

‘You will dwell with barbarous and uneducated men’: Countess Ermengarde and Political Culture in Twelfth-Century Brittany

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Between 1106 and 1109, Robert of Arbrissel wrote to Countess Ermengarde of Brittany advising her on how she could transition back into the secular world after spending several months at the abbey of Fontevraud. In commenting on those with whom Ermengarde would interact, he stated: ‘You will dwell with barbarous and uneducated men.’¹ Although a Breton native son, Robert clearly had a rather low opinion of his homeland. Yet Robert’s poor estimation of Brittany was one shared by many.² William of Poitiers, however, may have the most colourful description of Brittany:

Indeed in those parts one warrior sired fifty, since each had, according to their barbarous customs ten or more wives ... When they are not making war, [the Bretons] live on or occupy themselves with plunder, brigandage and domestic feuds. They rush joyfully and eagerly into battle; while fighting they hit out like mad men ... and give ground with reluctance. They rejoice and glory in victory and praise won in battle.³

¹ Robert of Arbrissel, ‘Letter to Countess Ermengarde’, <<https://epistolae.ccnmtl.columbia.edu/letter/241.html>> [accessed 18 Sept. 2017]. There has been some debate over Ermengarde’s precise status while at Fontevraud. In his letter to her, Robert clearly states that she was married and not able to renounce her marriage, which questions if Ermengarde did take vows as a religious woman. However, according to Dom Gui Lobineau, author of an early history of Brittany, the Obituary for Fontevraud does list her as a monacha or nun, suggesting she had at least begun the process of taking vows. Dom Gui Alexis Lobineau, *Histoire de Bretagne: Composée sur les titres et les auteurs originaux*, 2 vols (Paris, 1707) [hereafter, Lobineau, *Histoire*], I, col. 124. Ermengarde is also listed as a *conversa* in the necrology of St Maurice of Angers: Charles du Fresne du Cange *et al.*, *Glossarium mediae et infimae latinitatis* (Niort, 1883–7), <<http://ducange.enc.sorbonne.fr/conversa>> [accessed 18 Sept. 2017].

² For example in his letter to Robert of Arbrissel, Bishop Baudri of Dol referred to Brittany as a ‘den of scorpions’. See *Robert of Arbrissel: A Medieval Religious Life*, ed. and trans. Bruce L. Venarde (Washington, DC, 2003), p. 8. Bishop Marbode of Rennes similarly described Brittany as full of outlaws and uncivilized people: Jules de Pétigny, ‘Lettre inédite de Robert de Arbrissel à comtesse Ermengard’, *Bibliothèque de l’école de chartes*, 15/1 (1884), pp. 215–16.

³ William of Poitiers, *Gesta Guillelmi: The Deeds of William*, ed. and trans. R. H. C. Davis and Marjorie Chibnall (Oxford, 2006, 1998), p. 75.

The ethnographic marginalization common among these medieval writers has cast a long shadow over the political history of Brittany. Indeed, even today Brittany is often treated by scholars as marginal or peripheral to medieval Europe.⁴

The accepted narrative for medieval Breton political history emphasizes a lack of centralized authority which resulted in political volatility. After the Viking invasions of the ninth and tenth centuries, scholars assert that the tentative unity forged by the early Breton kings was torn asunder and those monastic centres that had not moved inland were destroyed. Two comital families – those of Rennes and Cornouaille (see genealogy) – battled each other and drew other elites into their respective orbits. This internal instability also made Brittany a playground for the territorial ambition of its neighbours, specifically Normandy and Anjou. Only in 1084, when Count Alan IV (r. 1084–1112), a product of both the Rennes and Cornouaille lines, assumed control did the infighting stop and stability was restored. His son, Conan III (r. 1112–48), built upon the stability that his father had created.⁵

Like all accepted narratives, this one needs re-interrogation. Recent scholarship has expanded ‘political culture’ to recognize the contributions of ministers, advisers, family and others, as well as the ‘values, assumptions, habits, behaviours, language and rhetoric’ used to exercise power.⁶ Analysis of the political actions and contributions of Countess Ermengarde (c.1070–1147, r. 1093–1147) will provide an opportunity to reconsider twelfth-century Breton political culture.⁷ In spite of Alan

⁴ For example, in their discussion of medieval political development neither Thomas Bisson nor Robert Bartlett take Brittany into account, further reinforcing the assumption that medieval Brittany was somehow outside the politics that defined Europe in the Central Middle Ages. Thomas N. Bisson, *The Crisis of the Twelfth Century: Power, Lordship, and the Origins of European Government* (Princeton, NJ, 2008) and Robert Bartlett, *The Making of Europe: Conquest, Colonization, and Cultural Change, 950–1350* (Princeton, NJ, 1994).

⁵ André Chédeville and Noël-Yves Tonnerre, *La Bretagne féodale, XIe–XIIe siècle* (Rennes, 1987) and Patrick Galliou and Michael Jones, *The Bretons* (Oxford, 1991) provide examples of this narrative. For a slightly different perspective, see Joëlle Quaghebeur, *La Cornouaille du IXe au XIIe siècle: Mémoire, pouvoirs, noblesse* (Rennes, 2002).

⁶ Charles Insley, ‘The political culture of twelfth-century Wales’, *Anglo-Norman Studies*, 30 (2007), pp. 132–53. See also R. R. Davies, *The First English Empire: Power and Identities in the British Isles, 1093–1343* (Oxford, 2000), pp. 86–95, and Stephen D. White, *Custom, Kinship and Gifts to Saints: The ‘Laudatio Parentum’ in Western France, c. 1050–1150* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1988) and ‘“*Pactam legem vincit et amor iudicum*”: Settlement of Disputes by Compromise in Eleventh-Century Western France’, *American Journal of Legal History*, 22/4 (1978), pp. 218–308.

