noted in footnote 5) Arthur de La Borderie and B. Pocquet, *Histoire de Bretagne*, 6 vols. (Rennes: H. Vatar, 1896).

opposed.<sup>22</sup> Looking to his own family, he seemed to favor each of the two eventual claimants in turn (fig. 1), his niece, Jeanne of Penthièvre, and his half brother, John of Montfort. His attention turned first to his niece, Jeanne of Penthièvre, Guy's only child. In 1337, Duke John married this niece to Charles of Blois, a nephew of King Philip VI.

By contrast, for most of his rule, Duke John was explicit about his distaste for the rival claimant to the duchy, his half brother John of Montfort, the son of Duke Arthur II by a second marriage. Nonetheless, John of Montfort claimed that three years after Jeanne's marriage to Philip's nephew, Duke John had reconciled with him.<sup>23</sup> Moreover,

22. The chronicler Guillaume de Nangis explained that John proposed to leave Brittany to Philip VI "in order to avoid the dangers which would befall the kingdom should the duchy fall into the hands of a woman, namely his niece who said she had claims to it . . . but certain Bretons opposing this, the negotiations remained incomplete . . . and finally it all came to nothing." As quoted in Michael C. E. Jones, "The Breton Civil War," in *Froissart, Historian*, ed. J. J. N. Palmer (Totowa, NJ: Rowman & Littlefield, 1981), 211.

23. John of Montfort himself offered this information in his legal case for the

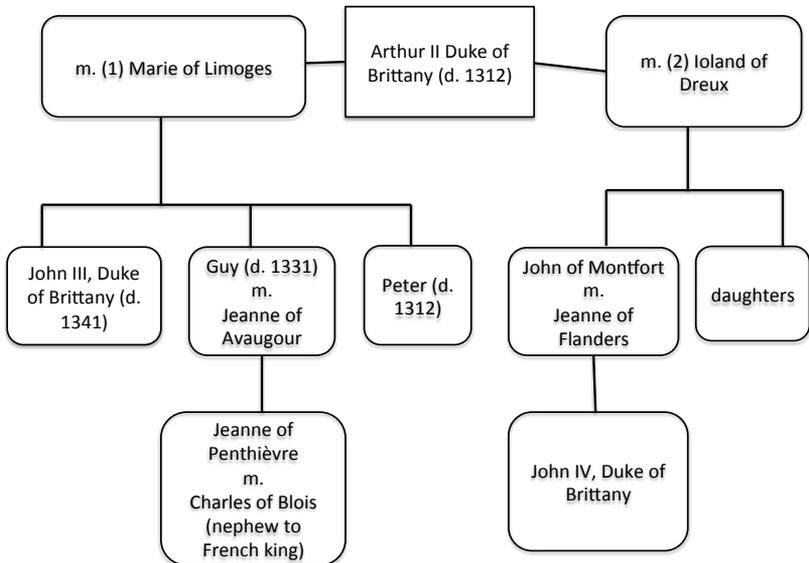


Figure 1. Family Tree

as Montfort was to argue during his legal suit for the duchy, Brittany was a peerage of the French realm and thus subject to the same succession practices that governed the French kingship and explicitly excluded women from succession.<sup>24</sup> He was implicitly countering the Breton practice of female succession that had occurred in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries before Brittany attained peerage.<sup>25</sup> Because Duke John never explicitly named his successor, he left behind two rivals with equally solid claims on the duchy, so it was perhaps inevitable that royal authority (i.e., an external, non-domestic force) would get involved almost immediately.

King Philip VI decided the legal dispute over the duchy in favor of Jeanne of Penthièvre and Charles, but Montfort made a quick escape from the Parisian court back to Brittany in September 1341 and began to press his suit through military means. In November, the combined forces of Charles of Blois and John of Normandy (Philip's son and heir, whom Philip had sent to fix the problem) captured John of Montfort and in December sent him to Paris. John of Montfort's imprisonment in Paris would have been the end of the short-lived rebellion, if not for Montfort's wife, Jeanne of Montfort. In her husband's absence, Jeanne became the visible head of the Montfortist party in Brittany, calling in Edward III of England and leading a strong resistance to Charles of Blois and his wife, Jeanne of Penthièvre.

The evidence from chronicles is most important in examining the careers of the two Jeannes, especially Jeanne of Montfort, who, like her husband, left behind only a scarce handful of documents. The works by Jean le Bel and Jean Froissart come to the fore because they provide the

---

duchy. Michael Jones, "Some Documents Relating to the Disputed Succession to the Duchy of Brittany, 1341," in *Camden Miscellany*, vol. 24, Camden Fourth Series, vol. 9 (London: Royal Historical Society, 1972), 17–18, doi:10.1017/S008690500002853.

24. *Ibid.*, 23–25.

25. Yannick Hillion, "La Bretagne et la rivalité Capétiens-Plantagenêts: Un exemple: la duchesse Constance (1186–1202)," *Annales de Bretagne et des pays de l'Ouest* 92, no. 2 (1985): 111–44; Judith Everard and Michael C. E. Jones, eds., *The Charters of Duchess Constance of Brittany and Her Family, 1171–1221* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell Press, 1999); Melissa Pollock, "Duchesses and Devils: The Breton Succession Crisis (1148–1189)," *French History* 23, no. 2 (2009): 149–70, doi:10.1093/fh/crp003; Livingstone, "Extraordinairement ordinaire."

most detail about these two women. A Liégeois noble and enthusiastic supporter of Edward III's cause, le Bel was disposed to think favorably of the Montforts, who sided with Edward.<sup>26</sup> Froissart used le Bel's chronicle (composed during the 1350s up to 1361) as the basis of his own account of the beginning of the Hundred Years War, which he finished about 1373. He went on to revise what became Book 1 of his chronicle several more times, while simultaneously adding on to the earlier redactions for various patrons, such as Guy of Blois, a nephew of Jeanne of Pen-thièvre's husband.<sup>27</sup>

Historians have long questioned both the biases and the accuracy of these two works, though both le Bel and Froissart unequivocally stated that reporting the truth as it came to them from reliable eyewitnesses was the whole purpose of their chronicles. According to a contemporary chronicler, le Bel's patron commissioned him to write a "true history," presumably to counter the verse history full of fabrications that le Bel disparaged in the opening lines to his chronicle.<sup>28</sup> Instead, le Bel wrote, "I want and intend to take pains . . . to write in prose what I have seen and heard and to record from those who have been there where I have not been, as very close to the truth as I am able."<sup>29</sup> For his part, Froissart began his prologue "I wish to keep busy with organizing and putting into prose [these wars] according to the true information that I have had from valiant men, knights and squires, who have helped them to increase, and also from any kings of arms and their marshals, who by law are and should be just inquisitors and reporters of such dangers."<sup>30</sup> He

---

26. For more on le Bel, see Diana B. Tyson, "Jean Le Bel: Portrait of a Chronicler," *Journal of Medieval History* 12, no. 4 (1986): 315–32.

27. J. J. N. Palmer, "Book I (1325–78) and Its Sources," in Palmer, *Froissart: Historian*, 7–24, 161–64.

28. See Nigel Bryant's introduction in Jean le Bel, *The True Chronicles of Jean Le Bel 1290–1360*, trans. Nigel Bryant (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell Press, 2011), 1.

29. "Je veul mectre paine et entente, quant je pourray avoir loisir, d'escrire par prose ce que je ay veu et ouy recorder par ceulx qui ont esté là où je n'ay pas esté, au plus prez de la verité que je pourray." Jean le Bel, *Chronique de Jean Le Bel*, ed. Jules Viard and Eugène Déprez, 2 vols. (Paris: Société de l'histoire de France, 1904), vol. 1: Prologue, 3–4 (hereafter references are to volume, part, and page). Translations are the author's unless otherwise indicated.

30. "Je me voel ensonniiier de l'ordonner et mettre en prose selonch le vraie

also explained that he used Jean le Bel's work as well, the only written source he named in his prologue. This concern for methodology and verifying information extends beyond the prologues, particularly when a certain incident itself was difficult to prove. As an example of how eagerly he valued truth over flattery, le Bel painfully included reports of Edward III's shameful rape of the Countess of Salisbury, an incident that Froissart viewed as slanderous and unworthy of inclusion.<sup>31</sup> Le Bel and Froissart aimed to create as accurate a record of the wars between Edward III and France as was possible for their time.

