

COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

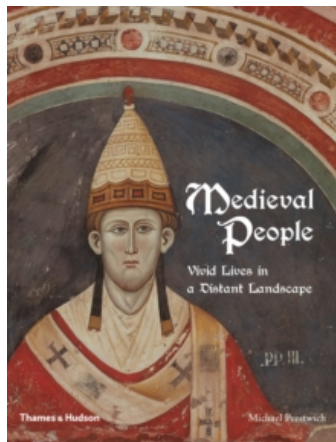
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Prestwich, M. (2014). *Medieval people*. London: Thames & Hudson.

Eleanor of Aquitaine

QUEEN 'BY THE WRATH OF GOD'

1124-1204

The figure of Eleanor of Aquitaine is enveloped in myth and contradiction. There is the scandalous queen, who, when married to Louis VII of France, had an affair with her own uncle. There is the mother, fiercely protective of the interests of her sons against her second husband, Henry II of England. In addition there is the patron of literature, and of the troubadour culture of southern France, perhaps suggested by her tomb effigy in Fontevraud abbey, which shows her reading a book and ignoring the presence of Henry lying beside her.

Born in 1124, Eleanor was heiress to the great duchy of Aquitaine in the south of France. She was brought up surrounded by a sophisticated court in Poitou; her grandfather, Duke William IX, was a poet who supported the troubadours with their songs of love. How far Eleanor, as a girl of thirteen, herself helped to bring this culture to northern France when she married Louis VII in 1137 is questionable; but later, when she married Henry II of England, she sponsored the Provençal troubadour Bernard de Ventadour at the English court. There is, however, little to show that she helped to develop ideas about courtly love. A satirical handbook about love was written by Andreas Capellanus, a clerk at the French court towards the end of the twelfth century. In the book, Eleanor and her daughter by Louis VII, Marie, countess of Champagne, pronounced judgments at Poitiers in courts of love. In one ruling, a woman who abandoned her lover for another was told to return to the first man, a clear reference to Eleanor's leaving Louis VII for Henry II. There is no doubt that Marie was an important literary patron, notably of Chrétien de Troyes. However, mother and daughter had little contact after Eleanor's marriage to Louis was annulled when Marie was only seven; and the tale of the courts of love has no more credence than Andreas's advice that men should cure their shyness by raping peasant women. As for the book that Eleanor is shown reading on her tomb, it is far more likely to be a psalter than a romance.

The romantic vision of Eleanor, as a woman for whom love was all important, can easily shift into scandal. It was said that she felt that in Louis VII she had married a monk, rather than a king. Louis, however, was devoted to her, and in 1145 took the exceptional step of bringing her on crusade. At Antioch, Eleanor fell into close company with her uncle Raymond, ruler of the principality. When there were arguments over strategy, she sided with Raymond. Gossip soon abounded about her relationship with him. Eleanor threatened

Louis with divorce, but on the couple's return from the east the pope successfully reconciled them. Back in Paris, however, the rumours flared up once more. Eleanor was said to have had an affair with Geoffrey, count of Anjou, when he came to Paris with his son Henry; though it was to be Henry, nine years her junior, and the future king of England, that she would marry. Finally, in 1152, Eleanor's marriage to Louis VII was annulled, on the grounds that they were too closely related. The real reason for the breakdown was her failure to produce a male heir.

Within eight weeks, Eleanor had married Henry, who succeeded to the English throne in 1154. Politics, not love, was the motive: she brought with her the vast lands of Aquitaine and Poitou, while he could provide her dominions with protection. There were no more rumours of affairs on Eleanor's part. The boot was now on the other foot, with Henry's many illicit liaisons, notably that with Rosamund Clifford. The marriage was successful in one important respect: by 1168 Eleanor had borne Henry nine children. The family, though, was to prove utterly dysfunctional.

Eleanor's role in politics and government during the years of her marriage to Louis VII had been very limited, in contrast to the previous queen, Adelaide of Maurienne. Rarely away from Louis, Eleanor had little opportunity for independent action. As Henry II's



Queen Eleanor, in a French wall-painting of around 1200. It is thought that it may show her being led into captivity after the rebellion of 1173–74.



The wedding of Eleanor of Aquitaine to Louis VII of France is shown on the left of this fourteenth-century illustration. On the right, Louis and his troops embark on the Second Crusade.

queen, there were more openings for her. During the long periods that Henry spent in his continental dominions, she acted as regent in England. There is a determined tone in the few of her instructions that survive. Ordering the men of Abingdon to do their service to the abbot, she wrote, 'If you do not do this, the justice of the king and my own justice will cause it to be done.' In 1168, she returned to her homeland of Poitou, ruling there successfully, and with a degree of independence from her husband.

Crisis came in 1173, with the rebellion against Henry II of his heir, also named Henry. Eleanor supported her son, while his brothers Richard and Geoffrey joined in the rising. Matters went badly for the rebels; the young Henry was feckless and incompetent. Eleanor

was captured, and duly placed in comfortable, if thoroughly unwelcome, captivity. Henry II's mistress Rosamund died in the mid-1170s; inevitably, later legend made Eleanor responsible, with horrendous tales of torture involving, among other things, the use of toads. Henry did not, however, divorce his wife; to have done so could have led to the loss of Aquitaine. Her custody became increasingly nominal in the later years of Henry's reign, but it was not until the king's death in 1189 that she was fully free.

With the accession of her son Richard I, Eleanor had a new political role to play: the controlling matriarch. Before Richard's coronation, she reversed some of Henry II's decisions, and was very active in England during Richard's absence on crusade. In one letter, she termed herself 'Eleanor, by the wrath of God, Queen of England'. She took a leading part in securing Richard's release after he had been captured by the duke of Austria while returning from the east; in 1194, she accompanied the archbishop of Canterbury to Germany to deliver the first instalment of her son's ransom. She also worked to ensure that her youngest son, John, did not usurp his brother's authority. On Richard's death in 1199, Eleanor interrupted her retirement at Fontevraud to do her best to ensure that her subjects in Poitou would be loyal to John and not support the rival candidate to the throne, his nephew Arthur of Brittany.

Eleanor did not conform to the normal role of a queen. In many ways, her interests were more those of a duchess of Aquitaine. Traditionally, it was expected that a queen should intercede with her husband, asking him to exercise mercy in appropriate cases. No doubt Eleanor did this on occasion, but there is nothing to show that this was a major preoccupation. A queen should be pious, and while Eleanor's care for Fontevraud abbey fitted in with this assumption, the scale of her patronage of the Church was not exceptional. Queens might also be expected to act as peacemakers, but Eleanor's status as former queen of Louis VII meant that she was hardly suitable to assist in Anglo-French negotiations. Her forceful support of her sons was more likely to end in war, as in 1173, than in peace.

It is hard to disagree with the chronicler Richard of Devizes, whose description of Eleanor was deliberately full of contradictions. She was 'a matchless woman, beautiful and chaste, powerful and modest, meek and eloquent'.

Eleanor of Aquitaine's tomb effigy at the French monastery of Fontevraud.