⁷ There has been rather little modern inquiry into Breton countesses, *dominae* and even nuns. See Amy Livingstone, ‘Extraordinairement ordinaire: Ermengarde de Bretagne, femmes de l’aristocratie et pouvoir en France au Moyen Age, v. 1090–1135’, *Annales de Bretagne et des pays de l’Ouest*, 21/1 (2014), pp. 7–24, and ‘Pious women in a “den of scorpions”: the piety and patronage of the countesses of Brittany, c. 1050–1150’, *Historical Reflections/Réflexions historiques*, 30/1 (2017), pp. 45–61; Joëlle Quaghebeur, ‘Havoise, Constance et Mathilde, princesses de Normandie et duchesses de Bretagne’, in Joëlle Quaghebeur and Bernard Merdignac (eds), *Bretons et Normands au Moyen Age: Rivalités, malentendus, convergences* (Rennes, 2008), pp. 145–62; Michael Jones, ‘La vie familiale de la duchesse Constance: Le témoignage des chartes’, in G. Le Menn and J. Le Moing (eds), *Bretagne et pays celtique: Langues, histoire, civilisation* (Rennes, 1989), pp. 349–60; Yannick Hillion, ‘Mariage et mécénat: deux aspects de la condition féminine aristocratique en Bretagne, au milieu du XIIe siècle’, in C. Guillou

IV's place as the presumptive saviour of Brittany, for nineteen of the twenty-eight years he was count, he was married to Ermengarde – and for approximately five of those years (1096–1101), she ruled on her own while he was on crusade.⁸ Similarly, Ermengarde co-ruled with her son until her death (1112–47). Thus in the very period when scholars suggest Brittany was stable and well-ruled, the consistent political presence was Countess Ermengarde. Indeed, one scholar has commented that 'between her too pious husband and feeble son, [Ermengarde] was the only "political male" at the head of the comital family'.⁹ Significantly, the author genders Ermengarde 'male', reflecting another feature of the historiography of medieval political power; it was only exercised by men or those who were gendered male. I will argue, however, that Ermengarde remained very much a female and that her gender, in fact, gave her power and influence that she could command in the political realm not available to her husband or son.¹⁰ In particular, Ermengarde was skilled in creating and cultivating relationships with powerful people and important ecclesiastical institutions of the Loire valley. Her talents and connections contributed significantly not only to the stability of Brittany, but also to its political culture. Ermengarde, however, was normative in her exercise of power and influence and functioned much as other countesses and aristocratic women did throughout medieval Europe.¹¹

I

To gauge both Ermengarde's participation in political culture and to determine how politics operated in Brittany, four topics will be examined here: governance, influence, creating alliances, and intervention. As the daughter of Count Fulk IV of Anjou, being raised at her father's court

(ed.), *Études sur la Bretagne et les pays celtiques: Mélanges offerts à Yves le Gallo* (Brest, 1987), pp. 157–66.

⁸ Tradition holds that Ermengarde was married first to count William of Aquitaine. This supposition is based on a quote from William of Tyre from his *Chronicle* when he was describing Fulk of Anjou's parentage. Given that William made mistakes about the European aristocracy and the fact that Ermengarde appears in no document from Poitou/Aquitaine, I am persuaded by Ruth Harvey's argument that the marriage never took place. There may have been some sort of betrothal or engagement, and perhaps that accounts for the assertion that Ermengarde was married first to William (that and it would be in accord with her father's attempt to create bonds with his southern neighbour). Ruth E. Harvey, 'The wives of the "first troubadour"', *Duke William IX of Aquitaine*, *Journal of Medieval History*, 19/4 (1993), pp. 307–25.

⁹ Arlette Lebigre, 'Les debuts de l'abbaye cistercienne de Buzay in pays de Rais, 1144–1250', *Revue d'histoire de droit français et étranger*, 45/3 (1967), pp. 456, n. 27.

¹⁰ In his encomium of Ermengarde, Bishop Marbode of Rennes particularly emphasized her beauty and femininity. 'Daughter of Fulk, adornment/glory of Brittany, beautiful, modest, handsome, shining, brilliant, young, if you had not known the marriage bed and birth labors, you could be, in my judgment, Cynthia [Diana] The look, flashing with light which wounds those who see it, and the golden hair . . .'. For a translation of the entire poem, see *Epistolae*, <<https://epistolae.ccnmtl.columbia.edu/letter/240.html>> [accessed 18 Sept. 2017].

¹¹ Please see my recent article, 'Recalculating the equation: powerful woman = extraordinary', *Medieval Feminist Forum*, 51/2 (2016), pp. 17–29, for an argument against the assertion that elite women exercising power was somehow exceptional.

in Angers helped to prepare Ermengarde for a life in politics.¹² While medieval chroniclers loved to hate Fulk le Réchin, many overlook the fact that Fulk's court was also a centre of learning and nurtured many who would become some of the most prominent clergy of their day.¹³ Both Robert of Arbrissel and Marbode of Rennes were associated with the court at Angers and would play formative roles in Ermengarde's career.¹⁴ The ideas circulating about reforming the Church also passed through Angers as the nearby abbey of Marmoutier was one of the prime centres of reform and where many Angevin abbots were educated. The Angevin comital family, moreover, had long been benefactors of this monastery.¹⁵ As a young woman, Ermengarde was undoubtedly exposed to these ideas and reformers. Her continued contact with her natal kin ensured she was kept apprised of ecclesiastical thought generated from this monastery.¹⁶ These connections would aid Ermengarde as she governed Brittany with her husband and then her son.

II

Both Alan IV and Conan III have been lauded for the peace and stability they cultivated in Brittany.¹⁷ Key to this peace was the ability to provide justice and to command.¹⁸ Ermengarde took part in both as co-ruler and countess. During the course of his tenure as count, Alan issued sixteen notices concerning comital justice or intervention. Of these sixteen, half can be reliably dated to after 1093 when Alan and Ermengarde married. Ermengarde acted with Alan in seven of the

¹² As there is no evidence that she was sent to a maternal relative for care, I believe Ermengarde spent much of her childhood at her father's court. Like many aristocratic daughters, Ermengarde may have been educated at a nearby convent – perhaps Ronceray. Ermengarde's childhood is a facet of her life that merits further investigation. Kathryn Dutton has examined how three generations of Angevin comital sons were raised ('*Ad erudiendum tradidit*: the upbringing of Angevin comital children', *Anglo-Norman Studies*, 32 (2010), pp. 24–39).

¹³ Daniel Prigent and Noël-Yves Tonnere (eds), *Le haut moyen âge en Anjou* (Rennes, 2010); John McNeill and Daniel Prigent (eds), *Anjou: Medieval Art, Architecture, and Archeology*, British Archeological Association Conference Transactions, XXVI (Leeds, 2003).

