



Lionessheart: The Life and Times of Joanna Plantagenet.

Reviewed by: Jitske Jasperse

CONSEJO SUPERIOR DE INVESTIGACIONES CIENTÍFICAS

DOI: 10.21039/rsj.559

Abstract: Review of Catherine Hanley, *Lionessheart: The Life and Times of Joanna Plantagenet*, (The History Press, 2025).



***Lionessheart: The Life and Times of Joanna Plantagenet.* By Catherine Hanley. The History Press, 2025. ISBN 978-1-803-99516-8. 255 pp. £22.00.**



Lionessheart is a sweeping and at times breath-taking account of both the life of Joanna Plantagenet (1165–1199), the youngest daughter of Eleanor of Aquitaine and Henry II of England, and “of the wider world as she saw and experienced it” (19). Catherine Hanley convincingly brings to life Joanna and her contemporaries, skilfully demonstrating the role elite women played in society, even if not all of them were successful or powerful. The author notes that power was a multifaceted concept that sometimes resulted in women waging actual war (showing women’s power to make decisions and to impact their surroundings), but also required women to be clever enough to pick their battles. It is easy to view Joanna as a passive pawn, whose life as royal daughter, wife (as queen), sister, and, finally, countess was largely decided by the men in her life. Hanley, however, portrays Joanna as a woman who played the cards she was dealt, as well as an individual with thoughts and emotions. Ultimately, queens and noblewomen needed to be resilient and make the best of circumstances about which they frequently had little say.

The sobriquet “Lionessheart” (223) is well chosen because the fates of Joanna and her brother, Richard the Lionheart, were intertwined. Indeed, one of the strengths of Hanley’s account is her attentiveness to the entanglement of Joanna in the affairs of Richard. The Lionheart played a decisive role in what would be the final ten years of Joanna’s thirty-five-year long life.

Looking beyond the sibling bond, *Lionessheart* also reflects Joanna’s royal pedigree. As pointed out by Jonathan Morton in *New Medieval Literatures* 16, Philippe of Thaon’s bestiary—dedicated to Joanna’s great-grandmother Adeliza of Louvain, second wife of Henry I, and perhaps also owned by Joanna’s mother, Eleanor of Aquitaine—states “that what in the Greek is lion means king in French. The lion rules over mute beasts in many ways, and so the lion is a king” (24). Thus, the lioness is a queen. Stemming from a family of kings who selected lions as heraldic animals, Joanna was a cub who grew into a lioness after she married her first husband, William II of Sicily, with whom she had no offspring. The couple seems nonetheless to have lived amicably, perhaps even lovingly (Chapter 2).

After his death, Joanna was unable to prevent Tancred—William II’s cousin, the illegitimate son of William’s uncle Roger—from being crowned king of Sicily in January 1190. Tancred confiscated her dower land and incomes and imprisoned her (Chapter 3).

This episode—as many others related by Hanley in Joanna’s eventful life—is used to demonstrate why Joanna’s power was limited, but also that the queen always sought opportunities that would improve her situation (or at least not worsen it). With Tancred, Hanley encountered a historical figure who makes for good storytelling. She presents him to us in a vivid manner, including his physical appearance. Additionally, Hanley selects her medieval Christian, Jewish, and Muslim historians in such a way that the reader gets a clearer picture of the people, sounds (including languages), smells, architecture, gardens, and landscapes that surrounded Joanna.

As an art historian, I was delighted by the sensory landscapes Hanley evoked, and therefore I was somewhat disappointed that images in the book were not used as sources. In general, the author makes no explicit references to the twenty-eight colour images that are included, even though her description of William’s court and the selected images from Petrus of Ebulo would work well together. Visual and material culture deserves to be taken just as seriously as the words of the medieval historians that help us paint a picture of Joanna as an affective, living being. Publishers promoting wider-audience books should try to incorporate images in meaningful ways, and not just as beautiful pictures without context.

After Tancred imprisoned Joanna, Richard came to her rescue in September 1190. Richard’s rescue was not a selfless action by a loving brother, but a calculated move on the Lionheart’s part that included family honour, money (which he took rather than gave to Joanna, who formally was entitled to it), and a planned journey to the Holy Land. Joanna’s needs were not Richard’s concerns, because rather than escorting her back to familiar territory, he took her—alongside his wife Berengaria and the Damsel of Cyprus, daughter of Isaac Komnenos—to the Levant (Chapters 4, 5, 6). They encountered more ordeals there before they would return home, even though the “question of where ‘home’ might be for the rest of her life was still to be answered” (161). Hanley’s observations, like this one, help the reader engage with Joanna’s inner life, despite the absence of Joanna’s personal documents, such as letters. The long road home (Chapter 7)—demonstrating again the extend of Joanna’s travels—eventually brought Joanna to Poitou by late 1193, where she spent three years familiarizing herself with French affairs before Richard organised her marriage to Raymond VI of Toulouse, which took place in 1196.

While she would have been familiar with Toulouse before her marriage, moving to the county of Toulouse still required Joanna to adapt again to different cultural, geographical, religious, and political circumstances (Chapter 8). We might imagine that

this new milieu, which was “neither monocultural nor cut off from the wider world” reminded her slightly of Sicily (186). Apparently, her husband Raymond did not involve his wife much in his political affairs. Hanley tries to unravel his character to understand why a pregnant Joanna made a drastic decision: leaving her husband and her two children—Raymond and Jeanne—who, by law, belonged to her husband. In Chapter 9, the author details how Joanna took advantage of the unrest the Cathars generated and prepared to return to her natal family. Coming full circle, Hanley ends with Fontevraud, the abbey where Joanna grew up with her youngest brother, John, and where she was reburied with his financial support twenty-five years later.

Lionessheart is full of careful observations that help readers understand the distant life of Joanna, her female contemporaries, and their surroundings. In a life dominated by men, Joanna weighed her chances, grasped opportunities, and demonstrated an enormous resilience. Hanley has made Joanna’s story not just one about a royal daughter, but one also about medieval elite women, who appear and reappear throughout her narrative to demonstrate the breadth of their motions.

JITSKE JASPERSE

Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas