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## Eleanor of Aquitaine: Not Your Average Medieval Woman

Laura Goodman

Eleanor of Aquitaine is one of the most well-known English queens of the Middle Ages. She has been portrayed as a character in movies and there are many books about her life. She was both a queen of France and of England where she was much more involved than were other medieval queens. Eleanor ruled her own lands without her husband and ruled in her son's place while he was on Crusade. She was not a typical medieval woman, even when compared to other medieval noblewomen and queens.

There are differing views on women during the Middle Ages, but it is generally agreed that their life was not easy. Women were perceived in different ways, depending on the circumstances. In his *English Life in the Middle Ages*, historian L.F. Salzman states "woman is at one moment idealized as a divine being, to gain whose love the world may well be lost, at the next she is figured as a worthless and venomous creature, hardly worthy to have a human soul."<sup>1</sup> The poems of the troubadours frequently portrayed the first kind of woman and the second was often denounced from the pulpits of medieval churches. "The worst slanderers of the female sex were clergy... The common people heard women continually abused from the pulpit."<sup>2</sup> These conflicting views could be seen throughout medieval writings. Women were often portrayed in extremes, especially those who were well known. Eleanor of Aquitaine was viewed in much the same way, in extremes. She did not stay quietly in the background, which drew criticism.

Eleanor did not live the life of a typical medieval woman. As a queen, she did not have to live through the difficulties of day to day life. A typical middle-class woman "would look after the herb garden, help with such work as haymaking, go into the market with butter, cheese, eggs, poultry and so forth, make salt and brew ale, and, presumably, do most of the cooking."<sup>3</sup> Even growing up, Eleanor was a high-ranking noblewoman, and probably would have been spared such mundane duties, as she would have had others to do these chores for her. She was heiress to Aquitaine, Gascony and Poitou, which set her apart from even most noblewomen. However, she probably did learn other duties. "Comparatively rich... though upper-class women may have been, they were not idle. In the administration of households and estates they had a full part to play... some women were literally called upon to defend the hearth and home when their menfolk were away."<sup>4</sup> Eleanor would have been raised to understand the running of a household, which could be extended to the running

of a country. As an heiress to so many lands, she would have learned even more about ruling than most other noblewomen. Eleanor would have been exposed to more than a lower ranking noblewoman. Noblewomen served a different role in society, and Eleanor later took this even farther, ruling in her husband's place. Her early education would have prepared her well for her future positions.

Marriage was an important part of a woman's life during the Middle Ages. Noblewomen were often betrothed at a young age. "In the twelfth century, many an aristocratic girl of thirteen was already married, or betrothed and living in the household of her in-laws-to-be."<sup>5</sup> Royalty and noblewomen were betrothed early, as these betrothals formed key alliances between families and even countries. "Marriages were, indeed, for the most part a matter of arrangements, in which the feelings of the bride were very little considered."<sup>6</sup> Women were often used as pawns for marriage alliances. A woman's dowry was a key portion of any marriage contract as well. "In common English law usage [dower] means that which a free man gives to his wife at the church door at the time of his marriage."<sup>7</sup> This dower was often very important in royal and noble marriages, as it could include important titles as well. Dowry denotes the portion that the woman brought to the marriage. In Eleanor's case, her dowry was key. Entire regions could form a woman's dowry if she was of high enough rank. Eleanor's dowry was much greater than most and was land that belonged to her in her own right rather than to her husband. Her lands remained independent of those of her husband. This dower became more important as her life progressed.