¹⁴ As Orderic Vitalis recounts: 'Count Fulk was a man with many reprehensible, even scandalous habits, and gave way to many pestilential vices' and whose court 'frivolously away their time, spending it as they chose without regard for the law of God or the customs of their ancestors. They devoted their nights to feasts and drinking-bouts, idle chatter, dice, games of chance and other sports, and they slept all day' (*The Ecclesiastical History of Orderic Vitalis*, ed. and trans. Marjorie Chibnall 6 vols (Oxford, 1972–81), VI, p. 187).

¹⁵ Olivier Guillot, *Le comte d'Anjou et son entourage au XI^{ème} siècle*, 2 vols (Paris, 1972), I, p. 162.

¹⁶ It was also while living in Angers and before her marriage to Alan in 1093 that Ermengarde interacted with Bertrada of Montfort, her father's next wife. These women were roughly contemporaries and had many common interests – specifically dedication to the community at Fontevraud and Count Fulk V of Anjou, who was Ermengarde's half-brother and Bertrada's son.

¹⁷ For examples, see those cited in n. 5 above.

¹⁸ For a comparison, see Mark Hagger, 'Secular Law and Custom in Ducal Normandy, c. 1000–1144', *Speculum*, 85/4 (2010), pp. 827–67. For an example of royal justice, see Bjorn Weiler, 'William of Malmesbury, King Henry I, and the *Gesta Regum Anglorum*', *Anglo-Norman Studies*, 31 (2009), pp. 157–76.

eight.¹⁹ If the dissemination of justice is accepted as a sign of authority, this countess was clearly involved in the governance of the county. Ermengarde's activity in comital acts would have been an experience she would have had in common with other countesses, like Adela of Blois and Aremburge of Anjou, who also acted with their husbands in governing the county.

For instance, between 1110 and 1112, Alan and Ermengarde resolved a dispute at their court at Nantes concerning two of their vassals, who happened to be brothers.²⁰ One of the brothers had made a gift of a church in Nantes to Marmoutier, with approval of his lords, Alan, Ermengarde and Conan, and as part of a larger comital donation. Shortly after, the other brother disputed the gift and even did violence to the monks. The abbot appealed to the comital court for help since the troublemaker would not recognize the abbey's right to the church or the abbot's attempt at a compromise. Alan and Ermengarde called the disputants to their court (Conan was not present), where they had assembled their barons, and in consultation with their men, they deliberated on the case. The count and countess along with their vassals decided that because the brothers' land had already been divided, neither had claim to what the other held.²¹ The disputing brother then recognized that his claim was unjust and to assuage the anger of the count and abbot, he appeared grovelling before them, in repentance.

This comital notice records some key information about the extent of the power of the twelfth-century Breton counts. The abbot of Marmoutier believed that Alan and Ermengarde could render justice and bring this unruly noble to heel, an indication that this count of Brittany wielded the ability to command over the local aristocracy – a change from what had been the case for much of the previous century. The comital couple also acted with their barons in passing judgment, an example of efficient and shared governance. Finally, resolving this dispute restored peace among comital vassals and with the Church. As co-ruler, Ermengarde participated in this resolution that ensured that secular lords did not do violence to those unable to defend themselves. Intriguingly, the charter says that Alan was 'troubled by anger' over this incident. Ermengarde appears to have been the cooler head that prevailed and worked to mitigate Alan's ire. Rather than a piece of comital choreography or invented monastic drama, incidents such as these suggest the tense environment

¹⁹ The one notice where Ermengarde did not act with Alan dates from the time when she was living at Fontevraud, e.g. 1105, in *Hubert Guillotel: Actes des ducs de Bretagne (944–1148)*, ed. Philippe Charon, Philippe Guigon, Cyprien Henry, Michael Jones, Katharine Keats-Rohan, and Jean-Claude Meuret (Rennes, 2014) [hereafter, Guillotel, *Actes des ducs*], no. 107, pp. 402–3. In contrast, Conan III only issued five notices and Ermengarde appeared in three of those five. The two where she was not present date from when she would have been a Cistercian nun or living in the Holy Land.

²⁰ Guillotel, *Actes des ducs*, nos. 113 and 114, pp. 417–21.

²¹ This is a very interesting judgment, given practices in the neighbouring Loire region where brothers and relatives made claim to each other's lands – already partitioned or not. See Amy Livingstone, *Out of Love for My Kin: Aristocratic Family Life in the Lands of the Loire, c.1000–1200* (Ithaca, NY, 2010).

of legal proceedings. A vassal's disobedience or challenge to his lord's authority could surely result in angry retaliation. Men, such as Alan and his peers, were in a position to use violence to slake their anger. Ermengarde's intercession avoided just such a conflict – which could escalate and draw in other combatants. She recognized the importance of keeping the support of their vassals and that Alan's anger could have led violence to get out of hand. In this instance, her gender would have worked to her advantage and that of the parties involved.

Providing the Bretons with peace continued to occupy Ermengarde throughout her life. In 1127 she and her son Conan presided over a Peace Council.²² One of the objectives of the council was to restore property to the Church that had been 'usurped' by the Breton nobility. In a letter to the pope recording these events, Conan assured him that the malefactors had been punished. Here again we see the counts of Brittany being able to exert their authority over the Breton nobility.²³ Pauline Stafford has argued that 'authority induces obedience without the need for force ... A person with authority can command simply by the position they are in',²⁴ and Ermengarde clearly was in a position to command. Indeed throughout the 1120s and 1130s Conan and Ermengarde acted to ensure ecclesiastical property was restored to various monastic houses. Often these actions were undertaken from the 'counsel of Countess Ermengarde'.²⁵

Ermengarde's participation in justice and courts is affirmed in Robert of Arbrissel's letter to her, which can be read for information on what Robert, someone who was familiar with aristocratic life, thought Ermengarde would be doing as she resumed her life as countess. Several times in the letter he advises her on rendering justice, for example: 'If justice does not precede, peace does not follow' and 'Do not command anything lightly, do not do anything lightly, do all by counsel lest you repent later.'²⁶ From the extant evidence, Ermengarde seems to have

²² Dom Pierre Hyacinthe Morice, *Mémoires pour servir de preuves à l'histoire ecclésiastique et civile de Bretagne*, 3 vols (Paris, 1742) [hereafter, Morice, *Mémoires*], I, cols 556–8.