The search for truth was so very important to le Bel and Froissart because they wished to inspire their audiences to perform honorable deeds like those they worked so hard to ascertain. "A rhyming history," le Bel claimed, "with such fabrications would seem unpleasant and disagreeable to people of reason and consideration. For one could well attribute, by such unmeasured words, to any knight or squire noble deeds so outrageous that [the man's] valor would be diminished, for their true deeds would be less believable, which would be a great shame for them."<sup>32</sup> A paragon of chivalry deserved his reputation only if his feats were believable; he became a model for others only if these deeds were attainable rather than fanciful. Froissart is even more direct, stating

---

information que j'ay eu des vaillans hommes, chevaliers et escuiers, qui les ont aidies à acroistre, et ossi de aucuns rois d'armes et leurs mareschaus, qui par droit sont et doivent estre juste inquisiteur et rapporteur de tels besongnes." Jean Froissart, *Chroniques*, ed. Siméon Luce et al., 9 vols. (Paris: Société de l'histoire de France, 1869), vol. 1, part 2: Prologue, 1 (hereafter references are to vol. and page). Note, however, that modern historians have found Froissart's intentions much more complicated, particularly as related to Book 1, which Froissart redacted several times for different patrons (and not always in the direction of more accuracy). See George T. Diller, "Froissart: Patrons and Texts," in Palmer, *Froissart: Historian*, 145–60, 182–83. See also, Peter F. Ainsworth, *Jean Froissart and the Fabric of History: Truth, Myth, and Fiction in the Chroniques* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1990).

31. le Bel, *Chronique*, 2: chap. 65, 30–34.

32. "par quoy telle hystoire ainsy rimée par telz controveurs pourroit sembler mal plaisant et mal agreable à gens de raison et d'entendement. Car on pourroit bien attribuer, par telles parolles si desmesurées, sur aucuns chevaliers ou escuiers proesses si outrageuses que leur vaillance en pourroit estre abessée, car leurs vrais fais en seroient mains creus, de quoy ce seroit dommage pour eulx." le Bel, *Chronique*, 1: Prologue, 2.

that his chronicle “will be of such matters and examples to encourage [others] to do good, for the memory of good deeds and the record of prowess stirs and enflames by reason the hearts of young bachelors.”<sup>33</sup> Both men intended their chronicles as a record of contemporary feats of nobility and valor, amazing and marvelous but still true and something that their audience could aspire to emulate.

Nevertheless, le Bel’s and Froissart’s desire for accuracy regarding chivalric deeds must not be confused with the modern historian’s concern for accuracy regarding precise timing and location of actions. To these two medieval chroniclers, when and where an action took place was less important than the deed itself and attributing honor to whom it was due.<sup>34</sup> And inevitably, they sometimes got events wrong, but the deeds were nonetheless *credible* or they would not have passed le Bel’s and Froissart’s filters for accuracy. Rather than disregard the chronicles because of their occasional inaccuracies, I propose we take into consideration their frequent claims to purveying truth. Both writers believed their stories were accurate, even including incidents they would rather ignore (such as the rape of the Countess of Salisbury).<sup>35</sup>

So, while the details of the events may not be provable to the satisfaction of modern historical methods and goals, the writers depicted events, attitudes, and power structures that were completely plausible to them and their readers. As Ruth Morse has explained when discussing the fifteenth-century Augustinian friar John Capgrave, the historian “embellished his sources according to his knowledge (from oral and written sources as well his own and common experience) and the picture he

---

33. “Et ce sera à yaus matère et exemples de yaus encoragier en bien faisant, car la memore des bons et li recors des preus atisent et enflament par raison les coers des jones bacelers.” Froissart, *Chroniques*, 1, pt 2: Prologue, 3.

34. See Bryant’s introduction to le Bel, *True Chronicles*, 4.

35. Scholars have, of course, disagreed over the veracity of this incident. Antonia Gransden, for example, concludes that le Bel fell victim to French propaganda, while Diana Tyson opines that le Bel would not have included the incident without conclusive testimony. Antonia Gransden, “The Alleged Rape by Edward III of the Countess of Salisbury,” *English Historical Review* 87, no. 343 (1972): 333–44, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/563289>; Diana Tyson, “Jean Le Bel: Portrait of a Chronicler.”

wished to draw.”<sup>36</sup> Le Bel and Froissart chose which incidents to include in their histories and described these events in commonly recognized terms in order to persuade their readers of a “truth,” namely the value and merit of chivalry. Thus, their presentations of the two Jeannes fit into commonly understood power structures, whether or not the specific details of who said what actually occurred. Their chronicles provide a model of how noblewomen could or should have acted.<sup>37</sup>

To flesh out the picture painted by the chroniclers, this essay will also examine a few less loquacious contemporary chronicles (all from the pro-French perspective) and diplomatic documents, such as treaties, charters, and expense records. Sometimes these documents corroborate accounts in le Bel’s and Froissart’s works; other times, the documents offer evidence of even greater political and military involvement by the two Jeannes. Most significantly, the documents reveal attitudes toward noblewomen and power similar to those found in the chronicles: like the chroniclers’ inclination to describe these women in positions of power, the willingness of kings and nobles to treat directly with these women and refer to them as lords demonstrates their faith in the women’s military and political authority.

### Shared Rulership Through Marriage: Jeanne of Montfort

At first glance, Jeanne of Montfort appears to fit the model of the courageous noblewoman who steps into the fray only when her husband disappears from it. For example, while none of the couple’s own papers from before John’s capture survive today, the few documents from Edward III of England show this king dealing solely with John until after his capture, when Edward dealt also with Jeanne. According to le Bel and Froissart, however, Jeanne participated in the war even before her

---

36. Ruth Morse, *Truth and Convention in the Middle Ages: Rhetoric, Representation and Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 1.

37. Richard Barton advances this argument in regard to eleventh-century warfare. Richard Barton, “Writing Warfare, Lordship and History: The *Gesta Consulum Andegavorum*’s Account of the Battle of Alençon,” in *Anglo-Norman Studies 27: Proceedings of the Battle Conference, 2004*, ed. John Gillingham (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell Press, 2005), 45–46.

husband was captured. Furthermore, the ease with which she took over command of the Montfort party during his incarceration indicates that the Montfort vassals and allies were accustomed to thinking of her as possessing lordly authority, even in military affairs, because she already exercised lordly power.

In the first seven months of the Breton War, John of Montfort took the more visible role in the chronicle accounts of the couple's joint rule, assuming control of the more noticeable aspects of political and military affairs. As soon as John heard the news of his half brother's death, le Bel and Froissart wrote, he rushed to Nantes to require homage from the citizens, for without the support of the Breton towns and nobles, he could not hope to make good on his claim. John then left for the city of Limoges, a contested area to the south of Brittany only recently added to the ducal lordship, to secure the treasury and receive homage from that city as well.<sup>38</sup> John hoped to use the treasury and to build on the support of these two major towns, both inside and outside of Brittany, to prove to outsiders that he was the legitimate authority in Brittany and to solidify his rule. The chroniclers relate, however, that the Montforts lost their gamble on attracting the important Breton nobility to their side, so John took to the Breton countryside, winning over each city and fortress by force of arms. He capped off this tour with a flying visit to England to recruit Edward III's aid.<sup>39</sup> Not to be outdone, Charles of Blois, the husband of the rival claimant to the duchy, complained to Philip VI, who ordered John, without naming Jeanne, to come to Paris to settle the dispute via legal means. After some hesitation, John did go to Paris, while Jeanne presumably remained behind.<sup>40</sup> This campaign across the countryside followed by the quick trip across the channel likely never happened, but both chroniclers believed these activities were plausible enough to include them in their chronicles.<sup>41</sup> More importantly for

---

38. le Bel, *Chronique*, 1: chap. 46, 248-49; Froissart, *Chroniques*, 2:88-89. As the sole heiress of Limoges, Marie of Limoges brought her viscounty with her in her marriage to John of Montfort's father, Duke Arthur II.

