



*Nemesis: Medieval England's Greatest Enemy.*

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**Abstract:** Review of *Nemesis: Medieval England's Greatest Enemy*, by Catherine Hanley (Osprey Publishing, 2025).



***Nemesis: Medieval England's Greatest Enemy*. By Catherine Hanley. Osprey Publishing, 2025. ISBN 978-1-472-86744-5. 304 pp. £35.00.**

The rise and fall of the “Angevin Empire” dominated the kingdom of England’s history from the mid-twelfth to early thirteenth centuries. It was forged and lost under the reigns of four early Plantagenet kings: Henry II, Richard I, John, and Henry III. In the space of three generations, the Plantagenets expanded their holdings and extended their influence across Western Europe, governing territories from the Anglo-Scottish border in the North to the Pyrenees in the South. The breadth of their territorial possession provided the Plantagenets with considerable power and prestige, inevitably bringing them into conflict with the Capetian kings of France, to whom they were nominally subordinate for their French domains. However, by the reign of Henry III, the Capetians broke their Plantagenet rival’s power, nullified their advantages, and took their key possessions in France. Although King Philip II Augustus of France was responsible for this dramatic reversal of fortunes, he has remained a shadowy figure in the traditional Anglo-centric narrative of the loss of Angevin power in France, obfuscated by the actions of his English rivals. Anglophone scholars have depicted him as scheming, manipulative, and cowardly, a natural villain in comparison to his more heroic Plantagenet opponents. Catherine Hanley, in this succinct, accessible, and highly engaging biography, brings Philip out of the shadows and corrects anglophone scholarship’s negative depiction of him, demonstrating that he was an astute and capable monarch who was committed to his goals of advancing the greatness of his realm and the power of his dynasty.

While structured like a traditional biography progressing through the events of Philip’s life (1165–1223), *Nemesis* differs in one major respect: it focuses primarily upon Philip’s relationship and rivalry with the Plantagenet kings of England and how these impacted the course of his reign. The book is divided into four parts, each one covering the reigns of the Plantagenet kings who were successively Philip’s chief antagonists. These parts are then further subdivided into chapters covering relevant episodes of Philip’s life, such as the Third Crusade, the fall of Normandy, and the Battle of Bouvines. On the one hand, this organizational approach allows Hanley to weave a very tight and compelling narrative of the ongoing contest between Philip and his Plantagenet rivals, showing how one flashpoint or crisis fed into another and enabled Philip to incrementally build upon his successes. She shows how Philip grew and developed as a king, learned from his mistakes,

adapted to changing circumstances, and understood the need to play the political long game to outwit and outlive his opponents. Hanley's lively prose and engaging style helps spirit readers along, covering much ground with enough detail for readers to understand the key issues of Philip's reign without becoming bogged down by the minutiae of medieval Anglo-French politics.

On the other hand, the narrow nature of the book limits the breadth of topics typically included in biographies of medieval monarchs. While Hanley rightfully centres the conflict between the Capetians and the Plantagenets, she does not discuss Philip's domestic, religious, and economic policies in their own detailed, separate thematic chapters. Instead, she analyses them only in service to the core focus of the book. Some topics are quite extensively covered, such as Philip's relationship to his second wife, Ingeborg of Denmark, but other areas are only lightly touched upon, such as Philip's personal piety, his relationship to the Church, and the development of royal administration under the growing Capetian state. Consequently, readers never get a holistic sense of Philip as a medieval monarch, although Hanley provides more about how he used domestic, religious, and economic factors to his advantage in his rivalry with the Plantagenets. This often leaves readers wanting a little more. Placing Philip into a slightly broader context could help provide more insights into his contest with the Plantagenets: ultimately, he was successful against the Plantagenets, but was he as successful in other aspects of his reign? How did he capitalise upon those areas in service of his greater goals?

Nevertheless, Hanley presents a convincing and engaging depiction of Philip II, who deserved the title of being England's "Nemesis." Always playing the long game, he never lost sight of his ultimate goals, and he readily capitalised upon his opponents' moments of weakness to advance his cause. Philip proved himself to be one of the greatest monarchs of medieval France, but he was not without his flaws: his disregard and consistent underestimation of the power and influence of the women about him routinely held him back. Philip has often been depicted as fainthearted or militarily weak, but Hanley shows that he was a skilled general even if he was not as bellicose as his contemporaries. Hanley's biography of Philip II is an absorbing read, ideal for students and those with a general interest in this period of medieval history.

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