²³ As part of this council, Breton nobles restored church property that they had seized or had somehow come to control 'unjustly'. After the council, Ermengarde and Conan also participated with several archbishops, bishops and other prelates in the purification of the altar of St Sauveur of Redon. Guillotel, *Actes des ducs*, no. 131, pp. 454–6. There is some question about the veracity of this document, stemming mostly from style rather than the substance of the act.

²⁴ Pauline Stafford, 'Emma: the powers of the queen in the eleventh century', in Anne Duggan (ed.), *Queens and Queenship in Medieval Europe* (Woodbridge, 1996), pp. 3–26, at p. 12.

²⁵ For example, Guillotel, *Actes des ducs*, no. 133, pp. 459–60. Countess Aremburge, Ermengarde's sister-in-law, also advised and encouraged her husband, Fulk V, to restore property to the Bishop of Le Mans in 1125: *Actus Pontificum Cennomansis in urbe degentium*, ed. G. Bussan and A. Ledru (Le Mans, 1902), p. 467. I would like to thank Kathryn Dutton for making me aware of this comparison with Aremburge.

²⁶ For a translation and Latin text of this letter, see <<http://epistolae.ccnmtl.columbia.edu/letter/241.html>> [accessed 18 Sept. 2017]. The editors of *Epistolae* put the date of the letter at c.1109. Given the context of the letter, I would argue that it was more likely written around 1106/7 when Ermengarde first returned to the world. For discussion of this letter, see also: Pétigny, 'Lettre inédite de Robert de Arbrissel à comtesse Ermengard', pp. 209–35. A. Bourdeaut, 'Ermengarde, comtesse de Bretagne: entre Robert d'Arbrissel et Saint Bernard, fondation de l'abbaye de Buzay', *Bulletin de la société d'archéologie et histoire de Nantes et de la Loire inférieure*, 75 (1935), pp. 173–97.

followed his advice. She and Alan sought counsel with their vassals in passing judgment on the dispute of Marmoutier's property. Similarly she and Conan held a council to render justice over lay possession of ecclesiastical property to create peace between their vassals and the Church. As I am not aware of any examples of resistance or disputes brought by the Breton aristocracy in response to these judgments, it would appear they accepted the rulings of the count and countess.

III

Sometime shortly after his election as bishop of Rennes in 1096, Marbode penned a letter to Ermengarde in the form of a poem praising her beauty, her piety, but particularly her counsel and eloquence: 'Fame reports that no woman surpasses you, Powerful in eloquence, shrewd in counsel.'²⁷ The timing of the poem is significant in that it was written just after Marbode became bishop, feasibly as a way of thanking Ermengarde for her assistance in his elevation to the episcopal see. Marbode calls Ermengarde 'Daughter of Fulk, Glory of Brittany' and as countess of Brittany and daughter of Anjou, she was certainly in a position to bring her influence to bear by calling on her various relationships to help Marbode achieve this office.

While hostility between Brittany and Anjou may have abated by the early twelfth century, Angevin interest in Brittany had not; it merely took another form.²⁸ Ermengarde's marriage had been arranged to establish an Angevin presence in a county that was strategically important to the counts of Anjou. Fulk IV must have had confidence that his daughter was politically astute enough to balance being an advocate for Anjou with ruling the county with her husband (although it is likely that Fulk cared more about the former than the latter). The vacancy of the bishopric of Rennes in 1093 provided an opportunity for Angevin–Breton interests to merge.

Count Alan IV had gone a long way in establishing firm control of Brittany by dealing with both internal and external threats to comital primacy. He spent the early years of his tenure combatting Geoffrey Grennonat, the bastard son of his grandfather, his Cornouaille cousins, and the Normans.²⁹ However, various parties in Brittany – particularly the

²⁷ For Marbode's letter, see: *Patrologia Latina*, 171, poem 23, cols 1659–60; also partially quoted in de Pétigny, p. 213. See also *Epistolae*, <<http://epistolae.ccnmtl.columbia.edu/woman/31.html#letterslist>> [accessed 18 Sept. 2017].

²⁸ The Angevin counts had been a disruptive presence in Brittany stretching back to Fulk Nerra in the tenth century, who claimed the title of count of Nantes. The Angevins had designs on Brittany as part of their expanding dominion, so they meddled in Breton affairs by supporting the rivals to the counts of the house of Rennes; those of Cornouaille and Nantes. For example, the Angevins had supported Geoffrey Grennonat, Count Alan III's bastard son, against Alan IV's father Hoël. Fulk may also have influenced the election of Sylvester as bishop of Rennes. The marriage with Count Alan IV would bring these hostilities to an end.

²⁹ As Rennes was traditionally the comital seat, Alan IV had to siege Rennes and wrest it from Geoffrey in order to be invested there as count in 1084. Lobineau, *Histoire*, I, col. 102. Alan married

Cornouaille kindred and members of prominent noble families – had yet to be completely neutralized. The la Guerche family had long possessed the bishopric of Rennes and used this office to challenge the counts. When Sylvester de la Guerche died in 1093, Alan was not interested in having another member of this or another prominent Breton family succeed to the bishopric. Rather, it was in his interest to have an outsider assume this office. Here the interests of Rennes and Angers coincided. Fulk wanted someone sympathetic to Anjou as bishop; and Alan wanted someone free from allegiance to the aristocratic families of Brittany.

Countess Ermengarde was strategically placed to realize these imperatives. Marbode was an Angevin native, educated at the cathedral school at Angers where in 1075/6 he became school master. Shortly after, Marbode was granted the position of cardinal archdeacon of the diocese of Angers: an office which he held until the end of his life. Marbode was also connected to Fulk's court through his family. He and Ermengarde likely knew each other as she grew up at her father's court and Marbode's kinsmen were advisers to the count.³⁰ Ermengarde was strongly committed to the Church, particularly to the ideas of reform circulating around the Loire, originating from Marmoutier. As a supporter of the reform movement, she would have been invested in finding a bishop worthy of the office, preferably one who shared her views on reform, rather than a Breton aristocrat who sought the office for its power. Marbode suited everyone's interests well. For Alan, he was an outsider with important connections to the Loire. For Ermengarde, he was disposed to reform, connected to her father and his court, and a familiar face from her childhood. For Fulk, Marbode was an Angevin related to men he trusted.

Ensuring Marbode's election was a delicate calculus, nevertheless. Pope Urban II was touring the region as part of his effort to rally support for the First Crusade. Urban was well disposed towards Marbode, partially because several in his entourage knew him, and in March 1096 Marbode was elevated as bishop at the council of Tours.³¹ The newly elevated bishop soon wrote a poem to Ermengarde, in which he specifically praised her ability to provide counsel.³² Marbode's particular emphasis

William the Conqueror's daughter, Constance, in 1087 shortly after the siege of Dol. Lobineau, *Histoire*, I, col. 104.

³⁰ Melissa Lurio, 'An educated bishop in an age of reform: Marbode of Rennes, 1096–1123', Ph.D. Dissertation: Boston University, 2004, pp. 44–9, 111; 322–8. For Marbode's family, see Melissa Lurio, 'A proposed genealogy for Marbode, Angevin Bishop of Rennes, 1096–1123', *Medieval Prosopography*, 26 (2005), pp. 51–76. Marbode's brother and nephew were minor functionaries of Fulk IV. Even if not personally acquainted, Marbode and Ermengarde had the mutual interest of Fulk in common. Moreover, as Kathryn Dutton has shown, many twelfth-century Angevin functionaries were, in fact, descended from Marbode's family: Kathryn Dutton, 'The personnel of comital administration in Greater Anjou, 1129–1151', *Haskins Society Journal*, 23 (2014), pp. 125–53.

³¹ Lurio, 'An educated bishop', p. 137.

³² Lurio also argues that Ermengarde was instrumental in getting Marbode selected for the episcopal see. *Ibid.*, p. 137.

on the countess's skill in giving advice stemmed from Ermengarde's involvement in the episcopal election. She probably counselled both Alan and Marbode in securing this election (as well as dealing with her notoriously difficult father with whom she had a good relationship) and employed her eloquence to argue for her position.³³ Marbode's praise of Ermengarde as 'shrewd' is significant, as it indicates her comprehension of the ebb and flow of politics. Ermengarde's support of his candidacy provided the foundation for a long and friendly relationship between countess and bishop – as well as an important link to Anjou. Marbode's election was well timed, for just as he assumed his office Count Alan IV departed for the Holy Land. Ermengarde's support and advocacy of Marbode may well have stemmed from her desire to have a bishop who would be her ally while she ruled Brittany on her own.

For the next two decades, until Marbode's death in 1123, he and Ermengarde collaborated in a variety of ways. In 1101, Marbode consecrated a church that Ermengarde had built in Rennes, near the comital castle, with her own money.³⁴ Later that same year, Ermengarde and Alan donated several more churches in Nantes to the abbey of Marmoutier.³⁵ In her study of Marbode, Melissa Lurio has argued that in order for him to be elected bishop, Marbode needed the support of this powerful abbey.³⁶ Having the count and countess of Brittany demonstrate their support for reform by restoring churches to Marmoutier would have helped buttress Marbode's status as a reforming bishop. Although the counts of Brittany had patronized Marmoutier before, this was the first time that Alan had made any sort of gift to Marmoutier. The count would go on to make several more before he retired in 1112 and Ermengarde participated in every one.³⁷ Ermengarde herself would come to be an ardent supporter of papal reform – which she may have gleaned from her connections to Marmoutier or presence at local church councils while Urban was visiting western France. The countess acted as the touch point between the abbey of Marmoutier and efforts of reform in the county.

Ermengarde's support of Marbode benefited comital power in many ways. Unlike previous bishops who had worked to undermine the counts, Marbode was clearly an ally. There are no instances of hostility or dispute with the bishop during Marbode's tenure. Moreover, having a friendly bishop aided the comital family when tension arose with other Breton clergy. Marbode was also an important connection to Anjou and hence Angevin allies. Although a bishop of Rennes, Marbode remained a native

³³ Marbode also praised Ermengarde's piety, specifically that she did not 'love the world'. This would be an indication of rejecting the power of the secular world and its impact or interference in the Church – which would have been consonant with the current programme of reform.

³⁴ Lobineau, *Histoire*, II, cols 293–4; Morice, *Mémoires*, I, cols 584–5. See also Lurio, 'An educated bishop', no. 71, pp. 567–9. The bishop and countess also collaborated in providing an endowment to support a priest for the church.

³⁵ Guillotel, *Actes des ducs*, nos. 104 and 105, pp. 396–9.

³⁶ Lurio, 'An educated bishop', pp. 153 and 230.

³⁷ Guillotel, *Actes des ducs*, nos. 104 and 105, pp. 396–9; no. 109, pp. 406–10; and no. 115, pp. 422–5.

son of Anjou throughout his life. Indeed, he held the office of archdeacon of Anjou even after he became bishop of Rennes and retired to the abbey of St Maurice to end his days. The collaboration between the Ermengarde and Marbode started with her support of his elevation to office, but endured until the bishop retired to their mutual place of birth.

IV

As the example of Marbode indicates, Ermengarde was adept at making allies of prominent clergy. Throughout her life, Ermengarde was strongly drawn to religion. Scholars have often dismissed Ermengarde's exploration of the religious life as indicative of a woman who did not know what she wanted. Closer scrutiny, however, demonstrates that even though Ermengarde may not have found the religious life possible, her time as a *religieuse* at Fontevraud and as a nun at the Cistercian house of Larrey allowed her to cultivate networks of friendship with many powerful clergy, which helped to maintain peace in Brittany and extend comital authority.

About ten to twelve years after her marriage, that is around 1105, Ermengarde's exposure to the Church's teachings on consanguinity caused her to question the legitimacy of her marriage to Alan. Combining this with an interest in new forms of spirituality, Ermengarde left Brittany to live at Fontevraud where the countess forged a bond with Robert of Arbrissel, his patrons, and the ideals central to Fontevraud that would last her life time.³⁸ Ermengarde was also influential in gaining support for this community. During her time there, her father and two brothers made a gift to the nuns.³⁹ After she returned to Brittany, she continued to advocate for Fontevraud and her husband and sons donated again to the abbey. The donation was made in Nantes, in the great hall of the castle, in the presence of Hersende and Petronilla, women who would go on to be the prioress and first abbess of Fontevraud.⁴⁰ Not only was Ermengarde successful in getting her conjugal family to support this community, she also maintained contact with the nuns of Fontevraud as Hersende and Petronilla were visiting Nantes – probably Ermengarde herself. Through Fontevraud, the comital family was connected to a network of patronage, friendship and shared interest in spirituality.