39. le Bel, *Chronique*, 1: chap. 46, 250-59; Froissart, *Chroniques*, 2:90-102.

40. le Bel, *Chronique*, 1: chap. 47, 261-62; Froissart, *Chroniques*, 2:103-5.

41. Michael C. E. Jones, "Ancenis, Froissart and the Beginnings of the War of Succession in Brittany (1341)," in *Between France and England*, 5-12.

our purposes, they depicted only John, and never Jeanne, fighting and securing allies at this stage of the war, indicating that these political and military activities were more rightly performed by the male half of the lordly couple when both members were present and active.

Left with just this evidence, a picture emerges of a male lord as a sole ruler, at least in the spheres of politics and warfare, but the chroniclers also provided many examples that included Jeanne in these areas of lordship. Indeed, the chroniclers paint, instead, a picture of a close collaboration between the husband and wife in which the wife also participated in political and military affairs but in different ways from her husband. While the John of the chronicles made the external political alliances and participated in the physical fighting, Jeanne provided advice and strategy.

For the entirety of the seven-month period before John's capture, both chroniclers also noted the active political and military involvement of Jeanne of Montfort, who, they often took care to note, had "the heart of a man and a lion." While she did not fight at this stage, the chroniclers did depict her as an authority figure and part of the lordship unit. For example, immediately after John first heard the news of his brother the duke's death and demanded homage from the city of Nantes, "he and Madame his wife, who had well the heart of a man and a lion, were together advised that they should hold a grand court and solemn feast at Nantes," to which all the barons should come "to pay homage and fealty to him [John]."<sup>42</sup> While Jeanne was not identified as a recipient of the fealty and homage, le Bel's councilors (but not Froissart's) did include her when rendering advice about the steps needed to secure control of the duchy. Later on, "they were both advised to retain foot and mounted soldiers . . . so that they could achieve their intention."<sup>43</sup> Again, the

---

42. "Il et madame sa femme, laquelle avoit bien cuer d'omme et de lyon, eurent ensemble conseil qu'ilz tendroient une grand court et feste solemnele à Nantes, et manderoient tous les barons et les conseilliers des cités et du paiz qu'ilz venissent à celle feste pour luy faire hommage et feauté." le Bel, *Chronique*, 1: chap. 46, 248. "Ils et la contesse sa femme, qui bien avoit coer d'omme et de lyon, eurent conseil ensamble qu'il tenroient une grant court et feste solennèle à Nantes, et manderoient tous les barons et les nobles del pays de Bretagne et les consaulz des bonnes villes et de toutes les cités, qu'il volsissent estre et venir à celle court, pour faire feauté à lui come à leur droit signeur." Froissart, *Chroniques*, 2:88.

43. "Si eurent conseil entre eulx de retenir souldoiers à pié et à cheval tous ceulx

advisors addressed the couple as a unit, specifically including Jeanne in making decisions about military matters. They did not, however, in either chronicle, include her when they advised John “to go conquer by force or by love the whole country and destroy all the rebels.”<sup>44</sup>

Thus, the chroniclers viewed the female lord (Jeanne) as an integral part of the lordship unit, fully capable of and often expected to take part in making political and military decisions, but they reserved the physical fighting for the male lord (John). The lack of commentary indicating surprise or suggesting that a woman’s involvement in decisions of war was a rarity implies that the chroniclers, and presumably their readership, accepted the noble wife’s participation in warfare. Further, this straightforward treatment of Jeanne’s participation in decisions of war implies that the chroniclers operated under the assumption that lordship was a complementary rulership.

In depicting her as one half of the noble couple unit, the chroniclers took care to set Jeanne apart from the rest of the comital entourage, also highlighting her contributions as a privileged confidant and advisor, in other words, as an authority figure herself. When John completed his mad dash to Limoges to secure the treasury, he returned to “madame his wife . . . who was full of joy at this news.”<sup>45</sup> The chronicles give the impression that her approval completed the seizure of the ducal treasury, as the following sentence introduced the next scene, in which the couple’s grand feast took place. Similarly, when John returned from his

---

qui venir vouldroient et de partir ce grand tresor, affin qu’ilz venissent à leur intention.” le Bel, *Chronique*, 1: chap. 46, 249. By contrast, Froissart mentions only John here: “Et eurent conseil entre yaus de retenir saudoiers à cheval et à piet, tous ceulz qui venir vorroient, et de departir ce grant tresor que trouve avoient, pour mieus venir le dit cont à son pourpos de la ditte ducé de Bretagne.” Froissart, *Chroniques*, 2:89–90.

44. “Quant ledit conte de Montfort vit qu’il eut gens à pyé et à cheval en grand nobmre, il eut conseil d’aler conquerre par force ou par amours tout le paiz et destruire tous rebelles à son pouoir.” le Bel, *Chronique*, 1: chap. 46, 250. “Quant li contes de Montfort perchut qu’il avoit gens à plentet, il eut conseil de aler conquerre, par force ou par amours, tout le pays, et de destruire tous rebelles à son pooir.” Froissart, *Chroniques*, 2:90.

45. “Là, madame sa femme estoit, qui eut grand joye de ces nouvelles.” le Bel, *Chronique*, 1: chap. 46, 249. “Là où madame sa femme estoit, qui eut grant joie del grant tresor que ses sires avoit trovvet.” Froissart, *Chroniques*, 2:89.

supposed trip to England, he related to his wife the agreement he had made with Edward III. According to Froissart, Jeanne reacted with joy and advised him that he had acted with good counsel.<sup>46</sup> In the chronicler's perspective, her opinion mattered enough that John discussed the details of the alliance with her, and her approval was recorded. In the next episode, after John fled Paris and what he correctly feared would be a negative response to his legal plea for the duchy, he returned to relate the sad news to Jeanne, who advised him on defensive actions. John needed to discuss the state of affairs with his wife and to discuss their strategy going forward. As the chroniclers report it, it was "then [that] he went, by the advice of his wife, who had well the heart of a man and a lion, through all the cities, castles and good towns that were to be rendered to him, and establish throughout good captains and so great a number of foot and mounted soldiers as he could there, and plenty of provisions."<sup>47</sup> By her advice, John shored up the defenses in preparation for the retaliation that would surely follow his escape from the Parisian court.

The chroniclers le Bel and Froissart evidently believed, and never questioned their audience would doubt, that Jeanne of Montfort did take part in the counsel, planning, and implementation of the war efforts within the duchy itself. Their presentation of the couple declares that Jeanne and her husband worked together as a unit, which offers an opportunity to reexamine the division of gender roles at the noble level and within the historiography on nobility. In these two chronicles, both

---

46. "Et puis s'en vint en le cité de Nantes, où il trouva la contesse sa femme, à qui il recorda comment il avoit exploitiet. De ce fu elle toute joians, et li dist qu'il avoit très bien ouvré et par bon conseil." Froissart, *Chroniques*, 2:102. Le Bel merely noted that Jeanne received her husband with great joy. le Bel, *Chronique*, 1: chap. 46, 259.

47. "Quant if fu revenus dalés le contesse sa femme qui estoit à Nantes, il li compta toute sen aventure, puis ala par le conseil de sa femme, qui avoit bien coer d'omme et de lyon, par toutes les cités, les chastiaus et les bonnes villes qui estoient à lui rendues, et establi par tout bons capitainnes et si grant plenté de saudoiiers à piet et à cheval qu'il y couvenoit, et grans pourveances de vivres à l'avenant." Froissart, *Chroniques*, 2:105. "Quant il fut retourné à Nantes par devers madame sa femme, il luy conta dolentement tout le fait, puis par le conseil d'elle, laquelle avoit bien cuer de lyon, il ala par toutes les bonnes cités, villes et chasteaulx, et renforcha les garnisons et les pourveances." le Bel, *Chronique*, 1: chap. 47, 262.

members of the noble couple participated in war; sex was not a barrier, suggesting that perhaps warfare was not reserved exclusively for men (at least, not at the noble level). Nonetheless, the husband and wife did perform different duties within the sphere of warfare, with John leading the physical fighting and dealing with external authorities, while Jeanne advised on military maneuvers. It is worth noting, too, that all of this action took place in 1341, the year that Jeanne gave birth to her second child, which may have prevented her from traveling and thus participating in some of John's activities. As we will see with the rival claimant, Jeanne de Penthièvre, a woman unencumbered by pregnancy might very well have attended sieges with her husband.