Medieval queens were women set apart from all others. They were an exception to the rule, yet they were still women. They had to find their own way in life, as "nothing like a modern office with... specific duties existed within any royal administration during the central medieval period, and certainly not for the king's wife... and yet, there were ceremonial acts, public obligations, and expectations to be met."<sup>8</sup> Each queen had to find her own place in English society, and some chose to step back, others to stand out. "The first two Matildas were trusted queens of kings who ruled on both sides of the English Channel, and as the king's wife and deputy, they each exercised what amounts to vice-regal authority in their respective realms."<sup>9</sup> These women chose a position of power and control, setting a precedent for Eleanor to follow. Eleanor took this to an extreme, ruling on behalf of her husband and later, on behalf of her two sons. Her long life made much of this possible. "As a woman of incomparable wealth and almost incredible longevity, Eleanor of Aquitaine was 'alone of all her sex' among the twelfth-century queens of England."<sup>10</sup> Eleanor had the time to acquire and consolidate her power.

Eleanor's life as queen began with her marriage to the then future Louis VII of France on 25 July 1137.<sup>11</sup> Eleanor would have been about fifteen at the time she married Louis. She was the heir to immense ducal holdings that Louis VI wanted for his son. The king saw this as

an excellent match. "Louis the Younger's experience... led him to assume that his bride would share his work of ruling over the French kingdom, and Eleanor's background likewise caused her to expect to be her husband's chief counselor."<sup>12</sup>

She was prepared to be a strong force in the ruling of France. She rapidly gained power over the young king, frequently influencing his decisions. By 1144, Eleanor had "succeeded in overcoming all rivals to secure her position as her husband's partner in governing" even over his own mother.<sup>13</sup> This was uncommon, as the mother of the king often maintained power over the queen. This was especially surprising considering her age at the time of marriage. Even at such a young age, Eleanor stood apart.

Eleanor's influence led to some conflict between Louis VII and the French church. This led to Louis' taking the cross and going on Crusade. He had been considering a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, but the fall of Edessa to the Turks and the massacre of its Christian inhabitants influenced his decision as well. At Christmas in 1145, Louis declared his intention to go on Crusade, and Eleanor intended to join him.<sup>14</sup> "The presence of women in the crusading armies was not a novelty... Now, though, for the first time, a king was going on crusade and his wife was going with him."<sup>15</sup>

While on Crusade, Eleanor and Louis stopped in Antioch, where she "renewed her acquaintance with her uncle Raymond, on whose elegance, bounty and knightly valor everyone agreed... Uncle and niece had many long private conversations during the stop at the Antioch court."<sup>16</sup> This led to a conflict between Eleanor and Louis. Eleanor supported Raymond's request for help in recovering Edessa, but Louis wanted to continue on to Jerusalem. There were rumors and allegations of an affair between Eleanor and Raymond, but "her actual crime... [was] her refusal to be forced into a constraining mold of wifely submissiveness."<sup>17</sup> Eleanor continued to make her own decisions, regardless of the effect they would have on her husband. Eleanor told Louis that "he could go on to Jerusalem, but she would stay in Antioch and initiate proceedings for the annulment of their marriage."<sup>18</sup> Louis disagreed and forced Eleanor to accompany him to Jerusalem. In this case, Eleanor was forced into being a submissive spouse. In the end, this attempt at asserting her independence was not successful.

Upon their return from the Crusades in 1149, the royal couple stopped just south of Rome to visit the pope. The pope was aware of their troubled marriage and "attempted to mend matters between them: after listening to both sets of grievances, he forbade them to allude henceforth to any kinship which might exist between them and confirmed to them... that their union was entirely valid, even decreeing that no one, on pain of excommunications, should seek to dissolve the marriage for any reason whatsoever."<sup>19</sup> However, this was not enough. In 1153, "the King called a council at Beaugency, at which... several of the King's kinsmen swore under oath that the

spouses were related to each other within the degrees of kinship prohibited by the Church.”<sup>20</sup> Their marriage was at an end. In his book *Medieval Lives*, historian Norman Cantor imagined Eleanor saying, “Louis and I stopped sleeping together. The abominable Bernard closed up my womb and then he convinced my silly husband to go on a crusade.”<sup>21</sup> It would certainly be possible for Eleanor to have felt this way at this point in her life. She was forced into decisions she did not agree with, and as a woman of strong opinions, this could not have sat well with Eleanor.