Further indication of Ermengarde's support of Fontevraud is apparent in her patronage of the abbey of St Sulpice-la-Forêt, the community founded by Raoul de la Futaie, the companion and fellow hermit of Robert of Arbrissel. Raoul had founded St Sulpice as a double house, very much along the lines of Fontevraud. Vincent Launay credits Ermengarde with creating 'a favourable climate' for 'revived' monasticism, which

³⁸ Furthermore, Fontevraud and Robert could count some of the most influential people in France as their patrons and supporters. Queen Bertrada, Ermengarde's stepmother, for instance, became a dedicated follower of Robert and his ideals.

³⁹ Guillot, *Le comte d'Anjou*, II, pp. 269–70.

⁴⁰ Guillot, *Actes des ducs*, no. 121, pp. 433–5. Significantly, these women were conducting business concerning Fontevraud on their own, without Robert of Arbrissel.

resulted in foundations like St Sulpice in Brittany.⁴¹ The countess and her family also provided material support through their donations to this community.⁴² One of them was made ‘on the counsel’ of Ermengarde.⁴³ In 1107, the countess also joined with Bishop Marbode in confirming the donation by two of her vassals of a church in his diocese to Robert’s foundation of canons at La Rœe.⁴⁴ Support of these new foundations forged connections between the countess and other powerful Breton elites who were similarly attracted to reform – her own vassals as well as the lords of Fougères and the bishop of Rennes. Patronage of Arbrissel also reinforced the bond of kinship between the Breton comital family and the counts of Anjou and Maine, Ermengarde’s half-brother Count Fulk V and his wife Aremburge.⁴⁵ Fulk is often lauded as an important supporter of Fontevraud, but instead of Ermengarde being reduced to ‘the sister of Robert’s benefactor Fulk V’, she assumed a rather more active role for it was she who instigated her brother’s patronage of this community (as well as that of her father, husband, son and grandson).⁴⁶ Count Fulk V and Aremburge would also donate to St Sulpice. Ermengarde surely played a key role in attracting Angevin support for this Breton house, located just on the outskirts of Rennes.⁴⁷ Ermengarde’s relationship with her brother was quite close.⁴⁸ Indeed, some have argued that Ermengarde may even have helped raise Fulk – and given the twenty-year gap in the ages, this

⁴¹ Vincent Launay, ‘La politique monastique des ducs de Bretagne: l’exemple de l’abbaye de Saint-Sulpice, XIIe–XIIIe siècles,’ *Britannia Monastica*, 16 (2012), pp. 67–75.

⁴² Guillotel, *Actes des ducs*, no 156, pp. 507–9 and no. 129, pp. 451–2.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, no. 153, pp. 498–501.

⁴⁴ Lurio, ‘An educated bishop’, p. 304 and Instrument 85, p. 603. By this point, Robert had left La Rœe and was preaching throughout France. In c.1098, Marbode had written to Robert chiding him for his itinerant preaching and his behaviour with women. The support of the bishop for La Rœe does indicate that while he may have had trouble with Robert’s itinerant preaching and relationships with women, he – and the countess – saw value in the new monastic foundation of La Rœe and were invested in the community’s material support. For a translation of Marbode’s letter to Robert, see Venarde, *Robert of Arbrissel*, pp. 92–100.

⁴⁵ Aremburge and Fulk’s daughter, Mathilda became one of Fontevraud’s abbesses. Mathilda had been engaged to William Atheling who died in the white ship tragedy of 1120. Shortly afterward, she decided to become a nun. Conan III would make a gift to Fontevraud (for his mother and with her consent) and mentions that his cousin was a nun there. Guillotel, *Actes des ducs*, no. 135, pp. 464–6.

⁴⁶ Venarde, *Robert of Arbrissel*, p. xxvi. While it is true that Fulk the younger’s mother, Queen Bertrada, was also a passionate advocate of Robert Arbrissel, Ermengarde’s involvement with Robert pre-dates that of Bertrada by at least a decade.

⁴⁷ Joseph Chartrou, *L’Anjou 1109–1151: Foulque de Jerusalem et Geoffroi Plantagenet* (Paris, 1928), no. 45, pp. 343–4. Their gift eventually became a priory of this abbey. Lurio, ‘An educated bishop’, p. 313.

⁴⁸ Ermengarde had also played a key role in getting her brother Fulk to ensure their father’s tomb was appropriately commemorated, indicating her influence over her brother, but also their affective bond. Abbot Geoffrey of Vendôme wrote to Ermengarde asking for her assistance. Since Geoffrey was complaining that the tomb was in disrepair, the letter must date some years after Fulk IV’s death. With the timing of Fulk and Aremburge’s gift to the abbey of Vendôme in 1119, it seems a good bet the letter was written c.1117/18 rather than the date of 1131 assigned by the editors of *Epistolae*. The chief evidence they cite for the later date is the reference to ‘royal of family’, which they take as indication Fulk V was king of Jerusalem. But this could simply be hyperbole or a reference to the match of Ermengarde’s son Conan with the daughter of King Henry I or that Fulk’s mother was the queen of France. Fulk, moreover, was already in the Holy Land by 1131. Oddly, Geoffrey claims that there is no other ‘heir of his flesh’ (i.e. Fulk IV) to whom he could appeal other than Ermengarde.

could certainly have been possible.⁴⁹ What is apparent is that these siblings shared an interest in the religious movements sweeping France in the early twelfth century, which served to reinforce their ties of blood and allegiance. Brother and sister would also both be attracted to Cistercian monasticism. In this case it does seem that Fulk first exposed Ermengarde to St Bernard's teachings, as he and his wife were early patrons of the Cistercians.⁵⁰ This mutual interest in religion served the political interest of the counts of Brittany well by binding these two families together. In the next generation Conan, Ermengarde's son, would make a gift on behalf of his cousin Mathilda, who became abbess of Fontevraud, but also ask his cousin Geoffrey for assistance in his wars against unruly Breton nobles.⁵¹

V

Living with 'barbarous and unruly men' necessitated a need for allies. These alliances also positioned this countess to intervene between her male kin and the clergy. Like many women of her class, Ermengarde was called upon to restore peace. Her mediation in a dispute between Conan III and the Cistercians illustrates how this countess activated her networks with clergy and kin to resolve conflicts.