Once Jeanne of Montfort's husband was defeated, in November 1341 (negotiations for his surrender lasted into December), she seamlessly took over as leader of the Montfortist party. In some instances, Jeanne merely extended the political and military activities she had been engaged in before her husband's capture. Chroniclers for both sides depicted her performing the tasks she had previously advised her husband to accomplish. The *Chronique normande* explains that her first move upon hearing the news of her husband's capture was to secure her treasury, moving it to the castle of Brest under the guard of Tanguy of Chastel, just as le Bel and Froissart claimed her husband had taken it from Limoges on the death of his brother.<sup>48</sup> Le Bel and Froissart showed her shoring up defenses, rallying morale, and traveling about the duchy as if on a modern-day presidential campaign. For example, she continually sent reinforcements and provisions to the towns pledging loyalty to her cause.<sup>49</sup> A single document from March 1342 dealing with internal affairs from Jeanne herself survives to corroborate the chronicles' picture of Jeanne's active participation in the war efforts. In this letter, Jeanne promised to safeguard the people and goods of Saint-Malo by sea and

---

48. Auguste Molinier and Emile Molinier, eds., *Chronique normande du XIV<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Publications de la Société de l'histoire de France (Paris: Renouard/Henri Loones, 1882), 53.

49. For an example of her further work toward garrisoning and provisioning her cities, see le Bel, *Chronique*, 1: chap. 47, 271-72 and chap. 52, 299-300; Froissart, *Chroniques*, 2:114-15 and 138-39.

by land.<sup>50</sup> In other words, Jeanne committed herself to military action in order to protect this town.

In addition to extending Jeanne's prior political and military activities, the chroniclers described her taking on tasks previously reserved for the male half of the noble couple, such as commanding offensive maneuvers and participating in physical fighting. While rather reticent about Jeanne overall, the *Grandes chroniques* hints at active involvement on Jeanne's part, stating that she and her companions "caused much trouble," but this is hardly conclusive.<sup>51</sup> The *Chronique normande* directly attributed command to Jeanne, stating that she "assembled many knights and soldiers, and they went by her [command] to attack the island of Guerande."<sup>52</sup> When they had conquered the island, they rendered the prisoners to Jeanne, who, as the commander, would decide what to do and whether and how to ransom them. She then directed her troops to besiege the town of Redon. Once John of Montfort was captured, these two pro-French chroniclers depicted Jeanne assuming the military activities once performed by her husband. Neither chronicler used Jeanne's military command as an opportunity to disparage the Montfortist party for allowing a woman to do this, indicating they fully accepted a woman participating actively in warfare.

Froissart, of course, was more loquacious. In one redaction of Book 1, he had Jeanne sending her men to lift a siege on a nearby castle that was loyal to her: "So said the countess to the knights and companions that it would be a great honor to lift this siege and to fight the French there, and their [deeds] would be recorded with great nobility."<sup>53</sup> Froissart went on to explain that Walter Manny led the actual countersiege,

---

50. Archives Nationales de la France (hereafter AN) J 241b #40.

51. "Sa femme qui suer estoit au conte de Flandres et ses complices, pour ce ne se desisterent onques de faire moult de maulz par le duchié de Bretagne." Jules Viard and Richard Lescot, eds., *Les grandes chroniques de France*, Société de l'histoire de France, 9 vols. (Paris: Champion, 1920), vol. 9, chap. 28, 221.

52. "Tant fist la dame que elle assembla plusieurs chevaliers et soudoiers, et alerent de par elle assaillir l'ille de Gurende et la conquistrent, et se rendirent ceulz de l'ille à la contesse." Molinier and Molinier, *Chronique normande*, 53.

53. "Si dist la comtesse as chevaliers et as compaignons que ce seroit grans honneurs de lever che siège et de là combattre lez Franchois, et leur seroit recordé à grant proèce." Froissart, *Chroniques*, 2:379.

but by starting the anecdote with the countess's speech, he indicated that Jeanne had a hand in the overall direction of this military endeavor. Later on, both Froissart and le Bel had Jeanne commanding forces in 1347 at La Roche-Derrien, where her opponent, Charles of Blois, was captured, though English royal accounts show Edward III paying for her upkeep in England since 1343.<sup>54</sup> Before discounting this engagement because of the dating, we should remember le Bel's and Froissart's loose regard for dates and consider that the *Istore et croniques de Flandres* also places her near a siege of Charles of Blois at La Roche-Derrien, though without a date. That chronicle states that Robert of Artois, fighting for the English, caught up with Jeanne, "who had assembled all of the Breton barons who were for her party and they had in the host a knight who was called Tanguy of Chastel." Robert and Tanguy then went on to La Roche-Derrien.<sup>55</sup> So, while this chronicler did not claim Jeanne was present at that engagement, he did indicate that she was still on Breton soil and actively directing Breton barons in an army when a siege of la Roche-Derrien occurred, which suggests that le Bel and Froissart provided a credible account of Jeanne's actions if not a fully accurate one.

In one stirring episode, le Bel and Froissart related that the countess took up a sword. Finding herself besieged by Charles and Jeanne of Pen-thièvre at the castle of Hennebont, she rallied the women and children inside the town, urging them to tear the stones from the streets, to use as ammunition against the attacking men.<sup>56</sup> She climbed a tower to survey the situation and devised a plan to launch a counterattack. Armed and mounted on a warhorse, the countess led a small group of men behind the enemy forces and set fire to their poorly guarded camp. Aroused by the cries of the few guards, the attackers returned to pursue the countess,

---

54. For this episode and other suspect ones, see le Bel, *Chronique*, 2: chap. 66, pp. 35–37 and chap. 79, 145–149; Froissart, *Chroniques*, 3:43 and 4:38–44 .

55. "Là trouva la contesse de Montfort, qui avoit assemblé tout plain de barons de Bretaingne, qui de sa partie estoient, et avoient à chëvetaine [an alternate manuscript has "à son ost"] un chevalier qu'on appeloit: Messire Tanguy du Chastel." Anonymous, *Istore et croniques de Flandres*, ed. Kervyn de Lettenhove, 2 vols. (Brussels: Imprimeur de l'Académie Royale de Belgique, 1879), 1:409.

56. For the following account of the siege at Hennebont, see le Bel, *Chronique*, 1: chap. 54, 307–11; Froissart, *Chroniques*, 2:142–46.

who took off in flight, leading her foes on a fruitless chase away from the castle. She returned the next day, once again rallying her troops and townspeople, who held out until help arrived from the English.

Froissart followed this thrilling account with another depicting Jeanne with sword in hand. This time, Jeanne was sailing off the coast of England with the English hero Robert of Artois when the pair were caught in a naval battle with supporters of Charles of Blois and his wife. The countess, armed with a rusty yet sharp sword, acquitted herself well in the ensuing skirmish.<sup>57</sup> Froissart claimed that the engagement took place when Jeanne made a quick trip across the channel to beg aid from King Edward III. While the *Chronique normande* and Jean le Bel included this short diplomatic mission, without the seaside battle, le Bel added that he was reluctant to credit the shipboard battle because he did not believe he had credible evidence for the incident.<sup>58</sup> Note that he did not discredit the incident on the grounds that Jeanne was a woman, but because he did not have enough reliable sources.

As these various accounts from the five chronicles demonstrate, the chroniclers readily believed that Jeanne fully participated in warfare once her husband could no longer perform these duties. In le Bel's and Froissart's chronicles, her full involvement was no doubt the more credible because she did not suddenly assume a completely unfamiliar role. Her prior practice advising on military affairs provided her with experience that the chroniclers (and presumably their audience) found convincing. The complete agreement by all five chronicles that she commanded forces cannot be dismissed as an entertainer's desire to provide a good story, for they all, whether for or against Jeanne's party, presented her activities matter-of-factly. Likewise, le Bel's and Froissart's willingness to believe that she could even have taken up arms gains credence when placed alongside earlier chronicle accounts of bellicose noblewomen in the eleventh through the thirteenth centuries.<sup>59</sup> This behavior, even if

---

57. Froissart, *Chroniques*, 3:8–10.

58. Molinier and Molinier, *Chronique normande*, 54; le Bel, *Chronique*, 2: chap. 61, 7–10.

59. Froissart and le Bel are not alone in reporting instances of women taking up arms themselves. For an overview, see McLaughlin, "The Woman Warrior"; Katrin Sjurson, "Peaceweavers' Sisters: Medieval Noblewomen as Military Leaders

only occasional, was expected of noblewomen because they were already acting as lords and thus already militarily active in other ways.

The evidence for Jeanne's assumption of her husband's political duties, less flashy than the feats of derring-do that fill the chronicles, rests on firmer ground: diplomatic documents, such as letters and treaties passed between Jeanne, the kings Edward III and Philip VI, and Charles of Blois. In the political realm, Jeanne dealt with external (i.e., non-domestic) authorities, a role that her contemporaries accepted without question, suggesting that she may not have been as inactive in this sphere before her husband's capture as previously thought.

The first document to include Jeanne in the war was the treaty between her husband, John, and their opponent, Charles of Blois, enacted as a result of John's defeat at Nantes in November 1341. John agreed to a truce and to submit himself and his claims on the duchy to Philip VI. "Item," the document reads, "in the case that within the octave of the upcoming Brandons [February 17] the said countess [Jeanne of Montfort] and children do not come to complete these said things, the king will go and will proceed so that it will appear not to contravene the said treaty."<sup>60</sup> This clause acknowledges Jeanne's authority in the matter of a truce, an authority that Philip, for one, recognized for he sent a follow-up request to Jeanne by February 24 (apparently she had not complied with her husband's treaty by then). Jeanne issued a reply the same day, placing all her towns and castles in Philip's hands so that he could render a legal judgment on the duchy and appending her seal.<sup>61</sup> Five days later, also at the behest of Philip, Jeanne agreed to a truce with Charles of Blois to last until April 15.<sup>62</sup> As with her response to Philip

---

in Northern France 1000-1337" (PhD diss., University of California Santa Barbara, 2010).

60. "Item, et que ou cas que dedanz luictaive des Brandons prochein venanz les dictes contesse et anffanz ne seroient venu pour parfaire les dictes choses ira li roys et fera proceder avant si comme bon li sanblera non contrevenant le dit traitie." Michael Jones, ed., *Recueil des actes de Charles de Blois et Jeanne de Penthièvre, duc et duchesse de Bretagne (1341-1364); suivi des actes de Jeanne de Penthièvre (1364-1384)* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires Rennes, 1996), p. 55, #3.

61. AN J 241b #43bis. The seal, if it still exists, is not available on the microfilm copy of this document.

62. AN J 241b #41. Mentioned also in le Bel, *Chronique*, 1: chap. 60, p. 342;

directly, Jeanne issued this document in her own name and explained that she had appended her great seal, as well as the seals of Tanguy of Chastel (her captain of the city of Brest, where the negotiations took place) and Henry of Ker (described as her bachelor), to lend authority to this act.

These seals by Tanguy of Chastel and Henry of Ker hint at Philip's attempts to wrap up the Breton concerns by winning over the Montforts' supporters without Jeanne, but these adherents proved reluctant to abandon the Montforts' cause. In January 1342, a month after securing John of Montfort at the Louvre in Paris, King Philip VI offered a remission to several of Montfort's more important supporters, including Tanguy of Chastel and Henry of Ker.<sup>63</sup> In return for the remission, Philip required these supporters to pay homage to Charles of Blois as duke of Brittany and to make an oath of fidelity to Philip.<sup>64</sup> Apparently no one took him up on the deal, for Philip sent Henry of Malestroit to repeat the offer on February 1.<sup>65</sup> By the end of the month, Henry of Malestroit was in Brest communicating Philip's requests to Jeanne; this is when she agreed to place her castles and towns in Philip's hands. Philip had tried to work directly with Tanguy of Chastel and Henry of Ker, who were among those named in his offers of remission, and Henry of Malestroit recorded that he made Philip's requests for peace directly to the two of them as well as to Jeanne. While Philip may have hoped that Tanguy and Henry of Ker would work on their own initiative to exclude Jeanne, these two announced their subordination to Jeanne in a letter they attached to Jeanne's agreement with Philip, calling her "our very dear and redoubtable lord (*dame*) my lady of Brittany and of Montfort" and taking care to "agree and assent" to the accord made by Jeanne rather than term

---

Froissart, *Chroniques*, 2:181.

63. Tanguy of Chastel, Henry of Ker, and Geoffrey of Malestroit undertook to provision John's castle at Conquest and his army with wine purchased from a group of merchants. Dom Pierre-Hyacinthe Morice, *Mémoires pour servir de preuves à l'Histoire ecclésiastique et civile de Bretagne* (Paris: Charles Osmont, 1742), vol. 1: col. 1428. See the same for John's reply.

64. Jules Viard, Aline Vallée, and Jean Favier, eds., *Registres du Trésor des Chartes*, Tome III, *Règne de Philippe de Valois: trois parties: inventaire analytique* (Paris: Archives Nationales, 1978), pt. 2, #4789; Morice, *Preuves*, vol. 1: col. 1434.

65. Morice, *Preuves*, vol. 1: col. 1435.

their agreement with Philip as an action undertaken under their own aegis.<sup>66</sup> Five days later, Tanguy did write to Philip, excusing his fighting in Brittany as efforts to defend against the attacks of Charles and not an expression of treasonable activities, but the next day, when Jeanne sealed her truce with Charles, Tanguy and Henry of Ker appended their seals, signaling their acceptance of her authority to make these kinds of decisions and their willingness to abide by her treaties.<sup>67</sup>

The support rendered to Jeanne by the Breton nobles no doubt undergirded her lordly authority and thus the willingness of external authorities to deal with her as one of their own. The fact that Bretons rallied to her attests to their confidence in her ability to govern well, a conviction they would not have held had they not already been accustomed to viewing her as one of their lords who had proven her abilities even before her husband's capture. The reasons for the barons' adherence were, no doubt, complex. Perhaps Duke John III really had reconciled with his younger half brother, Montfort, before his death. Perhaps Charles of Blois's close relationship with Philip VI, as the king's nephew, rendered his and Jeanne of Penthièvre's cause distasteful to the notoriously independent-minded Bretons. More likely, however, the Montfort barons, almost all of whom hailed from the lower strata of Breton nobility, viewed the civil war as an opportunity for advancement. Nevertheless, and significantly, after John of Montfort's surrender, the adherents of the Montfort party did not desert Jeanne, indicating that they were accustomed to viewing her as a viable lord.

The chroniclers, too, presented Jeanne as a lord who commanded the enduring loyalty of her vassals. In addition to the men who carried out her commands to reinforce fortifications, provision towns, and attack the Blois/Penthièvre party, the Montfort allies of the chronicles held firm to Jeanne. Le Bel and Froissart recorded the loyalty of the captain of Rennes, Sir William of Cadoudal, who refused to join Charles of Blois when the citizens of Rennes surrendered the city, preferring instead to join forces with Jeanne of Montfort at Hennebont.<sup>68</sup> The two chroni-

---

66. "N(ost)re t(re)sch(e)re et redoubte dame madame de bretaig(ne) et de montfort." AN J 241b #43bis.

67. Gui Alexis Lobineau, *Histoire de Bretagne* (Paris, 1707), vol. 2: col. 488–89.

68. le Bel, *Chronique*, 1: chap. 54, 306; Froissart, *Chroniques*, 2:141–42.

clers recorded similar stories in the cities of Auray, Vannes, Dinan, and others, in which the nobles either escaped to join Jeanne at Hennebont or died in the defense of a town they held for Jeanne.<sup>69</sup> When these nobles left their own towns for greater security, they chose to rally to Jeanne's side, demonstrating their trust in her as a leader.

While Philip and Charles were negotiating with Jeanne and attempting to win over her adherents, Edward III maintained relations with John, who was under house arrest in Paris by the end of December 1341. On February 2, Edward sought an agreement with John to allow for trade between their merchants, and on February 20, Edward granted John the Richmond lands in England (once again) in recognition of John's resistance against Edward's adversary, Philip.<sup>70</sup> By March, Edward too dealt directly with Jeanne and one of her men, this time Amaury of Clisson, who was both empowered as the tutor and guardian of the Montfort heir and was present in England. On March 10, Edward acknowledged receipt of a "loan" of 1,000 pounds from Jeanne and Amaury, and Amaury officially placed the lands of Brittany in Edward's hands, a move that reveals that Jeanne's similar agreement with Philip less than two weeks prior was a brilliant maneuver to stall for time.<sup>71</sup> Even though Amaury transferred the control of Brittany to Edward in his capacity as tutor and guardian, Edward viewed the act as authorized by both Amaury and Jeanne, as he made clear in his July 20 instructions to his chief of Breton affairs, William of Bohun, when Edward repeatedly referenced "the agreements" made by Amaury *and* Jeanne.<sup>72</sup> Just as John of Montfort's lordship incorporated the efforts of his wife, Jeanne's lordship incorporated loyal men, whose work should be viewed as part of complementary lordship rather than as the true basis of power behind a female figurehead.

Edward took longer to arrive than expected (though two English

---

69. le Bel, *Chronique*, 1: chap. 55, 312–13, and chap. 57, 319–25; Froissart, *Chroniques*, 2:147–49 and 154–60.

70. Thomas Rymer, ed., *Foedera, conventiones, literae, et cujuscunque generis acta publica, inter reges angliae, et alios quosvis imperatores, reges, pontifices, principes, vel communitates*, 3rd edition (Hague, 1737), vol. 2, pt. 4, 119.

71. *Ibid.*, 120.

72. *Ibid.* 131.

expeditions preceded him), and Jeanne found herself besieged that summer of 1342 at Hennebont castle, from which she allegedly made her daring sortie. When Edward finally arrived in October, Jeanne joined him and his army, signed an alliance with him that detailed the marriage between her son and one of his daughters, and returned with Edward to England in March 1343.<sup>73</sup> At no point in his Breton correspondence did Edward express either surprise or hesitation about dealing with a woman on such matters as warfare or political alliances.

Jeanne's position as a major Breton lord was not lost on external authorities. For example, the Charles of Blois depicted in these chronicles certainly recognized the importance of Jeanne: after taking the city of Rennes and gaining the fealty of the bourgeois there, Charles's "lords advised him which part he would go to next to best achieve their goal. The council decided that they should go to Hennebont, where the countess was, since the count was in prison; if they could take the castle and the countess, the war would be finished."<sup>74</sup> In noting that John of Montfort was currently in prison and that they still needed to defeat Jeanne, Charles and his leading men recognized that the countess held the position of leader of the Montfortist party. Likewise, in January 1343, when Edward and Philip signed a three-year truce, Jeanne and her son and daughter accompanied Edward back to England. Edward continued to treat Jeanne as an important ally: royal accounts show he paid her debts to London merchants while he extracted authorization to collect taxes in Brittany to help finance English forces there.<sup>75</sup> Relations changed drastically in December 1343, when Edward removed Jeanne's

---

73. BNF français 22362 f. 14 r-v.

74. "Les seigneurs se conseillèrent quelle part ilz iroient pour miels achever la besongne. Le conseil à ce se tourna que on alast devant Hainebon, où la contesse estoit, puisque le conte estoit en prison; s'ilz pouoient prendre le chastel et la contesse, la guerre seroit finée." le Bel, *Chronique*, 1: chap. 54, 307. "Messires Charle eut conseil quèle il se poroit traire à toute son host, pour mieulz avant exploitier de reconquerre le remanant. Li consaulz se tourna à çou que il se traisist par devers Hembon, là où la contesse de Montfort estoit; car, puis que li sires estoit en prison, s'il pooit prendre le ville, le chastiel et le contesse, il aroit tost sa guerre afinée," Froissart, *Chroniques*, 2:142.

75. Reprinted in La Borderie and Pocquet, *Histoire de Bretagne*, 3:488; Rymer, *Foedera*, 331-32.

children from her care, enforced his right to collect Breton taxes, and moved Jeanne to Tickhill to be held under house arrest.<sup>76</sup> The move makes sense only if Edward regarded her as a powerful figure who had a mind of her own.<sup>77</sup>

Meanwhile, the Breton Montfortists held true to her party for another year, when Philip offered pardon again. Only then did they submit, perhaps recognizing that Jeanne would never again regain freedom.<sup>78</sup> Their long refusal to join with the French most likely owes a great deal to the strong Breton desire to maintain their semi-independence from the French crown, and English aid in the form of troops and money helped make their opposition possible.<sup>79</sup> Yet the devotion the Bretons retained for both Montforts continued even after their disappearance from Brittany. John of Montfort escaped Parisian arrest in 1345, so he once again became the rallying point for his party, but he died before the summer ended. Two years later, in 1347, some Bretons appear to have attempted to break Jeanne out of her English house arrest, but the attempt failed and ended with her appearance in a judicial court in England.<sup>80</sup>

Adding the flurry of documents that passed between Jeanne and the two kings after the incarceration of her husband to the depiction already painted by the two chroniclers, a picture emerges of a woman very much involved in the warfare that had engulfed Brittany. In the absence of her husband, she managed to maintain not only the lordship of the couple's lands, but also a claim to a title and greater lordship. The chroniclers' depictions of Jeanne both with and without her husband show that contemporaries understood that noblewomen had agency

---

76. Rymer, *Foedera*, 397–98; La Borderie and Pocquet, *Histoire de Bretagne*, 3:488–91; Leland, “Heroine or Lunatic,” 3.

77. A point made also by John Leland, whose paper sets out to discredit the belief, apparently concocted by Arthur de la Borderie in the nineteenth century, that Jeanne of Montfort fell victim to insanity once safe on English shores. La Borderie and Pocquet, *Histoire de Bretagne*, 3:487–90.

78. Viard, Vallée, and Favier, *Registres*, pt. 2, #5770–5771; Jones, *Recueil des actes de Charles et Jeanne*, #39–#53.

79. Tanguy of Chastel, for one, continued to work for the English; he was named as England's guardian of the 1348 truce between Philip and Edward, charged with ensuring the peace in Brittany.

80. Leland, “Heroine or Lunatic,” 5.

within lordship, even when their husbands were present and even in military affairs. Jeanne may have been constrained by the patriarchy inherent in the lordship system in that she became more visible and more active in the physical sense only in the absence of her husband, but we must take care not to overstate the limitations on noblewomen.

### Shared Rulership with Inheritance: Jeanne of Penthièvre

Unlike Jeanne of Montfort, Jeanne of Penthièvre was a sole heiress, lord of the sizeable Penthièvre lands within the duchy of Brittany as well as (perhaps) of the duchy itself. Nonetheless, this Jeanne fits the same pattern laid out above: the chronicles and her charters show that she remained active in the duchy during her marriage, both when the couple lived together and when her husband, Charles, like John of Montfort, was captured; she participated actively in military matters and political affairs; and she expanded her political and military activities during her husband's capture and imprisonment to assume those previously performed solely by him.

Jeanne's status as sole heiress provides an opportunity to investigate the origins of her authority. Some scholars have pointed out that the increasing use of primogeniture in northern Europe created a system in which women who had no brothers could gain political authority, allowing them either to exercise power for themselves or to transmit the authority to their husbands and sons.<sup>81</sup> As the only child of Duke John III's full brother, Jeanne of Penthièvre, rather than her husband, carried the claim to the duchy, a fact contemporaries took pains to note. For example, in his legal case in the Parlement of Paris, Charles of

---

81. Scholars have noted that primogeniture, which privileges the eldest male in inheritance strategies, could also benefit women who had no brothers, since families often preferred to keep the patrimony in the hands of the single female offspring rather than divide it amongst collateral relatives. See Pauline Stafford, "Women and the Norman Conquest," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 6th Ser., 4 (1994): 221–49, doi:10.2307/3679222; Jane Martindale, "Succession and Politics in the Romance-Speaking World, c. 1000–1140," in *England and Her Neighbours, 1066–1453: Essays in Honour of Pierre Chaplais*, ed. Michael Jones and Malcolm Vale (London: Hambledon, 1989), 19–41; Margue, "L'épouse au pouvoir." See footnote 25 for examples of primogeniture working in a woman's favor in Brittany.