Eleanor quickly remarried to the future King Henry II of England. Henry was heir to the English throne through his mother, Matilda. He was already the Count of Anjou and Duke of Normandy. “Some historians have been surprised by... Eleanor of Aquitaine because only two months elapsed between her divorce and remarriage... however, political reasons compelled Eleanor’s rapid acquisition of a second husband, as did concerns for her personal safety.”<sup>22</sup> As a woman who was independently wealthy in her own right, Eleanor was quite a catch. This meant that many men wanted to literally capture her and force her into marriage. Her marriage to Henry was practical, as he was very powerful. She sent him a message notifying him that she was free to marry on 6 April 1152. They were married on 18 May.<sup>23</sup> Gervase of Canterbury described Henry’s trip to Poitiers: “The duke indeed allured by the nobility of that woman and by desire for the great honors belonging to her... hastened quickly over the long routes, and in little time obtained the marriage which he had long desired.”<sup>24</sup> Eleanor must have been considered quite desirable despite the earlier rumors of her relationship with her uncle. Her wealth would have been quite a draw, regardless of any other factors that may have been involved.

Eleanor’s second marriage was also different from that of most women in that she chose her own husband. As previously mentioned, most marriages were arranged without any consideration for the bride.<sup>25</sup> Eleanor, as Duchess of Aquitaine, was able to choose for herself. Both William of Newburgh and Gervase of Canterbury expressed “[surprise at] a woman arranging her own marriage alliance, a rare occurrence in the twelfth century.”<sup>26</sup> Eleanor finally had the opportunity to control her own life. Eleanor was also much older than most brides; she was nearly thirty when she married Henry and significantly older than her husband.<sup>27</sup> Eleanor did not submit completely to her husband. This was unique among royal marriages, as the queen usually passed her titles over to her husband. Eleanor chose to remain as the Duchess of Aquitaine and kept control of her own lands. She even went so far as to have a seal created only with the titles that were her own by right, excluding those she had gained through marriage.<sup>28</sup> This demonstrated how, at least initially, she maintained her independent control of her lands. This was very different from the relationships between other married couples at the time. Men typically took control of any

property their wife brought to the relationship.

Eleanor gave birth to many children during her marriage to Henry. Their first son, William, was born in February 1153. This would probably have been a relief as she had never born a son to her first husband, only daughters. Two years later, another son, Henry, was born to the couple. Three daughters and three more sons would be born.<sup>29</sup> Some would go on to be well known, such as Richard the Lion-Hearted and his brother John. Others, such as their first son, did not survive childhood. Their sons would later go on to cause their parents much trouble.

Henry was frequently absent from his English realms, choosing to spend much of his time in Normandy and other areas. This left an opening for Eleanor. Henry reigned for thirty-five years, but only spent thirteen of those in England.<sup>30</sup> Someone had to maintain control of the country while he was away, and this duty fell to Eleanor. Many writs were probably issued in her name, but only nine still remain. There must have been more, as references to her writs are also found in other sources. For example, if a clergyman needed to leave the country, he was required to have a writ from the Queen. Not all of these remain, but they must have existed. It is also implied in one source that a writ from the king in Normandy was not sufficient, an additional writ from the queen was also required.<sup>31</sup> This demonstrates the significant power she wielded within England. This freedom to act gave her much more power than prior English queens.

In 1168, Eleanor returned to her ancestral lands. Some of her nobles were unhappy with the way Henry was ruling over them. "Dissatisfaction mounted to such a level that the Poitevin bishops sought to end the English king's rule over them by challenging the legitimacy of his marriage to their duchess."<sup>32</sup> After much discussion and some fighting, Henry agreed to return the rule of Poitou to Eleanor. She remained in Poitiers until 1174. In 1172, Eleanor had her son, Richard, invested as duke to ensure a continuity of control and that the lands would not go to Henry. This could have been in response to the coronation of his older brother Henry, as the "Young King" of England in 1170, but this is uncertain.<sup>33</sup> Richard spent much of his time in Poitiers with his mother through these years, during which time a dispute arose between Richard, his brothers and their father.