Where Count Alan IV had been successful in uniting Brittany, Conan was less adept, particularly in bringing the lords of western Brittany under his control. Unlike his father, Conan virtually never visited the Cornouaille regions of Upper Brittany and made only three gifts to houses in the region. By the 1130s Conan was on the defensive in the north, battling the powerful descendants of the Cornouaille counts, the lords of Penthièvre.⁵² To bolster his power, Conan sought the support of the Cistercians and relied upon his mother to use her allies to assist him.

Perhaps Fulk was out of the country – maybe visiting the Holy Land – or Geoffrey simply appealed to Ermengarde as a woman who would most likely be in charge of commemoration for her family. In her edition of Geoffrey's letters, Geneviève Giordanengo dates this letter as c.1110, but this seems too early given that Geoffrey says Fulk's tomb was in disrepair and he would have only been dead a few months by this time – hardly time enough for the tomb to start to decay. Hence a date of c.1115–18 seems more likely. See *Geoffrey de Vendôme: Oeuvres*, ed. and trans. Geneviève Giordanengo (Paris, 1996), pp. 212–14.

⁴⁹ Basit Hammad Qureshi, 'Crusade, crisis and statecraft in Latin Christendom: the case of Count Fulk V of Anjou (1090–1143)', Ph.D. Dissertation, The University of Minnesota, 2017, pp. 32, 103, 196, and app. D.

⁵⁰ See Paul Marchegay, 'Chartes angevins des onzième et douzième siècles', *Bibliothèque de l'école de chartes*, 36 (1875), pp. 435–8. In 1121 they founded the Cistercian monastery at Loroux just north of Saumur in their holdings in Anjou. Aremburge was such a strong proponent of the Cistercians, and evidently this house in particular, that she was buried there. Given that Ermengarde spent much of her time in Fulk's company and in touring his Angevin lands before he departed for the Holy Land, Ermengarde may have developed an interest in the Cistercian order at this point. St Bernard's correspondence with Ermengarde holds some tantalizing information that supports Fulk's influence on Ermengarde's adoption of the Cistercian life.

⁵¹ Lobineau, *Histoire*, I, col. 135 says that Geoffrey tried to help Conan in battle at Pont Vissech. The Breton barons interfered with the plan of Geoffrey and Conan to join forces, as they kept them separate. This successfully prevented Conan from being able to bring these nobles to heel.

⁵² Olivier of Pont-Château was a particularly disruptive force in the region around Redon. Lobineau, *Histoire*, II, col. 166.

Ermengarde was drawn to Cistercian spirituality and was friends with St Bernard – who wrote two letters to her where his affection for her is apparent.⁵³ Around 1130 Ermengarde became a nun at the Cistercian convent of Larrey, and was even veiled by St Bernard himself, but she left the religious life about a year later. Her departure did not end her friendship with Bernard, however. After returning to Brittany around 1134 from the Holy Land where she had been visiting her brother who was now King Fulk I of Jerusalem,⁵⁴ one of her first acts was to ‘urge and counsel’ her son Conan to found a community of Cistercian monks just south of Nantes at Buzay.⁵⁵ While this foundation was certainly motivated by piety and commitment to the Cistercian cause, there was also a critical political context. During the 1130s the Penthièvre family and their satellites had gained significant military success, undercutting Conan’s authority in the Cornouaille regions. At the same time this rival family had also gained the favour of the Church and respect of St Bernard through their patronage of the Cistercians.⁵⁶ Cistercian monasticism became increasingly popular in Brittany with ten Cistercian houses founded between 1130 and 1147, and the Penthièvre family had taken lead in

⁵³ For a translation and transcription of this letter, see <<http://epistolae.ccnmtl.columbia.edu/letter/245.html>> [accessed 18 Sept. 2017]. See also Shawn Kraemer, ‘Interpreting the letters of Bernard of Clairvaux to Ermengard, countess of Brittany: the twelfth-century context and language of friendship’, *Cistercian Studies Quarterly*, 27/3 (1992), pp. 217–50, for additional context. Intriguingly, Bernard wrote to Queen Melisende, Ermengarde’s sister-in-law, around this time to ask for her assistance for a group of Cistercians and Templars that was soon to set out for Jerusalem. It is possible that Ermengarde travelled with this group. *The Letters of St. Bernard of Clairvaux*, trans. Bruno Scott James (2nd edn; Kalamazoo, 1998), letter 272, p. 345. Some authors date this letter to the 1140s, but since there is no mention of Fulk’s death, as there are in the other letters that Bernard wrote to Melisende, I think this letter is from a time before his death in 1142. Moreover, William of Tyre says a group of Templars and Cistercians travelled to the Holy Land around 1130, so this letter could have been written in connection with that particular expedition. It is also possible that the church Ermengarde built in the Holy Land near Jacob’s well might have been a Cistercian foundation.

⁵⁴ There is confusion over Ermengarde’s time in the Holy Land. The *Chronica de Gestis Consulum Andegavorum* states that she remained in Jerusalem at St Anne’s and that she died there. Louis Halphen and René Poupardin (eds), *Chronica de Gestis Consulum Andegavorum in Chroniques des Comtes d’Anjou et des Seigneurs d’Amboise* (Paris, 1913), p. 65. William of Tyre made the same error, as have modern scholars. (For William of Tyre’s other error about Ermengarde, see n. 8 above.) This would appear to be confusion with Ermengarde’s great-grandmother who was also named Ermengarde and who, like her descendant, travelled to the Holy Land. Ermengarde the elder did die while in Outremer. The belief that Countess Ermengarde of Brittany died in the Holy Land is compounded by the presence of a nun Ermengarde active at St Lazarus in the 1150s. But she was not Ermengarde of Brittany. The charters demonstrate that our Ermengarde returned to France where she lived until 1147 and was subsequently buried at the monastery of Redon next to her husband, Alan.

⁵⁵ The documents from Buzay have been lost over time. However, Lobineau has transcriptions of two documents recording Conan’s gifts to this house. Lobineau, *Histoire*, II, cols 290–6. One document is the actual 1135 endowment. The other is from 1141 and records that Conan had not followed through on his original gifts. For a discussion of the history of Buzay, see Lebigre, ‘Les debuts de l’abbaye cistercienne de Buzay in pays de Rais, 1144–1250’.