Blois argued that he should be duke because the duchy belonged to his wife,<sup>82</sup> an argument that Philip VI repeated and acknowledged in his judgment of the case.<sup>83</sup> Similarly, the *Chronique normande* related that Charles asked the king to recognize his wife Jeanne as the heir and that Philip acquiesced; that is, he named Jeanne and not Charles as heir.<sup>84</sup> Le Bel and Froissart made this case too, noting explicitly at several points throughout their chronicles, even after the discussion of the legal suit, that Charles's right to the duchy of Brittany came from Jeanne.<sup>85</sup> Further illustrating this point, Jeanne created official charters granting Charles rights to portions of her lands.<sup>86</sup> Even though Philip VI had legitimized Charles's position as the rightful duke within five months of the previous duke's death, contemporaries understood Jeanne as the true repository of ducal authority, otherwise why would she bother to officially grant him land and authority? Unlike Jeanne of Montfort, who married into her position in the noble couple, Jeanne of Penthievre provided the lordly authority for her marriage unit. Charles, then, gained his position as (possible) lord of Brittany the same way Jeanne of Montfort did: through marriage.

A perusal of the acts left behind by Jeanne and Charles demonstrates that Jeanne, rather than a mere transmitter of authority, was an active participant in a shared form of governance. No documents from the couple survive from before the war began; from 1341 to 1347, however, when the English captured Charles, seventy-eight letters survive (table 1). When viewed as a bloc, the numbers are not too favorable for Jeanne: eight sole and fifteen joint letters, for a total of twenty-three out of seventy-eight, or 30%. A re-examination though reveals much more active participation prior to the summer of 1344: five of the sole letters and nine of the joint, for a total of sixteen documents out of twenty-four, or 67%. By July 1344, the date of their last joint act from this period, Jeanne was three months pregnant with their first child, who

---

82. As noted by John of Montfort in his legal documents for the duchy. Jones, "Some Documents," 16.

83. Morice, *Preuves*, vol. 1: col. 1421-24 and 1442-47.

84. Molinier and Molinier, *Chronique normande*, 49-50.

85. For example, le Bel, *Chronique*, 1: chap. 47, 260; Froissart, *Chroniques*, 2:102.

86. Jones, *Recueil des actes de Charles et Jeanne*, #19 and #22.

was born in February 1345.<sup>87</sup> According to Froissart, she had a second son as well before her husband was captured in 1347. It appears, then, that her pregnancies and motherhood prompted her to downshift her involvement in the creation of official letters, but we should not view this decrease itself as a sign of retirement from the duties of lordship. The contents of the documents demonstrate Jeanne's continued interest and involvement in lordship after the onset of motherhood.

Documents	1341-1347	1341-Summer 1344
Total by the couple	78	24
Solely by Jeanne	8	5
Joint	15	9
Total by Jeanne	23 (30%)	16 (67%)

Table 1. Jeanne of Penthièvre's documents

The contents of the couple's official letters reveal that Charles expanded his activities after Jeanne's pregnancy, much as Jeanne of Montfort had expanded her activities after her husband's capture and incarceration. Nonetheless, Jeanne of Penthièvre did retain a role in the leadership of her duchy. Before summer 1344, Charles's solo acts consisted of letters to the pope and acknowledgements of shipments of weapons and men-at-arms sent by King Philip VI; as with the Montforts, the male in the couple conducted external political relations when the couple was together. After summer 1344, Charles took on a greater range of activities, but he never granted lands or money without Jeanne's approval (65,76). Additionally, he sought her approval for loans as well (57, 58, 62). Even though Jeanne did not participate actively in many of the day-to-day affairs, she did continue to participate in the rulership of the duchy, particularly in financial business, and there is a hint that she may have been the one to administer justice: in April 1344, the

87. Jeanne commanded her squire to announce the birth of her first son to her brother-in-law, Count Louis of Blois: Jones, *Recueil des actes de Charles et Jeanne*, #63. Subsequent references in text by document number.

Parlement of Paris sent a case back to the court of the Duchess of Brittany (26). Perhaps her more stable location, in contrast to her husband's hectic itinerary of sieges, suited her better for these particular tasks, leaving Charles free to pursue external relations and physical fighting. This division of labor undertaken by this couple between 1341 and 1347 suggests that they fully understood their work as shared governance. When one member was "incapacitated"—here by motherhood, later by capture—the other took over more duties formerly performed either together or by his or her spouse.

The letters' contents also reveal Jeanne's involvement even in matters of war and politics prior to her husband's capture whether before or during motherhood. She and Charles made several joint awards to people who had served them well during the civil war. For example, on February 20, 1342, they gave a city to Etienne Gouyon, sire of Matignon, for his "help and advice in defending the duchy," (4) and on June 5, 1342, they gave John, sire of Montgeroul, rights to high and middle justice for his "good and agreeable service" (7). Later that month, they jointly issued a charter from "the tents before Hennebont," the castle from which Jeanne of Montfort allegedly made her daring sortie (8). As well as proving that Jeanne of Penthièvre was so involved in the war that she attended sieges, the contents of this last charter furnish more evidence of her interest in the war. As a reward for his service, Charles and Jeanne confirmed Antoine Doria's rights to his own lands and gave him rights to the lands forfeited by a Montfort supporter. Since neither Doria nor Charles and Jeanne actually possessed these lands, the act implicitly encouraged Doria to win them. Jeanne issued the charter with her husband, indicating her involvement in matters of strategy. After her pregnancy, too, Jeanne continued her involvement in war, as when Charles sent her some captured spies in 1346 (84).

The chroniclers also indicated, sometimes indirectly, that Jeanne participated in the war alongside her husband. For example, le Bel and Froissart recorded Charles's siege of Carhaix in 1342 and his subsequent use of the town as a base of operations around the times of his siege of Hennebont.<sup>88</sup> Jeanne and Charles signed the joint gift to John, sire of

---

88. le Bel, *Chronique*, 1: chap. 57, 325 and chap. 59, 334–35; Froissart, *Chroniques*,

Montgeroul from Carhaix on June 5, 1342, the month before their joint gift to Antoine Doria in the tents before Hennebont, suggesting that she accompanied him on sieges for an extended period of time.<sup>89</sup> Froissart described her involvement more directly when the couple were reunited after Charles's release from incarceration in England. Froissart included her in the pre-battle discussion at Auray in 1364, the decisive battle for the civil war as it ended in the death of Charles of Blois. Before Blois set out with his troops, Froissart depicted him receiving homage from diverse lords. As he was about to leave, Jeanne entreated him to disregard any type of overture for peace; for too long, Montfort had claimed her inheritance, and thus Charles's, and he must see the war through to the end.<sup>90</sup> Like Jeanne of Montfort, Jeanne of Penthièvre acted as a primary advisor and strategist for her party.

Also like Jeanne of Montfort before her, Jeanne of Penthièvre took up the reins of her party when her husband was captured and imprisoned in 1347. Charles and the adherents to the Blois/Penthièvre party trusted Jeanne's ability to act as lord, not just because the claim to the duchy came through her, but also because she had proven herself by attending sieges, cosigning charters with military implications, and presiding over courts of high justice. Jeanne drew on this experience to carry on the war in his absence, expanding her duties as a strategist, advisor, and lord of the Blois/Penthièvre cause. In August 1347, she appointed her faithful ally Antoine Doria as the captain of the important town of La Roche-Derrien (94). On January 31, 1348, she instructed the city of Nantes on how to garrison itself, ordering that the city should have "twenty-five men-at-arms, including the captain, five of whom were to guard the New Tower" and "one hundred crossbowmen." She went on to detail the

---

2:160 and 169-70.

89. Some scholars have expressed the opinion that she played a much larger role in the events that transpired. See Jones, "The Breton Civil War," 70.