Eleanor's sons were not satisfied with waiting for their father to die to come into their inheritances. They wanted control over their lands while they were young, and they were willing to fight for it. "In 1173, Eleanor of Aquitaine, with the support of three of her young sons, rose in rebellion against her husband, apparently with the intention of regaining the independence of the Duchy of Aquitaine."<sup>34</sup>

Eleanor agreed with her sons, as she had become frustrated with her husband. She felt that "Henry should be forced to cede authority to his sons in the territories assigned to them... she wished to see her husband stripped of power, leaving him to spend his last years...

merely presiding over his sons.”<sup>35</sup> This decision did not bode well for the queen. She even received a letter from statesman and theologian Peter of Blois encouraging her to set the dispute aside. He wrote that “before this matter reaches a bad end, you should return with your sons to your husband, whom you have promised to obey and live with.”<sup>36</sup> Eleanor disregarded this letter and supported her sons’ revolt against their father. Eleanor may have followed in the footsteps of other queens previously, but no other queen before or after supported her sons in such a way. The rebellion failed, and Eleanor was captured. Eleanor was punished for rebelling against her husband, and against the traditional role of a wife.

Eleanor remained in captivity for many years. She was “brought back to England and kept in comfortable but strict confinement until Henry died in 1189.”<sup>37</sup> Henry no longer felt he could trust his wife to rule in his place, as he had early in their marriage. “The King hated his wife so much that he kept her under close watch in well-guarded strongholds.”<sup>38</sup> The only exception to this captivity came when the King of France attempted to claim back lands that he wanted to give to his sister. Henry “sent his messengers to England to give orders that Eleanor... was to be freed and come into her dower.”<sup>39</sup> Henry chose to free Eleanor temporarily in order to prevent handing lands over to the King of France. Eleanor was allowed to travel from palace to palace, but was kept under guard to prevent any future rebellions. Her sons continued their rebellion without her until her eldest son, Henry the Young King, died of dysentery at the age of 27. At this point, the rebellion fell apart. King Henry II took back control of his sons’ lands.<sup>40</sup> There were further disputes over the inheritance of King Henry’s lands, but they were minor in comparison to the previous revolt. Henry remained in power and kept Eleanor captive until his death in 1189.<sup>41</sup>

Eleanor’s son Richard was the first of her sons to reign. The day his father died, Richard sent orders for the release of his mother.<sup>42</sup> Eleanor quickly rose to power during Richard’s reign, “[taking] precedence over their wives, enjoying the perquisites of a queen-consort.”<sup>43</sup> She issued her own charters, including a charter to confirm the right of Maurice of Berkeley to the Berkeley barony.<sup>44</sup> Richard “laid out plans for governing his lands during his expedition to the Holy Land” that included Eleanor acting as his regent.<sup>45</sup> When Richard was captured upon his return from Crusade, Eleanor raised the money for his ransom and took control of the country, going so far as to issue commands in her own name.<sup>46</sup> Eleanor reigned in her son’s name, with nearly complete control of England.

When Richard died in 1199, Eleanor again took control. Richard had named her grandson, Arthur of Brittany as her heir, but Eleanor would have nothing of it. Eleanor felt that her son, John, should rule after his brother. Eleanor “[circulated] about Anjou and Aquitaine to prevent partition of the Angevin ‘empire’ between John and her

grandson.”<sup>47</sup> She went so far as to “[lead] a military campaign on the continent, even though this meant missing her son John’s coronation, which she had worked so hard to bring about.”<sup>48</sup> Eleanor actively fought for her son’s right to the throne, issuing more charters in the first five years of John’s reign than in the prior fifteen years after her captivity. Arthur finally gave up the struggle in 1199.<sup>49</sup>

