

*Joan, the Fair Maid of Kent: A Fourteenth-Century Princess and her World*, by Anthony Goodman. Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2017. Pp. 244.  
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In writing the first full-length biography of Joan of Kent, Anthony Goodman has done a great service to scholars in a wide diversity of fields. Chaucerians will appreciate the insight into one of the most important figures at the English court during Chaucer's life. Political historians will find much here to enlighten them as to the intricacies of late Plantagenet politics. And, for those who study gender, this study will prove an invaluable window into the life of a vibrant and active medieval woman, one who frequently reshaped the restrictions of her social circumstances to serve a greater set of her ambitions. Indeed, the fact that there had not previously been a biography of Princess Joan—despite the numerous biographies of her husband, father, and son—represents a disquieting testimony to the way in which the discipline of medieval studies has accepted the marginalization of female authority found in the witness of medieval chronicles as fact, without reference to the biases that render such assessments much closer to fiction.

For Princess Joan was undoubtedly an important political actor in her time, as Anthony Goodman makes clear. Countess of Kent in her own right, Princess of Wales and Aquitaine, and mother to the King of England, Joan not only stood near power all her life, but also actively influenced its incarnations. Moreover, her prominent social and political positions meant that we have significant historical documentation for Joan's life. As Goodman notes, the Princess appeared not only in the forms of domestic documentation that archive the lives of many medieval women, but also within chronicle accounts of warfare, rebellion, and political crisis. Jean Froissart and his historiographical peers dramatized Joan remarkably often; she was the weeping, courtly lady whose loving scene upon her husband's departure preceded the account of his battle, the weeping widow who honored his memory in death, and the loving mother who stood by her young royal son in the face of rebellious peasants.

One of the strengths of Goodman's book is that he ties together Joan's strong presence in the historical record with the larger historical contexts that shaped her life. While many readers will be familiar with the events of Joan's time as royal mother, her childhood as the daughter of the executed Earl of Kent may be more unexpected. Goodman does an excellent job tracing out the complicated, vacillating loyalties of the court of Edward II and that of the young Edward III, controlled by Queen Isabella and Roger Mortimer. Moreover, his

sense of history is one of reverberation and resonance; Joan's martyred father and disordered childhood echo throughout the book with sensitivity and poignancy. While scholars often encounter Joan in the finite, discreet punctuations of her life—as in the 1381 rebellion, for example—Goodman reflects upon the longevity of her life to argue that she served as a force of continuity, a living tie between the political crises of Edward II's reign and those of her son, Richard's. Goodman contrasts moments of change and loss with the long scale of Joan's life, and thus the story he tells is able to encompass both dramatic events of national consequence and smaller, more personal ones, such as the 1379 death of Isabella de Coucy, Countess of Bedford, whom he identifies as one of Joan's last links to the court of Edward III. Goodman's book is rare, as well, in treating Joan's daughters, Maud and Joan Holland, as significant figures in the Ricardian political world, a historiographical development that is long overdue.

Yet, in faithfully following the chroniclers, Goodman allows the stereotypically feminine pursuits of love, romance, and sexual intimacy to dominate Joan's story to an unfortunate degree. This is somewhat understandable; it is not for the humble biographer to resist, perhaps, the lure of notorious love. And, Joan's marriage to the Earl of Salisbury while already married to Sir Thomas Holland certainly shaped how her contemporaries viewed her. But I wish that youthful indiscretion had shaped *Goodman's* interpretation of her less. Goodman identifies Joan as an impulsive romantic, carefree of the world's strictures, due to her two secret marriages. But surely, that first bigamous marriage could as easily be seen as an ambitious twenty-six year old knight taking advantage of an eleven- or twelve-year-old girl with connections to the royal family. Likewise, the evident affection in Joan's illicit marriage to Prince Edward does not necessarily exclude sexual calculation on her part in marrying the heir to the English throne. What Goodman calls romance, I would argue, could as easily be called the intersection of sexual coercion with an increasingly destabilized class structure.

Goodman's book would also benefit from a more intersectional approach to gender. His Joan lived in, he claims, a time with new opportunities for women to break the rules, if they had enough wealth, beauty, and family connections to shield them from consequence. Yet he minimizes the effect on Joan's life of other social changes, such as the rise of the middle class and the Wycliffite heresy. The evidence, as Goodman himself notes, nevertheless points to Joan being deeply affected by these changes. Her associations with Michael de la Pole—the former wool merchant turned Earl of Suffolk—speaks to a comfort with men of non-aristocratic origin; her intervention to protect John Wyclif

from prosecution and her friendship with Lollard knights, including Sir Lewis Clifford, speaks of a willingness to entertain non-Orthodox views, or at least their adherents. Goodman explains these moments away, concluding that Joan simply did favors for John of Gaunt, but such an argument minimizes Joan as an intellectual actor in her own right. He argues that she was in favor of nontraditional romantic innovations, but his evidence speaks of a woman with far more diverse interests and allegiances.

In this, his last book, Anthony Goodman offers a powerful testament to the significance of Joan of Kent as a political actor in fourteenth-century England, and a meticulous documentation of how pervasively her impact on the royal court was felt and acknowledged within her own lifetime. If his evaluation of the Princess privileges romance too profoundly over the dynamics of ambition, class change, and religious critique, it nevertheless provides a crucial picture of an active, energetic, and influential woman, and a thoughtful commentary upon the consequentiality of the medieval women who still lurk in the archives, their biographies as yet unwritten.

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