Eleanor of Aquitaine, Twelfth-Century English Chroniclers and her ‘Black Legend’

Eleanor of Aquitaine (1124-1204) ranks as a favourite of modern biographers, and in the twentieth-century writings on this twelfth-century personality attained the proportions of a ‘romanticizing “Eleanor industry”’. In approaching Eleanor, historians today face the sharply differing standards of her medieval contemporaries, modern scholars, and popular writers in depicting a powerful woman’s place in medieval society and government. Because of this, the twelfth century’s most famous woman can provoke either modern biographers’ ‘uncritical enthusiasm, or else curiously grudging dismissal’. Perhaps the primary example of the enthusiastic approach is Amy Kelly’s *Eleanor of Aquitaine and the Four Kings*, first published over a half century ago and still in print. W. L. Warren’s dismissal of Eleanor in his biography of her second husband, Henry II shows the grudging attitude, ‘To judge from the chroniclers, the most striking fact about Eleanor is her utter insignificance in Henry II’s reign.’

To retrieve a ‘truthful image’ of Eleanor of Aquitaine, the twelfth-century English historical writings most cited by her biographers require re-examination. Her last years as queen coincided with a ‘golden age of historiography’ in the last quarter of the twelfth century and the first decade of the thirteenth century, the last years of Henry II’s reign and his two sons’ reigns. Eleanor’s biographers depend heavily on the Latin historical works

3 Cambridge MA, 1950. Jane Martindale notes Kelly’s reliance ‘on an often uncritical collation of chronicle accounts with the vernacular poetry and romances’, ‘Eleanor’, *Status, Authority and Power*, p. 36.
of this group of English writers from her last years, who were well informed about the royal court. These authors have influenced generations of students of Eleanor, although they were rarely witnesses to events, often recording incidents in their queen’s life decades after they had taken place. They supply the paints for a portrait of Eleanor, but mixed in their colours are gossip and rumour as well as their own preconceptions, droplets of a ‘black legend’ that tend to shadow her portrait with evil.7 Suspicious of women in public life, they put on parchment much hearsay, fashioning a lasting portrait of Eleanor as ‘an essentially frivolous woman’ and her life as a series of scandals.8 They were writing in an age when the Church was sharpening gender definitions, as reforming moralists and theologians intent on enforcing priestly celibacy sharpened their attacks on women’s sinful nature.9 Twelfth-century canon lawyers were redefining women’s proper sphere to restrict their public roles more and more; Old Testament depictions of women acting as judges were dismissed as the old law, no longer binding in the Christian era.10 Also contributing to a reshaping of medieval notions about women’s proper place in politics and society was a militarization of society with lords adopting the chivalric values of their fighting men.11 The result was a stripping from aristocratic women of power in the public sphere that they had previously held, if only precariously.

Members of the ‘golden age’ group of English historical writers were all in clerical orders; five were secular clerks with ties to the royal court — Roger of Howden (d. c. 1203), Ralph of Diceto, Diceto or Diss (d. 1201), Walter Map (d. c. 1210), Gerald of Wales (d. c. 1223), and Ralph Niger (d. c. 1199) — and four others were monks. The first two wrote as ‘insiders’ enjoying contacts within the royal household, and they generally favoured Henry II, despite the blot left on his record by the murder of his archbishop of Canterbury. Roger, a royal clerk and parson of Howden in Yorkshire, has been termed ‘the first civil-service historian in English history’; and much of Henry II’s legislation is known only through copies in his chronicles. He was the author of two works, the Gesta Regis Henrici Secundi, covering the years 1169-1192, and his Chronica extending to 1201,

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altering and adding to material in the *Gesta*. Another secular clerk, Ralph Diceto, canon and later dean at St. Paul’s Cathedral, had friends at the royal court to keep him informed. More original and learned than Roger, his *Imagines Historiarum*, begun late in the 1180s, is a wider ranging work, though covering only the second half of the twelfth century.

Very different from Howden and Diceto are two writers, Walter Map and Gerald of Wales, who were not so much chroniclers as courtiers writing satirical accounts of Henry II’s court that later historians have mined thoroughly. Their writings exhibit the competitive atmosphere permeating the royal court, as the ambitious flocked there contending for patronage with gossip, lies and slander as their weapons. Although Map’s *De Nigis curialium* written between 1181 and 1192, is chiefly a collection of anecdotes exposing the court’s folly and corruption, his final section (book v) attempts genuine history, giving an account of Henry II whom Map respected greatly. Also writing ‘as a satirist, not as a historian’ was the gossipy and opinionated Gerald of Wales, who had a copy of Map’s work at his side to plagiarize while writing and reworking his *De principis instructione*. Entering the Plantagenets’ service about 1184 and serving until retirement in 1196, he dedicated several works to them in the hope of winning a Welsh bishopric. In his *De principis instructione*, begun by 1191 but only completed in 1216, he shows his disillusionment with Henry II and his sons as his hopes faded for advancement through their favour. Writing at the end of John’s troubled reign, his attacks on the Plantagenet line grew ever more vitriolic as his admiration for the French monarchy swelled, and repeated innuendoes mar the passages treating Eleanor.

Despite lives spent far from court, four monastic chroniclers, Gervase of Canterbury (d. c. 1210), Ralph of Coggeshall (d. 1218), Richard of Devizes (d. c. 1200) and William of Newburgh (d. c. 1198), had access to reliable sources. Gervase, a monk of Christ Church


Canterbury, wrote the *Gesta Regum*, covering the years 1185 to 1210. With his access to the Canterbury archives, he almost ranks with Howden and Ralph Diceto as a historian of royal government, but his work is permeated with hostility against Henry II and his sons.16 Ralph was a Cistercian monk of Coggeshall Abbey in Essex and abbot from 1207 to 1218, near enough to London to entertain visitors bringing news of the royal court.17 William of Newburgh, author of the *Historia Rerum Anglcarum*, was a canon at Newburgh Priory in isolated Yorkshire writing c. 1196-1198. He had access to other histories, notably his neighbour Roger of Howden’s *Chronica*, incorporating so much material that his own chronicle has been defined as ‘Howden re-written and re-interpreted’.18 ‘The most religious-minded English historian of his generation’, Newburgh’s work reflects a monastic tradition of the chronicler as moral critic and judge of those whose deeds he records.19

Differing from other late twelfth-century chroniclers in their treatment of Eleanor are two writers, one a monk of Winchester Cathedral, Richard of Devizes, and the other a secular clerk who frequented Henry II’s court only briefly in the mid 1160s, Ralph Niger. Devizes, writing in a prosperous town often visited by the royal court, penned a sophisticated history reflecting a secular outlook more typical of a worldly city-dweller than a cloistered religious. His *Chronicon de tempore regis Richardi Primi*, written between 1192 and 1198, depicts the Lionheart as a hero similar to those in vernacular romances. The tone of Devizes’ work shows him to be ‘a mocking, irreverent, witty and rather cynical writer’ with a love of court gossip.20 Yet he treats Eleanor without other writers’ hostility; admiring her dedication in old age to preserving royal authority during her favourite son’s absence on crusade. Devizes is the only chronicler to leave a character sketch of Eleanor, describing the queen-mother as ‘an incomparable woman, beautiful yet virtuous, powerful yet gentle, humble yet keen-witted, qualities which are most rarely

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found in a woman, who ... had two kings as husbands and two kings as sons, still tireless
in all labours, at whose ability her age might marvel'.