90. "Monsieur, vous en alés deffendre et garder mon hiretage et le vostre, car ce qui est mien est vostre, lequel messires Jehans de Montfort nous empeece et a empechie un grant temps à tort et sans cause: ce set Dieu et le baron de Bretagne qui chi sont comment j'en sui droite hiretière. Si vous pri chierement que, sus nulle ordenance ne composition ne trettié d'acort ne voeilliés descendre que le corps de la ducé ne nous demeure," Froissart, *Chroniques*, 6:151-52.

pay for these soldiers, wartime taxes, and war machines to protect the town (98). In June, she made Alain Guillemot the castellan of Touffou to compensate for the “losses and damages” he and his family suffered because of the wars (106).

As with Jeanne of Montfort, the chronicles provide evidence that Jeanne of Penthièvre fought. Jean le Bel includes very little about this Jeanne, and Froissart followed suit in his first redaction. When her husband is imprisoned, the Penthièvre of the first redaction merely “takes the war with a great will. Thus was the war between those two women.”<sup>91</sup> In his third redaction, however, he expanded this Jeanne’s role, perhaps for dramatic balance or perhaps due to his increased knowledge of Breton affairs once a relative of Jeanne of Penthièvre’s became one of his patrons.<sup>92</sup> In this last redaction, Penthièvre “held the bridle to the teeth and showed the courage of a man and of a lion.”<sup>93</sup> She became much more voluble in the last version, holding her sons up to her remaining allies and calling out, “See my sons and heirs. As their father has done well for you, I and the child will do still better for you.”<sup>94</sup> Froissart declared in sum that “she waged as good and strong a war against the Countess of Montfort and her people as had my lord Charles, her husband, and his people before.”<sup>95</sup> Apparently her actions convinced Philip VI, for according to Froissart, the king sent even more troops to support “his cousin” (*sa cousine* in the feminine form) in Brittany.<sup>96</sup>

Jeanne of Penthièvre also demonstrated knowledge of the current

---

91. “prist la guerre de grant volenté. Ensi fu la guerre de ces deux dames.” Froissart, *Chroniques*, 4:43.

92. Froissart took care even in this later redaction to declare he remained impartial regardless of who his patrons were. See Jones, “The Breton Civil War,” 68–69.

93. “[P]rist et requelli le frain aux dens et moustra corage d’onme et de lion.” Froissart, *Chroniques*, 4:268.

94. “Vechi mes enfans et hiretiers. Se lors pères vous a bien fait, je et li enfant vous ferons encores mieuls.” Froissart, *Chroniques*, 4:268.

95. “Et fist la dame aussi bonne gerre et aussi forte à l’encontre de la contesse de Montfort et de ses gens, comme en devant mesires Carles, son mari, et ses gens avoient fait.” Ibid.

96. “Ausi li rois Phelippes, qui oncles estoit de mesire Carle de Blois, qui bien l’ama et qui trop fu sourouciés de ceste aventure qui avenue estoit devant la Roce Deurient, pour conforter sa cousine, i envoya tous jours gens en Bretagne, pour garder le pais et deffendre contre les Englois.” Ibid.

political situation in the world outside her own duchy and kinship network and a willingness to manipulate it for her own ends, thus taking on these duties as well. Charles was a captive for nine years, though Edward III allowed him to make two short trips to Brittany to set his affairs in order. Jeanne, though, never ceased working for his definitive release. She wrote several times to the pope, requesting his aid in persuading Edward to liberate her husband, and she even managed to interest Edward in negotiations, suspiciously also involving a marriage between one of his daughters and one of her sons.<sup>97</sup> Charles also continued to negotiate for his own release with Edward and to write to the pope during his captivity. If Jeanne were merely acting on her husband's behalf while he was absent, then her letters would have been redundant and unnecessary. Instead, they were received and recorded by important heads of state.

In the end, young John of Montfort, Jeanne's son who accompanied her with Edward III back to England, won the Breton Civil War with Edward's help. Froissart noted that when the French king recognized the young Montfort as the duke of Brittany, he advised the new duke to remember the "old" duchess, Jeanne of Penthièvre, who received a large monetary settlement and retained the title "duchess" for life.<sup>98</sup> Even defeat in war could not eradicate her authority.

## Conclusion

The "War of the Two Jeannes" offers much more than an opportunity to recount a fascinating story of two exceptional women. Both Jeannes actively participated in political and military affairs before *and* after their

---

97. Jones, *Recueil des actes de Charles et Jeanne*, #95 and #97; Morice, *Preuves*, vol. 1: col. 1486–87. The best treatment of the machinations involved in the efforts to liberate Charles of Blois remains Eugène Déprez, "La 'Querelle de Bretagne', de la captivité de Charles de Blois à la majorité de Jean IV de Montfort (1347–1362)," *Mémoires de la Société d'Histoire et d'Archéologie de Bretagne* 7 (1926): 25–60.

98. "[Q]ue il recompensast la ditte dame, qui duçoise s'en estoit appellée, d'aucune cose, pour tenir son estat bien et honnestement, et li assignast sa rente et revenue en certain lieu où elle le peuist avoir sans dangier." Froissart, *Chroniques*, 6:179–80. See also, Morice, *Preuves*, vol. 1: col. 1588–99.

husbands disappeared from the scene. More importantly, their contemporaries never commented on these women as unusual; the evidence from the chronicles and the letters by the women and kings does not explain away the Jeannes' involvement so much as display the women running affairs as if it was perfectly natural and accepted. This participation makes sense if we view the women as part of a lordship unit, the ducal couple that reigned over a duchy. Such a perspective avoids the question of the origins of a noblewoman's authority. As part of a lordship unit, the root of the authority could lie with the woman as sole heiress (as it did for Jeanne of Penthièvre) or with the male heir (as it did for John of Montfort). The key is that the authority was bestowed on both members of the lordship couple. In this way a wife did not "borrow" authority from her husband so much as act for a united couple, even when the couple was not physically together.

This is not to argue that fourteenth-century French society did not reserve different roles for men and women of the same social station, for of course they did, but rather that the different roles did not necessarily exclude women from certain spheres of action that modern scholars have falsely deemed "masculine." When both parties of the Montfort and Blois/Penthièvre couples were present, the husbands and the wives both participated in warfare and politics. John and Charles tended to take over external communications and the physical leadership of forces, while the Jeannes advised their husbands and approved of political alliances and military maneuvers. This active involvement in the political and military affairs of the duchy prepared the women to take over after the capture of their husbands. The Jeannes were already up-to-date on the stages of the war and the status of potential allies and enemies. In good times, the women did indeed have different roles to play than the men, but their roles did not exclude them from the spheres of politics and warfare.

The necessarily personal relationship between a nobleman and his wife meant that the nobleman had ample opportunity to learn of his wife's political acumen and skill. He may have come to rely on her in ways that the sources simply do not reveal, or he may not have, for the sources do not say. The nobleman's choice of a wife as his proxy during his absences, however, should be read as evidence that the wife had participated in politics before his absence, for surely, a lord would not

choose a complete greenhorn to rule in his absence. To pull a counter-example from recent times, during Bill Clinton's U.S. presidency in the 1990s, First Lady Hillary Clinton's involvement in the creation of a new health care plan engendered a public outcry because the position of First Lady does not, in the United States, conjure any notion of shared governance. Even though President Clinton's personal relationship with his wife enabled him to realize her political acumen and capabilities (which were later borne out in her own subsequent political career), he could not simply delegate to her governance tasks such as spearheading a major reform. By contrast, the medieval nobleman could rely on his wife's political advice and acumen in private and in public.

Equally important, the supporters of the respective sides in the civil war were accustomed to seeing the two Jeannes actively involved in politics, thereby easing the women's transition into political and military activities previously performed by the male half of the couples. Likewise, the noble wife chosen to act as her husband's proxy must have played a somewhat *public* political role prior to her husband's absence in order for the vassals, subjects, and allies to build enough trust in her to follow her leadership, for surely, in this time of consensus rulership, they would not blindly follow a political neophyte.

Indeed, I believe that the Jeannes' experiences were not that unusual for French noblewomen of the fourteenth century (or indeed in the preceding three centuries). These women participated in a shared governance that required them to perform military activities and conduct both internal and external affairs. Their lordship duties may have differed based on their biological sex; the key, however, is that they participated (perhaps in different ways and degrees) in all of the spheres of lordship, including politics and military affairs.

*Southern Illinois University*