Eleanor did finally relinquish control of England to her son. She retired to the abbey Fontevraud, where she had repeatedly attempted to retire previously. She had made frequent gifts to the abbey throughout her life, and in the last years of her life, she made even larger grants “directed toward the salvation of the souls of her ancestors.”<sup>50</sup> She had tombs designed and built for her husband, Henry II, and son, Richard I, as well as her own tomb. Eleanor died at Fontevraud on April 1, 1204 at the age of eighty-three.<sup>51</sup>

During her long life, Eleanor stood out from other medieval women and queens. She was in control of her own life much of the time during a period when many women were under the control of their husbands or their parents. She married two powerful kings, the second by her own choice. Eleanor went on Crusade, as few women could. She was the mother to four sons whom she supported as they revolted against their father. After Henry II died, she became even more powerful as she ruled as regent as her son went on Crusade as well. Eleanor repeatedly maintained control when most medieval women allowed the power to transfer to their husbands or sons. Eleanor of Aquitaine was much more than a typical medieval woman; she was a powerful person in her own right. She used her strengths to maintain control over her life in ways that few women could, even today. Eleanor of Aquitaine was not a typical medieval woman or queen; she was unique in her strength and control over her own fate.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>L.F. Salzman, *English Life in the Middle Ages* (London: Oxford University Press, 1937), 249.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, 250.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, 256-7.

<sup>4</sup>Henrietta Leyser, *Medieval Women: A Social History of Women in England* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1995), 165.

<sup>5</sup>Ragena C. Dearagon, “Wife, Widow and Mother,” in *Eleanor of Aquitaine: Lord and Lady*, ed. Bonnie Wheeler and John Carmi Parsons (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 98.

<sup>6</sup>Salzman, 252.

<sup>7</sup>Robert Palmer, *Women and the Law University of Houston Department of History*. Available from <http://vi.uh.edu/pages/bob/elhone/rules.html> (accessed 10 June 2011).

<sup>8</sup>Lois L. Huneycutt, “Alliangora Regina Anglorum,” in *Eleanor of Aquitaine: Lord and Lady*, ed. Bonnie Wheeler and John Carmi Parsons (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 117.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, 119.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, 129.

<sup>11</sup> Ralph V. Turner, *Eleanor of Aquitaine: Queen of France, Queen of England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 48.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 54.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 70-72.

<sup>15</sup> Jean Flori, *Eleanor of Aquitaine: Queen and Rebel* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), 45.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 53.

<sup>17</sup> Turner, 89.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Flori, 54.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Norman F. Cantor, *Medieval Lives: Eight Charismatic Men and Women of the Middle Ages* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1994), 117.

<sup>22</sup> Dearagon, 101-102.

<sup>23</sup> Turner, 108.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Salzman, 252.

<sup>26</sup> Turner, 111.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 110.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 114.

<sup>29</sup> Joseph Dahmus, *Seven Medieval Queens* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1972), 211.

<sup>30</sup> Turner, 150.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 155.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 183.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 187-189.

<sup>34</sup> Cantor, 122.

<sup>35</sup> Turner, 218.

<sup>36</sup> Peter of Blois, "Medieval Sourcebook: Peter of Blois: Letter 154 to Queen Eleanor, 1174." *Medieval Sourcebook*. Available from <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/eleanor.html>. (accessed 15 June 2011).

<sup>37</sup> Cantor, 122.

<sup>38</sup> Flori, 118.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 127.

<sup>40</sup> Turner, 243-245.

<sup>41</sup> Dahmus, 224.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Turner, 257.

<sup>44</sup> Ralph V. Turner, "The Role of Eleanor in the Government of her Sons," in *Eleanor of Aquitaine: Lord and Lady*, ed. Bonnie Wheeler and John Carmi Parsons (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 79.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 84.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>48</sup> Flori, 187.

<sup>49</sup> Turner, 285-88.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 293.

<sup>51</sup> Dahmus, 240.

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