⁵⁶ The period 1135–7 was a difficult time for Conan. He lost battles against his barons; King Henry I, his father-in-law died; Stephen of Blois seized England and it was certain that a war which would embroil Conan’s neighbouring Angevin cousin was imminent; and the heir to the throne of France married Eleanor of Aquitaine hence gaining rich lands for the Capetian crown.

founding the first Breton Cistercian house.⁵⁷ When framed within the competition between the Penthièvre counts and Conan for power, this religious patronage served to distinguish them as supporters of a new, and increasingly powerful, spiritual movement, thus increasing their political stature and portraying them as Christian princes. At the same time they also minted their own coins and called themselves counts in their charters – all direct threats to Conan’s status as count of all Brittany. To secure allies and a bond with St Bernard, arguably one of the most influential men of the day, Conan made a gift in 1134 to found a house of Cistercian monks. Ermengarde’s connection to the Cistercians proved invaluable and provided the comital family of Brittany with a means to demonstrate their piety, but also reinforce their place as the legitimate rulers of the entirety of Brittany.

Unfortunately, by 1141 Conan was in serious trouble with Bernard and the Cistercians because of his failure to provide the promised property and revenues.⁵⁸ As a result, the brothers were living in penury – which Bernard discovered when he visited. Bernard was so angry he told the monks to pack up and return to the mother house in Burgundy. Ermengarde’s affinity with St Bernard was put into action to resolve this conflict. Ermengarde intervened and smoothed things over with Bernard by providing the necessary revenue to make good on Conan’s promises.⁵⁹

This was a delicate diplomacy, entrusted to the countess, eloquent and shrewd, who had the influence and political capital necessary to restore peace. Ermengarde’s role as diplomat was in keeping with the experience of women of her class who were often called upon to act as intermediaries between the secular and sacred.⁶⁰ Indeed it was a role that Robert of Arbrissel expected Ermengarde to play as countess for he cited Queen Esther in his letter to Ermengarde as an example of how women could mediate between the lay and religious.⁶¹ Once again Ermengarde’s skill and network of friendship and alliances proved critical to the political survival of the comital family.

⁵⁷ André Dufief, *Les Cisterciens en Bretagne aux XII et XIII siècles* (Rennes, 1997) pp. 69–70. Specifically the Cistercian Abbey of Relecq, founded 1132, a daughter house of first, Cistercian abbey in Brittany, Notre Dame de Bégard in Western Brittany (Léon).

⁵⁸ Lobineau, *Histoire*, II, cols 294–6.

⁵⁹ Ermengarde’s close relationship with St Bernard did not falter even after she left the Cistercian abbey of Larrey. For Ermengarde’s relationship with Bernard, see Krahmer, ‘Interpreting the letters of Bernard of Clairvaux to Ermengard, countess of Brittany’, pp. 217–50.

⁶⁰ Sharon Farmer, ‘“Persuasive voices”: clerical images of medieval women’, *Speculum*, 61/3 (1986), pp. 517–43; Erin Jordan, *Women, Power and Religious Patronage in the Middle Ages* (New York, 2006); Madeline Caviness, ‘Anchoress, abbess and queen: donors and patrons or intercessors and matrons?’, in June Hall McCash (ed.), *The Cultural Patronage of Medieval Women* (Athens, GA, 1995), pp. 105–54; Philadelphia Ricketts, ‘Widows, religious patronage and family identity: some cases from twelfth-century Yorkshire’, *The Haskins Society Journal*, 14 (2004), pp. 117–36; Livingstone, *Out of Love for My Kin*, pp. 189–203.

⁶¹ Lois Huneycutt, ‘Intercession and the high medieval queen: the Esther topos’, in Jennifer Carpenter and Sally Beth MacLean (eds), *The Power of the Weak* (Urbana and Chicago, IL, 1995), pp. 126–46; David d’Avray, *Medieval Marriage: Symbolism and Society* (Oxford, 2005), pp. 60–3; Joan Ferrante, *To the Glory of Her Sex* (Bloomington, IN, 1997), pp. 51–2; 201–12.

VI

The complexities and intense rivalries of twelfth-century Breton politics informed Robert's characterization of the county being populated with 'barbarous and uneducated men'. Countess Ermengarde, however, was successful in collaborating with and commanding these unruly personalities. She was clearly an astute politician, who grasped the importance of creating and maintaining connections with powerful elites – secular and sacred. These skills and abilities were recognized, and praised, by her contemporaries. Her husband and son often followed her counsel and advice. Marbode of Rennes remarked on her eloquence and complimented her ability to provide good counsel, which he had experienced first-hand. Robert of Arbrissel believed she could be a just ruler, able to provide peace. All of this speaks to a woman deeply enmeshed and schooled in the political culture of her day. Politics in this era was defined by the intersection and sometimes conflict between secular and sacred. Countess Ermengarde moved seemingly seamlessly between lay and ecclesiastical circles.⁶² Indeed her life embodies the intimate combination of these two strands, for she was a woman who wielded secular power but who also commanded respect because of her dedication to the Church.

In his analysis of women and power, Georges Duby dismissed the idea that women could command the power to rule simply because of their gender.⁶³ But I would argue that gender actually empowered Ermengarde as the relationships and alliances she could call upon were often inaccessible to her male counterparts. There were, however, geographic limitations to Ermengarde's influence. Analysis of her participation in the Breton comital acts shows that she was only involved in the regions around Rennes and Nantes and never seems to have travelled to the northern or western portions of Brittany. In other words, Ermengarde was most active and influential in those areas closest to her birthplace of Anjou. Alan married Ermengarde for her connections in the Loire – to Anjou and Marmoutier specifically. Perhaps then it is not surprising that it was in matters relevant to the Touraine where Ermengarde was most effective. This geographic focus should hence be cast as strength rather than weakness or limitation, for it shows that she was successful in doing what she had been charged to do: connect Brittany to powerful institutions and individuals in the region of the Touraine. Ermengarde was clearly a force, a player, in the political culture of twelfth-century Brittany – indeed western France. Her accomplishments and activities demonstrate that neither she nor Brittany were peripheral or marginal to the political developments shaping medieval Europe.

⁶² William Schenck examines Ermengarde's movements between religious and secular life: 'From convent to court: Ermengarde d'Anjou's decision to reenter the world', in Daniel E. O'Sullivan and Laurie Shepard (eds), *Shaping Courtliness in Medieval France: Essays in Honor of Matilda Tomaryn Bruckner* (Woodbridge, 2013), pp. 201–13.

⁶³ Georges Duby, 'Women and power', in Thomas Bisson (ed.), *Cultures of Power* (Philadelphia, PA, 1995), pp. 69–85, at p. 73.