Ralph Niger, like Gerald of Wales, had studied in the Paris schools and then joined
the English royal court, but he was even less successful in winning royal favour. His strong
support for Thomas Becket's cause soon brought his banishment from England until Henry
II's death, and he came to share Gerald's bitterness toward the Angevin king. After a time
in the household of Henry and Eleanor's eldest son, the Young King, and years teaching in
Paris, he returned to England after 1189 and regained royal favour, witnessing one of
Eleanor's charters. In Ralph's two chronicles dating from his return to England during
Richard's reign, his intense hostility toward Henry does not extend to his queen, whom he
may have encountered at Poitiers in the late 1160s while he was in the schools there.

Although this group of historians had a crucial role in fashioning Eleanor's
reputation, they caught sight of her 'only out of the corner of their eyes as they tracked
down their bigger game'. Unfortunately, the only women likely to find biographers in the
Middle Ages were candidates for canonization, and Eleanor figures in the chronicles only
in a few key crises or scandals: her troubled marriage to the Capetian monarch Louis VII
first exposed by the crisis at Antioch during the Second Crusade; her divorce from him and
hasty marriage in 1152 to Henry Plantagenet, duke of Normandy and future king of
England; her role in her sons' rebellion against their father in 1173; and in her last years, a
whirlwind of activity after her husband's death in 1189 to ensure that the Lionheart
succeeded to Henry II's Angevin empire and again on Richard's death in 1199 to secure
John's succession.

Because the chronicles concentrate on a few dramatic episodes, it is no surprise that
they afford little help in answering questions about Eleanor that absorb historians today.
They make no comment on her 'outsider' or 'alien' status at the English royal court, give

and Scotland, 1070-1204', *Medieval Mothering*, ed. John Carmi Parsons and Bonnie Wheeler (New

22 British Library, Add. MS 14947 f. 40, Eleanor's charter for St. Edmund's Abbey, given at
in 8 (London, 1817-30), iii, 154. King John, when count of Mortain, granted Ralph a house in London,
ed. H. C. G. Matthews and B. Harrison, 60 vols (Oxford, 2004), 40, 902-3, consulted via online
(1940), 104-26.

23 The Letters of John of Salisbury, ed. W. J. Miller and C. N. L. Brooke, 2 vols (Oxford, 1986), ii, 204-
7, to Ralph Niger, then resident at Poitiers, c. 1166.

only the slightest hints of her emotions or mentality, and supply no evidence for her psychological involvement in the upbringing of her children. Indeed, they tell little more about her as mother than the dates and places of her children’s births, or names of those accompanying her on Channel crossings. Chroniclers shed little light on Eleanor’s role as regent during Henry II’s absences from England or her role in governing her own duchy of Aquitaine. They cast no light on her opinion, if any, on Henry’s bitter quarrel with his former chancellor, Thomas Becket. Nor do they comment on a topic of great interest to students of literature, her supposed role as an important patron of poets both in her native Poitou and in England. Other questions that historians today raise, such as the identity of members of her household and details of her patronage to them or to other favourites, are unanswered in the chronicles; if answers are to be found, they lie in her charters.

Chroniclers in England’s golden age of historiography cannot be expected to reveal what really happened. For late twelfth- and early thirteenth-century writers, rulers’ motives in important matters of war and peace were more often personal rather than political, finding motivations in affronted honour and thirst for revenge. They can reveal, however, the sort of behaviour that the people expected of their monarch, including the queen. As churchmen beginning their careers in the second half of Henry II’s reign, they felt the after-shocks of Archbishop Thomas Becket’s martyrdom at the end of 1170 that had shattered the king’s reputation among churchmen, darkening their view of the entire royal family. Although tending to interpret events and evaluate personages in accord with conventional Christian morality, they sought also to entertain. Few chroniclers could refrain from embroidering the facts in order to tell a better story, blending hearsay into their accounts and shirking responsibility for their scandal mongering with such asides as ‘so it is said’.

As clerics, these writers were influenced by theological teachings that portrayed Eve as a temptress, the origin of sin, and all women as her daughters, inheriting her nature as sources of wickedness and disorder. An aspect of eleventh- and twelfth-century religious reform, an intensified seriousness at enforcing clerical celibacy, encouraged anti-feminist

25 Gesta Regis Henrici secundi Benedicti Abbatis, ed. W. Stubbs, 2 vols, Rolls Series (London, 1867), i, 337; Chronica Magistri Rogeri de Houdene, ed. W. Stubbs, 4 vols., RS (London, 1868-71), ii, 304, records that in April 1185, Henry II, to discipline Richard, ordered him to return Poitou to his mother ‘because it was her inheritance’.


tirades by moralists and theologians. At the same time, however, Christian teaching presented the sinless Virgin Mary as the model for women; as John W. Baldwin observes, 'Simultaneously idealized and condemned, women were over determined and trapped in double jeopardy.'

28 In theologians' discussions of marriage, they stressed married women's need to accept subordination to their husbands, following not only Scripture but also classical teaching that males were more rational, more capable than females of overcoming the passions.

29 Aspects of medieval society also prejudiced males against females. In a warlike environment in which rivalries between men often resulted in violent confrontations, the dominant military caste feared women because they resembled clerics in their skill with non-violent, verbal weaponry, using words and sexual wiles to engage in plots and intrigues.

30 Such teachings and traditions predisposed this group of writers against any woman challenging a masculine monopoly on power, particularly Eleanor, whose participation in her sons' great rebellion against their father in 1173-4 confirmed their suspicions.

Paradoxically, writers in the early Middle Ages before the year 1000 were capable of admiring individual noble or royal ladies and acknowledging their public role. In the chaotic conditions of the Anglo-Saxons' struggles for unity, women in powerful positions readily won acceptance. A prime example is Alfred the Great's daughter, Aethelflaed, who ruled in her own name as Lady of the Mercians, after her husband's death in 911. By late Anglo-Saxon times, chroniclers still described powerful women in the public sphere with imagery that was 'by no means entirely pejorative', expressing admiration for ladies of outstanding piety or learning, and unsurprised by their leadership abilities equalling those of men.

31 After the Norman Conquest, however, new landholding and inheritance patterns less favourable to women came to dominate, and more misogynistic views emerged. The Normans inherited from their distant Scandinavian forebears a warrior ethos even fiercer than that found in other post-Carolingian societies, and the importance they placed on manliness and male honour survived their otherwise thorough cultural assimilation. For example, they punished men convicted of political crimes in post-Conquest England by castration, literally 'unmanning' them.

32 For Normans, political power was the perquisite
of males; the power to command and to punish, symbolized by the sword, was properly a male monopoly.\textsuperscript{33} For both churchmen and knights wielding authority was becoming so closely associated with purely masculine military matters, commanding knights in battle and besieging castles, that a woman as ruler became unimaginable. Men who tolerated powerful women ran the risk of mockery for appearing ‘unmanly’ or even ‘womanly’. As gender roles became more sharply defined in Eleanor’s years as queen, English writers were likely to decry a woman’s exercise of power in the public sphere as ‘unwomanly’, somehow unnatural and wrong.\textsuperscript{34}

Despite a growing animus against powerful women, contemporaries of Eleanor’s four Anglo-Norman predecessors as English queen consorts recognized that not all queens were Jezebels, and they had enjoyed contemporary writers’ approval. Like a number of Old Testament heroines, they were described as models of piety and purity, conscientious mothers, and worthy companions of their royal husbands, even if occasionally involved in politics.\textsuperscript{35} Orderic Vitalis, an English-born monk writing in Normandy, shows few signs of women’s worsening condition early in the twelfth century.\textsuperscript{36} Henry I’s consort Matilda had exerted influence in the political sphere, acting as regent during her husband’s absences from the realm, yet her reputation for piety staved off writers’ objections. Eleanor’s efforts as Henry II’s regent during his frequent absences from England during the first decade of their marriage did not win her similar praise, however. Unlike Matilda, whose intercession with Henry I on behalf of worthy petitioners had led writers to compare her to the biblical Queen Esther, Eleanor did not win contemporaries’ praise for taking advantage of her intimate access to Henry II to intervene for the sake of others.\textsuperscript{37}

As gender definitions sharpened in the course of the twelfth century, English writers condemned women for assuming the ‘manly’ role of exercising authority. A modern biographer of Eleanor’s daughter-in-law, Berengaria, Richard I’s wife, notes medieval moralists’ habit of ‘personalising the behaviour of women, attributing emotional or irrational motives to their actions’, while they depicted men as more frequently acting


\textsuperscript{36} Marjorie Chibnall, ‘Women in Orderic Vitalis’, \textit{Haskins Society Journal} ii (1990), 105-21.

rationally, unswayed by their feelings. Yet writers occasionally found masculine traits admirable in powerful ladies. During the civil war over Empress Matilda's quest for the English crown, the anonymous author of the *Gesta Stephani* did not object to the strenuous support given to Stephen by his queen, writing admiringly that 'forgetting the weakness of her sex and a woman's softness ... [she] bore herself with the valour of a man'. When he turned to the political and military activities of the empress, mother of Henry II, he depicted her displaying 'an extremely arrogant demeanour, instead of the modest gait and bearing proper to a gentle woman'. Even the writing of a chronicler supporting the empress, William of Malmesbury, is tinged with misogyny. The difference between the two women was that Stephen's consort was fighting for his right to the crown, not for her own right. A half-century later, Richard of Devizes, writing of Eleanor when she was quasi-regent ruling during Richard's absence from the kingdom, would praise her for qualities 'most rarely found in a woman'.

The crucial episode for blackening Eleanor of Aquitaine's reputation, fastening onto her a black legend of sexual impropriety, occurred during the Second Crusade when Louis VII and his queen spent ten days in March 1148 at Antioch as guests of her father's younger brother, Prince Raymond. Eleanor's quarrel with her husband there brought into the open the antipathy between a royal couple ill-suited for each other, beginning the unravelling of their marriage that would end in its annulment and her remarriage to Henry Plantagenet. Some chroniclers must have known an account of the Antioch episode written by John of Salisbury in his *Historia Pontificalis*, the earliest and fullest surviving report. Since John was present at the papal court when the pontiff was the royal couple's host in Italy on their return from the Holy Land, he was in a position to present a detailed account of their marital difficulties.

According to John of Salisbury, while the king and queen were at Antioch, 'the attentions paid by the prince [Raymond] to the queen, and his constant ... conversation with her, aroused the king's suspicions. These were greatly strengthened when the queen wished


41 Devizes, ed. Appleby, p. 25.
to remain behind although the king was preparing to leave, and the prince made every effort
to keep her, if the king would give her consent.' John adds that when Louis insisted that
Eleanor depart with him from her uncle's court, she raised the issue of their consanguinity,
'she mentioned their kinship, saying that it was not lawful for them to remain together as
man and wife, since they were related in the fourth and fifth degrees.'

This account by one of the greatest figures of the twelfth-century Renaissance,
'breathes truth', to quote an influential article by E.-R. Labande now over fifty years old.
John of Salisbury took care to make no overt accusation of Eleanor's adultery with
Raymond. Possibly he suspected Eleanor of no more than immoderate familial affection or
her uncle of using her to pressure Louis VII to give up his goal of marching at once to
Jerusalem in favour of his own plan for battling the Turks. Although John refrains from
comment on Eleanor's refusal to play the part of a contrite wife, he would have found
shocking her questioning the validity of her marriage, breaching the submissiveness that a
male-dominated Church and society imposed on women. John also finds Louis VII at fault
for his inordinate love for Eleanor 'passionately, in an almost childish way' that led him to
agree to their separation. In the years before the crusade, the strong-minded young queen
proved that she was capable of taking strong political stands, influencing her husband's
policies, and her behaviour at Antioch made manifest Louis's ineffectual control over her.
His excessive love for her threatened a moral and political order that defined female freedom
of action as 'unwomanly' and a husband unable to master his wife as 'unmanly'.

Rumours about Eleanor and Louis's troubled marriage must have circulated widely
during and after the Second Crusade. Such gossip soon magnified Eleanor's actions at
Antioch from an impudent challenge to her husband's authority, disobeying the church's
teaching on wives' submission to their husbands, to actual adultery. The incident at
Antioch also figured in troubadour poetry; verses possibly composed in Palestine during
the Second Crusade allude to Eleanor's alleged adultery. Eleanor's speedy remarriage

43 Labande, 'Pour une image véridique d'Aliénor'; reprinted in his Histoire de l'Europe Occidentale, p.
185.
45 Historia Pontificalis, p. 52, reginam vehementer amabit et fere puerlli modo; p. 53, affectu fere
immoderato.
46 Richard Barber, 'Eleanor and the Media', The World of Eleanor of Aquitaine: Literature and Society
in Southern France between the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries, ed. Marcus Bull and Catherine Léglu
(Woodbridge, 2005), p. 27; also Labande, 'Pour une image véridique', p.178; and Flori, Aliénor, pp.
322-4, 333-5.
131-32, stanza 6, lines 36-42. It condemns a woman for lying with more than one man, stating that it
would have been better if she had never been born 'than to have committed the fault which will be
talked about as far away as Poitou'.
after her 1152 divorce to Henry Plantagenet added fodder for rumours of serial adulteries. Gossip followed her to England, perhaps first nurtured in the camps of French crusaders bitter at their expedition’s inglorious end, then spread by courtiers at Paris displeased at her second marriage and Louis’s loss of his duchy to his Plantagenet vassal. Oral tradition was often the source of scurrilous tales, such as those set down in Walter Map’s *De nugis curialium.*

English writers, even those writing after the queen’s imprisonment in 1174 when fear of Henry II’s wrath ought not to have troubled them, contented themselves with oblique references to the incident at Antioch. Gervase of Canterbury merely mentioned ‘a certain discord between [Louis] and his queen Eleanor’ that arose following royal couple’s return from the Holy Land and about which, ‘according to certain persons it was perhaps better to keep silent’. Richard of Devizes in his chronicle was even less direct in reminding readers of Eleanor’s questionable conduct. Alongside a passage praising Eleanor, he placed a marginal note, marked off with wavy lines, that states conspiratorially, ‘Many know what I would that none of us knew. This same queen, during the time of her first husband, was at Jerusalem [rightly Antioch]. Let no one say any more about it. I too know it well. Keep silent.’ Over a decade after the queen’s death, Gerald of Wales was still surprisingly guarded, writing, ‘It is enough to note how Eleanor, queen of France, conducted herself at first beyond the sea in the parts of Palestine.’ Apparently writers were confident of their readers’ ability to fill in the details of her indiscretion on the Second Crusade.

Four decades after Eleanor’s 1152 divorce, such gossip originating with the Antioch episode inspired William of Newburgh’s widely quoted remark that the queen felt she ‘had married a monk, not a king’, hardly an appropriate assertion in the view of this devout Augustinian canon. Surprisingly, William makes no mention of Eleanor’s misbehaviour.


at Antioch, although he had access to William of Tyre's history of the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem, composed in faraway Palestine by 1185. Unlike John of Salisbury, William of Tyre assigns the prince of Antioch a major role as manipulator and his niece the victim's part. He writes that it was Raymond who 'resolved to deprive [Louis VII] of his wife, either by force or by secret intrigue', then makes the damning comment, 'The queen readily assented to this design, for she was one of the foolish women. She was ... an imprudent woman and contrary to the king's dignity, disregarding her marriage vows, having forgotten the conjugal bed.'

Scandalous rumours about Eleanor's conduct on the Second Crusade doubtlessly added to the vehemence of William of Newburgh's tirade against women's participation. The mere fact of the queen's accompanying her husband Louis VII outraged him. He saw nothing good coming from her joining the crusading host, which he credits to Louis's 'over-urgent longing for his young wife'. He saw Louis's action setting a bad precedent, encouraging nobles to bring along their wives, who further enlarged the number of women by taking their maid servants. He held a deep reverence for the crusaders' chastity that he felt threatened by women's presence. He declared that 'in the Christian camps [castra] where chastity [casta] should have prevailed, a horde of women were milling about ... [bringing] scandal upon our army'. For Newburgh, like other chroniclers of the crusades, crusading knights' sexual license afforded an explanation for its failure. He wrote of their misfortunes, 'It is not surprising that divine favour did not smile at all on the troops, as they were defiled and unclean.'

Or doubt, other factors contributed to English chroniclers' disdain for Henry II's queen, among them her foreign origin, even though no chronicle makes direct reference to her alien status. Eleanor's southern French background set her apart from her four predecessors as queens of England, who were either natives of England or from principalities just across the Channel. Once Eleanor's marriage to Henry acquainted late twelfth-century English chroniclers with Aquitaine, they formed an unfavourable impression of the duchy, convinced that it was an ungovernable land inhabited by rebels and heretics. The culture of Aquitaine differed so decidedly from that of England and Normandy that even the cosmopolitan John of Salisbury remarked on 'the peculiar customs


55 Newburgh, Historia, i, 66, 92-3; History of English Affairs, pp. 128-9. On Newburgh's elevation of chastity, see Partner, Serious Entertainments, pp. 70-3, 94.

56 William the Conqueror's queen was Matilda, daughter of the count of Flanders; Henry I married first Matilda, descended from Anglo-Saxon kings, and second Adela, daughter of the count of Louvaine; King Stephen's queen was a daughter of the count of Boulogne.
and strange laws of the folk of Aquitaine'.” Its mores were typified for northerners by Eleanor’s grandfather, William IX, the troubadour-duke whose licentious life had scandalized the Anglo-Norman chroniclers, and the queen’s contemporaries apparently assumed that she had inherited his louche character. Furthermore, throughout Languedoc great ladies moved easily into positions of political power, and almost all noble families could recall mothers and grandmothers’ struggles to defend or extend their domains. Young Eleanor would have heard stories of earlier duchesses of Aquitaine, among them her grandmother Philippa of Toulouse, or a more distant ancestor, Agnes of Burgundy. Such strong-willed ladies had substantial roles in political matters, fleeing one husband to take another, governing as deputies for weak or absent spouses or for minor children, and claiming lordships as their own hereditary right.

Regardless of Eleanor’s alien culture, anyone versed in the Church’s teaching on marriage would have expected a wife’s at least mild affection and fidelity to her husband, but she spectacularly failed at love in both her marriages. Although Eleanor in her second marriage fulfilled more than adequately a royal consort’s primary task of producing sons, the chroniclers did not laud her for her fruitfulness, and Ralph Diceto was alone in recording the vital information of names and dates of the births of her children by Henry II. Clearly, the Aquitanian heiress failed to live up to expectations that previous queens had left in the minds of the English people.

Rumours of continued misconduct by Louis VII’s queen after her return from the Holy Land were reported — or fabricated — many years later first by Walter Map, and following him, Gerald of Wales in his De principis instructione. Alone among the late twelfth-century writers, the two accused Eleanor of adultery at Paris. It was not her future husband, Henry Plantagenet, but Count Geoffrey of Anjou, his father, whom they accused of having ‘carnally known’ her on a visit to the French court, committing a sin that would

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make Eleanor and Henry’s marriage ‘incest of the second type’. Walter Map, probably writing his *De nugis curialium* during the queen’s imprisonment, depicts Eleanor as a willing participant in the affair, writing that ‘she was secretly reputed to have shared Louis’s couch with [Henry’s] father Geoffrey’. Gerald of Wales, writing a decade after Eleanor’s death during a baronial rebellion against her last surviving son John, followed Map in accusing her of adultery while still the wife of the French king. In a chapter devoted to tracing the depraved ancestry of both Henry and Eleanor, Gerald recalled her grandfather’s ‘manifest and detestable adultery’ with the viscountess of Châtellerault, declaring that she was cursed with the inherited licentiousness of her Poitevin lineage. In his account, Count Geoffrey ‘several times, as is said, forewarned his son Henry, admonishing and forbidding him to touch [Eleanor] in any manner, both because she was his lord’s wife, and because she had been known by his own father’. Gerald then complained that Henry exceeded his father’s crime, ‘King Henry presumed to pollute with adulterous copulation the so-called queen of France, as disseminated by rumour, and took her away from his own lord [Louis VII] and joined with her in matrimony’.

In reporting the dissolution of Louis and Eleanor’s marriage on grounds of consanguinity, all these English chroniclers were writing decades after the 1152 ecclesiastical council. Although William of Newburgh merely states that the bishops and nobles of France ‘solemnly claimed and attested under oath that there was a blood-relationship between them’, his fellow monastic chronicler Gervase of Canterbury maintains that they had taken a ‘contrived oath’ to declare the marriage consanguineous. A third monastic writer, Ralph of Coggeshall, lacking the others’ hostility to the Plantagenets, wrote that Louis VII had ‘repudiated’ or ‘cast off’ his queen due to consanguinity without further comment. The royal clerk Roger of Howden, mentioning Eleanor’s divorce in his *Chronica*, neglects the flaw of consanguinity, doubtless unwilling to call attention to the consanguineous nature of Henry’s own marriage to her. Even though a loyal royal servant, his words hinted at her fault, stating that ‘the archbishops, bishops, earls and barons took oaths that she was no longer fit to be his wife’. Although Eleanor’s contemporaries burdened her with some guilt for the divorce, historians today agree that

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63 *De nugis curialium*, ed. James, pp. 474-7.
64 Opera, viii, 300-1, bk 3, ch 27. Gerald seems to depict Eleanor not as a willing partner, but the count of Anjou’s victim, *abusus fuerat*.
65 Newburgh, *Historia*, i, 92-3; trans., Walsh and Kennedy, pp. 128-9; *Gervase of Canterbury*, i, 149, *artificiosum juramentum*.
however much she may have desired to end her marriage to Louis, his conviction that she
could not give him a son needed to ensure the succession was the deciding factor. The birth
of a second daughter in 1150 made the dissolution of their union inevitable. That the
couple’s kinship within the Church’s prohibited degrees was merely an excuse is shown by
Louis’s prompt marriage to a second spouse more closely related to him than Eleanor. Yet
none of the chroniclers points out the importance of the Capetian king’s need for a male
heir. Only Roger of Howden hints at Louis’s dilemma, taking care to note that Eleanor
gave Henry both sons and daughters, although she had given her first husband only two
daughters.

Turning to Eleanor’s second marriage, Ralph of Coggeshall, writing during Eleanor’s
widowhood, merely hints at its inappropriate haste, taking place ‘without delay’ and notes
that the marriage brought Henry the duchy of Aquitaine. Two other monastic writers,
William of Newburgh and Gervase of Canterbury, offer more details, presuming to know
Eleanor’s mind a generation before they were writing. They present Eleanor taking the
initiative in her marriage to Henry. Both were impressed by a great lady arranging her own
marriage, a rare occurrence in the twelfth century, but their impression was far from
favourable. Following conventional thinking that ranked women as less rational than men,
the two attribute personal, emotional or sexual motives to her quick remarriage. As one
recent writer remarks, ‘It is striking that chroniclers consistently avoid any suggestion that
Eleanor could have been driven to divorce Louis and marry Henry by any other motivation
than sexual desire ... the chroniclers consistently sexualize women’s power to depict it as a
disorderly, uncontrollable force and to discredit it.’ They took no note of her vulnerability
once she left her former husband’s court, a woman alone and in need of a protector both of
her person and her duchy.

Gervase of Canterbury and William of Newburgh purport that Eleanor desired to
replace Louis VII with Henry Plantagenet as her husband. Gervase shows Eleanor taking
the initiative soon after returning to Poitou; after ‘disdaining [Louis’s] decrepit Gallic
embraces’, she contacted Henry. Then, ‘by means of a messenger sent secretly to the duke,
[Eleanor] announced that she was free and dissolved [from her marriage] and stimulated
the duke’s mind to contract matrimony’. Yet Gervase admits that Henry too ‘had long
desired’ the marriage, ‘above all driven by the desire to possess all the honors that belonged

68 He and his bride, Constance of Castile, shared the same great-grandfather. Constance B. Bouchard,
‘Eleanor’s Divorce from Louis VII: The Uses of Consanguinity’, Eleanor, ed. Parsons and Wheeler,
pp. 230-1.
69 Howden, Chronica, ii, 214; his earlier Gesta regis, begun in 1169, makes no mention of the marriage.
70 Coggeshall, p. 13.
to her'. William of Newburgh, steeped in the monastic tradition of the chronicler as moral judge, passed a harsh judgment on the divorce and remarriage. Like Gervase, he ascribes Eleanor's second marriage to her desire for Henry, stating that she 'eventually obtained the marriage which she desired', and adding without comment that she left behind in France two daughters. He asserts that after Louis and Eleanor's return from the East, 'the former love between them gradually grew cold', and he reports rumours that Eleanor 'even during her marriage to the king of France ... longed to be wed to the duke of Normandy as one more congenial to her character'. Newburgh affirms this more forcefully in another passage, 'And the same queen, formerly married to the king of the French, having felt disgust at her tie with him, desired marriage to [Henry] and sought causes for a divorce: freed by law from her former husband in the view of the Church, she, as I should say, with unlawful license soon sent for her new partner.'

Richard of Devizes likened the family of Eleanor and Henry II to 'the confused house of Oedipus'. Indeed, the dysfunctional character of the family life of Eleanor and Henry II with their sons' open hostility toward their father was well known to contemporaries. The family's unhappiness could be explained by the sinful nature of the couple's marriage; since many held that the annulment of Eleanor's marriage to Louis VII was invalid, an adulterous and unlawful liaison. The twelfth-century Church's efforts to bolster the marriage bond, redefining it as a holy, indissoluble bond enabled clerics critical of Eleanor and Henry's marriage to define it as sinful and adulterous. The rebellion by Eleanor's sons against their own father, 1173-4, seemed proof of the cursed character of their marriage. William of Newburgh commented that 'this father was most unhappy in his most famous sons', concluding that the rebellious boys were instruments of the king's ruin visited on him by God. He explained that Henry II deserved retribution, sent 'by the just judgment of God for two reasons'. First was the king's marriage to Eleanor, the wife of another, and second was his insufficient penance for his obstinacy in opposing Archbishop Thomas Becket.

Over a decade after Newburgh, Gerald of Wales also blamed Henry for entering into a marriage of doubtful legitimacy, the first of several enormous sins that in Gerald's judgment earned him divine punishment through his own offspring. Gerald wrote in his De principis instructione, 'For, in the first place, as it is enough to note, he unduly took away Eleanor, queen of France, from her husband and lord, Louis, king of France, and bound her

72 Gervase of Canterbury, i, 149.
73 Newburgh, Historia, i, 92-3; trans., Walsh and Kennedy, pp. 128-9; and Newburgh, i, 281, bk. 3, ch. 26.
74 Devizes, ed. Appleby, p. 3.
to himself in the conjugal bond.'76 Then he concluded that the marriage also was incestuous because of Eleanor’s prior sexual relations with Henry’s father. Here Gerald was following Walter Map, who after writing of Geoffrey of Anjou’s seduction of Eleanor, commented, ‘That is why, it is presumed, their offspring, tainted at the source, came to nought.’77 In a passage tracing both Henry’s and Eleanor’s corrupt lineage, Gerald asked rhetorically, ‘How, I ask, from such a union could happy offspring be born?’78

The unprecedented example of a wife conspiring in a large-scale revolt against her husband in 1173 astounded and horrified contemporaries. Both secular clerks with ties to the royal court and more hostile monastic chroniclers agree on the queen’s role in the great rebellion.79 Roger of Howden, writing almost contemporaneously with events in his Gesta Regis, declares, ‘Prominent, moreover, among the instigators of this heinous treason were Louis the king of France, and, as is said in some quarters, Eleanor queen of England herself and Raoul de Faye [her uncle].’ He goes on to note that the queen sent off two of her sons, Richard and Geoffreys of Brittany, to the French court to join their brother Henry the Young King shortly after his flight from his father.80 Later Roger writing in his Chronica shortly after Henry II’s death, when Eleanor was free and once again powerful, prudently omitted any mention of her role in the rebellion.81 Ralph Diceto, writing a decade after Howden’s Gesta Regis, stated that while Henry II was in Ireland in 1171-2, ‘Hugh de Sainte-Maure and Raoul de Faye, uncle of Queen Eleanor, on her advice, so it is said, began to turn away the mind of the young King from his father, suggesting that it seemed incongruous to be a king and not exercise the rule of a kingdom.’ Ralph, like Howden, noted young Richard and Geoffrey’s flight to their elder brother’s side, ‘following the advice of their mother Eleanor’. He then listed over thirty instances of sons rebelling against their parents, but was unable to specify a single case of a queen rebelling against her royal husband.82 The two semi-official historians’ mention of Eleanor’s uncle, Raoul de Faye, suggests their doubt about a woman’s capacity for the extreme action of rousing her sons to rebel without some male’s direction.

Monastic chroniclers writing slightly later than Howden or Diceto agreed that Eleanor was a co-conspirator with her sons. Although William of Newburgh, following

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77 De nugis curialium, ed. James, pp. 474-7.
78 Opera, viii, 300-1, bk. 3, ch. 27.
80 Howden, Gesta Regis, i, 42, trans. Owen, Eleanor: Queen and Legend, p. 114. For the time of writing, Gransden, Historical Writing, p. 220.
81 Howden, Chronica, ii, 46-7.
82 Diceto, i, 350; also 355-66.
Howden, places blame on the French king for counseling Young Henry to rebel, he pictures Eleanor as guilty of encouraging her younger sons to join him in rebellion, stating that Richard and Geoffrey fled to Paris through their manipulative mother's connivance. Ralph of Coggeshall had less to say about Eleanor's involvement, blaming Louis VII and Count Philip of Flanders for encouraging Young Henry to revolt in 1173, but elsewhere he noted that because 'she wished to rise up with her sons against [Henry], he imprisoned her for many years'. Gervase of Canterbury also depicts Eleanor inciting Richard and Geoffrey to flee to Paris. His chronicle is the only one to add the detail that she fled to join her rebellious sons disguised in male dress, perhaps more a metaphor for her pursuit of masculine power than an accurate description. He wrote that the queen 'having changed from her woman's clothes, was apprehended and detained in strict custody. For it was said that all these happenings were prepared through her scheming and advice. For she was an extremely astute woman, of noble descent but \textit{instabilis} [inconstant or flighty]. The twelfth-century Church, attempting to differentiate different orders of society by prescribing their dress, condemned cross-dressing for blurring gender distinctions, offending against the proper order of things.

Scandal that had become attached to Eleanor as early as the Second Crusade inclined these writers to believe the worst of Eleanor in the 1173 conspiracy. Another factor in their eagerness to indict her is her separation from Henry II after 1168, when she resided in Poitou. Perhaps the royal couple lived apart by mutual agreement, for Henry saw that his attempt at direct rule over turbulent Aquitaine was failing, and he expected indirect rule through his wife to prove more acceptable to the populace. Whatever the couple's reasons for deciding to live at a distance, Eleanor doubtless welcomed an opportunity to return to her homeland to rule in her own right. Yet clerics, influenced by conventional teachings on marriage, would have interpreted Eleanor's leaving her husband's side as a sign of her refusal to adopt a wife's proper submissiveness. The Church's condemnation of married couples living apart is made clear in a letter written by Peter of Blois, then secretary of Rotrou, archbishop of Rouen, allegedly sent by the prelate to Eleanor early in the 1173 revolt at Henry II's prompting. Whether or not the letter is authentic or merely one of Peter's epistolary exercises, it reflects common clerical attitudes. It quotes the gospel of Matthew (19: 6), 'Those whom God has joined ... man must not put asunder.' The letter continues, 'That woman who is not subject to her husband violates the condition of nature, the command of the Apostles and the law of the Gospel. "For the man is the head of the

83 Newburgh, \textit{Historia}, i, 170-1.
84 Coggeshall, pp. 17-18.
85 \textit{Gervase of Canterbury}, i, 80, 241-2; see also Martindale, 'Eleanor', \textit{Status, Authority and Power}, p. 48, n. 66.
woman” (Ephesians 5: 23). She is created from him, she is united to him, and she is subject to his power.’ It concludes, ‘Either you return to your husband, or we will constrain you by canon law and will be bound to enforce ecclesiastical censures against you ... although we shall do it with sorrow and tears.’

Although these writers accuse Eleanor of fanning her sons’ resentments against their father to stir them to rebellion, they showed little interest in speculating on her motivation. Due to their view of history as exemplary, Eleanor’s motives were unimportant; she was God’s instrument for punishing Henry for his sins. If they hint at the queen’s motives, they turn to her female emotion, her thirst for revenge against Henry without spelling out reasons for her wrath. None credits Eleanor with political impulses for turning against her husband, for they were unaware that her childhood in Aquitaine had conditioned her to expect a great heiress to exert authority over her inherited lands. It did not occur to them that a craving for political influence and disappointment at failure to achieve it as Henry’s consort could have driven her to seek power through her sons. Her desire to preserve her own authority over her duchy of Aquitaine, to protect Richard’s right of succession there, and to prevent its sinking to the status of simply another of her husband’s provinces likely had as much to do with her revolt as the bitterness of a wronged wife. The homage of Raymond V to Henry II, Young Henry and Richard in February 1173 for the county of Toulouse must have made the threat clear to Aquitaine clear. She knew that Henry’s claim to lordship over Toulouse came only through her as duchess of Aquitaine. When Raymond was required do homage to Henry and to Young Henry, he was recognizing the Young King as the lawful successor to the county of Toulouse, superseding Eleanor’s longstanding claim that it was her rightful inheritance. Even worse from Eleanor’s point of view, the count’s homage implied that his county along with her entire duchy would fall permanently under the English monarchs’ subjection.

Although modern historians and novelists’ assumption is that Henry II’s adulteries, particularly his public affair with Rosamond Clifford, fed his wife’s desire for vengeance, none of the late twelfth-century writers makes such a specific allegation. Indeed, the

chronology does not fit the alleged facts of Henry II’s affair with Rosamund. Although some modern biographers date the king’s affair with her as early as 1166, it likely began no earlier than 1170 and possibly not until 1173, only becoming a public spectacle after the queen’s return to England as a prisoner in 1174.91 Not even Gerald of Wales depicted the queen’s incitement of her sons’ revolt as resulting from her anger at Henry’s new mistress. In his Expugnatio Hibernica written c. 1187, he implies that Henry had been discreet in his adulteries before the revolt: ‘After the great wrong committed against their father by his sons, under their mother’s influence ..., [the king] openly broke his marriage vows.’ Years later in the De principis, Gerald mentioned Rosamond Clifford, stating that the king, who ‘was before a secret adulterer was afterwards an open one,’ publicly displaying his liaison with her only after the queen’s imprisonment.92 Other chroniclers add nothing about Rosamond’s role in Eleanor and Henry’s estrangement. William of Newburgh was mistaken about Henry’s adulteries, asserting that he ‘begot illegitimate offspring in pursuing pleasure’ only once the queen had passed child-bearing age.93 Roger of Howden remained silent about the king’s affair with Rosamond Clifford until after the king’s death. Her name only appears in his account of St Hugh of Lincoln’s 1191 visit to the convent of Godstow, when he ordered her tomb removed from the nuns’ chapel, ‘for she was a harlot’.94

Eleanor of Aquitaine almost disappears from the chronicles during her captivity, 1174-1189; only Roger of Howden in his Gesta Regis tracked her movements.95 Ralph Niger, wishing to present the queen in positive terms and at the same time blacken Henry’s reputation refers to her long captivity, but without any mention of her role in inciting her sons’ revolt. He merely mentions that following the Poitevins’ rebellion, the king captured her ‘with fraud and flattery’ and that he held her ‘in a certain tower utterly without any possibility of escaping’. According to Niger, Henry imprisoned his wife ‘in order that he might more freely indulge himself, because he frequently took Satyrion [a lust-inducing plant]’.96

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91 Flori, Aliénor, p. 119, rejects any suggestion that the liaison became known to Eleanor c. 1166; see also Warren, Henry II, p. 601.
94 Howden, Chronica, iii, 167-8.
95 Howden, Gesta Regis, i, 305, 313, 333, 334, 337, 345.
After Henry II’s death in July 1189, depictions of Eleanor as a widow add depth to the usual one-dimensional portraits of great ladies, and a more approving tone appears in English chroniclers’ depictions of her as queen-mother. At an advanced age when most great ladies would have withdrawn from activity, she energetically took up the task of securing Richard Lionheart’s succession to the English throne, protecting his Angevin heritage during his crusade and captivity, and on his death, struggling to preserve the Angevin lands intact for her youngest son, John. In her widowhood she would exercise the political power that she had always craved, and she earned the reluctant respect of her contemporaries.

Only as a widow wielding power in defence of her sons could Eleanor win the chroniclers’ acceptance and forgiveness, and some writers added lighter shadings to their earlier dark descriptions. So long as she was acting on behalf of her absent son Richard, her straying into masculine spheres, exercising royal authority, even riding into battle, could be forgiven, and chroniclers could express their admiration. Richard of Devizes, Roger of Howden, Ralph Niger and Ralph Diceto all write approvingly of the queen-mother’s exercise of power in securing England on Richard’s behalf before his arrival in his new kingdom. Ralph Niger writes that on Richard’s departure from the kingdom, he left ‘the noble queen Eleanor’ in custody of the kingdom, and she ‘greatly cultivated in her last days truth and virtue in equal degree’. Both Niger and Diceto refer to the queen-mother as ‘the Eagle of the Broken Covenant’, a term earlier applied to her by a Poitevin chronicler in his lament on her captivity that had as its source the ‘Prophecies of Merlin’ in Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *History of the Kings of Britain*, ‘the eagle of the broken covenant shall rejoice in her third nesting’. Richard, Eleanor’s third son, would elevate her name to great glory. Diceto adds that on release from her long imprisonment, ‘She received from her son the power of determining whatever she wished in the kingdom. An order was given to the magnates of the realm, almost in the manner of a general edict, that all should be settled by the queen’s nod.’ In a chronicler’s rare search for motivation, he continues, ‘To make up for his many excesses, [Richard] took care to show his mother all the honour that he could, that by obedience to his mother he should atone for the offences committed against his father.’ He also writes that on learning ‘that King Henry II’s horses had been kept in stables of the abbeys, [Eleanor] distributed them with pious liberality’, and she curbed the royal foresters’ excesses, ‘intimidating them with the threat of severe penalties’.

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99 Diceto, ii, 67-8.
Roger of Howden in his *Gesta Regis* depicts Eleanor traversing England, ‘circulating with a queenly court [curia reginalis not regalis] ... from city to city and castle to castle just as it pleased her’, dispatching agents to the counties to release captives imprisoned arbitrarily by Henry’s will, including violators of forest law, ‘in obedience to the orders of her son’. Howden must have chosen the uncommon term *curia reginalis* purposely to draw attention to the extraordinary sight of a female exercising monarchical authority. In his *Chronica*, he adds that Eleanor freed prisoners because her own experience had taught her that ‘confinement is distasteful to mankind, and that it is a most delightful refreshment to the spirits to be liberated therefrom’.

Although Howden retired from the royal court in the first years of Richard’s reign, returning to his home in northern England, he remained well informed through his service to two bishops of Durham deeply involved in the kingdom’s business.

Eleanor’s involvement in government continued until Richard’s return to England from captivity in 1194, and chroniclers penned no complaints about her political activity on her son’s behalf. Although William of Newburgh tells little of Eleanor’s activities during Richard’s reign, he praised her for bringing the king’s bride, Berengaria of Navarre, to him in Sicily in January 1191. Despite having disapproved of women on the Second Crusade, he commended the Lionheart for taking Berengaria along on the Third Crusade. He wrote that it was useful for the king, ‘for he had no son to succeed him and he needed to seek offspring’, and because ‘he fortified himself with a remedy against the very great menace of fornication at a time when he was undergoing dangers in battle for the sake of Christ’.

After Eleanor returned from Sicily, Richard of Devizes reports her progress through Cambridgeshire in 1192, where she observed the people’s misery caused by ecclesiastical sanctions imposed on them. The penalties resulted from the quarrel between the former viceroy, William Longchamp, bishop of Ely, and his successor, the archbishop of Rouen. Devizes describes how the queen, seeing the people ‘weeping and pitiful’, lamenting that their deceased relatives were denied burial in consecrated ground, rushed to London to patch up the two prelates’ quarrel, persuading them to withdraw their spiritual penalties. Devizes asked, ‘And who could be so savage or cruel that this woman could not bend him to her wishes?’


103 Devizes, ed. Appleby, pp. 59-60.
Eleanor is depicted in a positive manner in her struggle to curb Count John's plots with the Capetian king during his elder brother's absence. At a series of councils in early 1192, 'through her own tears and the prayers of the nobles', John was persuaded to promise not to join Philip Augustus.104 Later during John's armed attempt to seize control of the kingdom in 1193-4, the government, rallied by Eleanor, steadfastly supported the captive King Richard. With a French invasion to aid John looming, the coasts facing Flanders were fortified according to Gervase of Canterbury, 'by command of Queen Eleanor, who at that time ruled England'.105 Later, Roger of Howden depicts Eleanor helping to raise the enormous ransom demanded by the German emperor, the money stored in chests sealed with her own and the justiciar's seals. The queen-mother joined her captive son in January 1194 in Germany, and according to Howden, Richard, 'by counsel of Eleanor his mother', agreed to the emperor's demand that he surrender England as an imperial fief in order to speed his release.106

Following the Lionheart's death in April 1199, the aged Eleanor flew into action once more to promote the succession of her sole surviving son John, whose claim to the Angevin heritage was challenged by her grandson Arthur of Brittany. Yet chroniclers who had described in detail her efforts for Richard have little to tell of her exertions on John's behalf. Three major writers of the golden age of English historians died too soon to leave much material: William of Newburgh by 1198 and Roger of Howden and Ralph Diceto, soon after a new century began. Another factor in writers' near-silence is their ignorance of Eleanor's assistance to John, taking place in the Loire valley and in her native Aquitaine.

Three episodes from King John's reign stood out for mention. Eleanor campaigned in spring 1199 with Mercadier, a mercenary captain, ravaging the countryside around Angers after Anjou had embraced Arthur's cause. Roger of Howden reported this without comment, although doubtless deeming her participation in a punitive military expedition 'unwomanly'.107 Later John's daring rescue of his mother, besieged at Mirebeau Castle in July 1202, was conspicuous as his most robust action in a largely listless defence of his French lands against the Capetian king. Ralph of Coggeshall recorded the king's exultant newsletter describing in detail Eleanor's deliverance. This letter must have circulated widely, for usually terse monastic annals give accounts of his victory at Mirebeau.108

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104 Ibid., pp. 60-64; Howden, Gesta Regis, ii, 236-7.
105 Gervase of Canterbury, i, 515.
106 Howden, Chronicon, iii, 208-12 and 202-3.
107 Howden, Chronicon, iv, 88; see Jane Martindale, 'Eleanor of Aquitaine: The Last Years', King John: New Interpretations, ed. Stephen Church (Woodbridge, 1999), pp. 152-3.
108 Coggeshall, pp. 137-8; also Anales monastici, ed. H. R. Luard, 5 vols, RS (1864-69); Margam, i, 26; Waverley, ii, 254; Winchester, ii, 78-9.
1200 Eleanor embarked on her last long journey to bring her granddaughter from Castile to be the bride of the Capetian heir, the future Louis VIII. Howden’s account is his last report on the queen-mother; he concludes, writing in respectful terms, ‘Queen Eleanor, being fatigued with old age and the labour of the length of the journey betook herself to the Abbey of Fontevraud, and there remained.’

Eleanor’s largely unflattering portrait in works of chroniclers representing a ‘golden age’ of medieval English historiography demonstrates her failure to meet a standard for queenship being defined in the twelfth century, part of a reformulation of gender roles that imposed harsher judgments of her than those passed on her predecessors as English queens. Most extreme are the thwarted patronage seeker Gerald of Wales’ denunciations, expanding on earlier allegations of his fellow courtier Walter Map. Writing in 1216 without fear of the beleaguered King John, Gerald let loose a barrage of bitter anti-Plantagenet propaganda slandering Eleanor. Only a little less malevolent were two monastic chroniclers, Gervase of Canterbury and William of Newburgh, although the account of a third monk, Ralph of Coggeshall, lacks their hostile and moralizing tone. As could be expected of two secular clerks close to the court, Roger of Howden and Ralph Diceto treated the English queen with near-neutrality, though they could not pass over in silence her role in her sons’ rebellion. Only two chroniclers reverted to earlier sympathetic depictions of English queens, the secular clerk Ralph Niger and the Winchester monk Richard of Devizes. Writing in the early 1190s of an aged and respected queen-mother battling on behalf of Richard Lionheart, they could accept her intrusion into the male world of political activity.

These chroniclers had a powerful influence on writers of histories in the later Middle Ages. Growing from their negative anecdotes and moral condemnation are later embellishments of rumours even more discrediting to Eleanor’s reputation. Near the end of the thirteenth century, Thomas Wykes, a chronicler at Osney Abbey near Oxford, borrowed his version of Eleanor’s divorce and remarriage from William of Newburgh, depicting her as the initiator. He wrote, ‘Long agitated by a dispute between Eleanor queen of the French and her husband the king, a divorce between them was pronounced, with the queen herself angrily seeking the divorce by reason of consanguinity; she vehemently worked for the divorce, because she ardently desired to marry Henry ...’.


110 Gillingham describes him as ‘a simple and disinterested monk’, in ‘Royal Newsletters’, p. 176. Coggeshall’s only mentions of Eleanor in her last years are her accompanying Berengaria to Sicily, her capture at Mirebeau, and her death, which he records without comment, *Coggeshall*, pp. 31, 137, 144.

A more influential chronicler than Wykes is Matthew Paris, writing at St Albans Abbey in the mid-thirteenth century, c. 1235-59, whose writings have carried great weight with historians almost to the present day. Matthew Paris in his report on Louis VII's crusade merely mentioned Eleanor's presence without alluding to the Antioch affair. When discussing Eleanor's divorce, he could not contain his predilection for 'unscrupulous falsification', however; and he elaborated on the incident at Antioch that had stalked the queen ever since, contributing to the construction of her black legend.112 The St Albans chronicler charged the former French queen not only with multiple adulteries, but 'especially infidelity with a certain infidel prince in the East, perpetrated while her husband devoted himself to the business of war'.113 About the same time in France, a collection of historical anecdotes by an anonymous minstrel of Reims took up the tale of the queen's Muslim lover, identifying him as Saladin, who was not even a teenager at the time of Eleanor's visit to the Holy Land.114 Today authors of novels and popular histories continue to propagate the myth of Eleanor's promiscuity, copying and embellishing old canards.115

Late twelfth-century English writers were prisoners of negative views of powerful women, furthered by churchmen's animosity toward women and by their redefinition of gender roles limiting earlier possibilities for women to win political power. Prompted to suspect Eleanor of Aquitaine by rumours trailing after her since the Second Crusade, they found this granddaughter of a dissolute southern duke falling short in fulfilling an English

113 Matthew Paris, Historia Anglorum, ed. F. Madden, 3 vols., RS (1866-69), i, 288; and a shorter account in Chronica Majori, ed. H. R. Luard, 7 vols., RS (1872-83), ii, 186.
115 Several modern biographers see a sexual dimension in Eleanor's relationship with her uncle, e.g. Allison Weir, Eleanor of Aquitaine. By the Wrath of God, Queen of England (London, 2000), p. 68: 'In the face of all the reliable contemporary evidence, it is puzzling to find that most of Eleanor's modern biographers do not accept that she had an adulterous affair with Raymond ...'. Another popular writer, Marion Meade, Eleanor of Aquitaine (New York, 1977; reprint 1991) p. 110, finds the idea of incest between Eleanor and her uncle ludicrous, although she accepts her seduction of young Henry Plantagenet when he and his father came to Paris in summer 1151, p. 144. Among scholars, Flori, Aliénor, pp. 321, 323, 328, 332-3; and Owen, Eleanor: Queen and Legend, pp. 24-5, take no open stand, but innuendoes indicate their strong suspicions. Owen writes, 'Raymond welcomed her with open arms — all too open, some were to hint.'
queen's proper role. A woman's pursuit of political power, not uncommon in the southern France of Eleanor's childhood, seemed to northern churchmen to overturn the natural order. Content to attribute causation in history to divine will, they had little interest in individual actors' motivations. They simply followed a widespread medieval propensity for attributing actions of leading characters in history to personal motivations, and especially a tendency to credit women's actions to emotional or sexual motives. If they paused to consider Eleanor's motives, they followed conventional thinking, assigning them to personal, emotional or sexual factors and ignoring political reasons. Gossip growing out of the Antioch incident converted Eleanor's attempts to take control of her own destiny, her refusal to abide conventional curbs on women's power into a black legend of sexual impropriety that has persisted for centuries.