

Undressing Eleanor: Deconstructing the Layers of Eleanor of Aquitaine through  
Her Life, Legend, and Female Body

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## Introduction

One of the most famous female historical figures of the Middle Ages, Eleanor of Aquitaine (c. 1122-1204) played multiple social and political roles during her long, tumultuous life. Not only was she Duchess of Aquitaine and Countess of Poitou, titles which she held for her entire adult life, but she also at various periods held titles such as Duchess of Normandy, Countess of Anjou, Queen Consort of France and of England; in addition, she was Queen Mother to three kings, two of whom she outlived and at least one of whom—namely King John, whose signature famously endorsed the Magna Carta—is still considered crucial to the study of the history of England. Eleanor's impact extended far beyond her titles, however. Her social and political contributions, alongside her apparently forceful and charismatic personality, have catapulted her to semi-legendary status in her own lifetime and beyond.

The priorities of historiography during the twelfth century worked in such a way that comparatively few lives of preeminent female figures have been thoroughly recorded by contemporaries. Examples of such women exist, to be sure, but biographies or treatments of them—as individuals, and not through the lens of their involvement with male historical figures—are rare. While historians today recognize even the most mundane of lives as worthy of attention, topics considered worthy of historical treatment in the Middle Ages are limited to grandiose matters like kings, wartime events, or religious leaders, with these accounts being mainly—if not entirely—dominated by men. Thus, the lives of distinguished women must either be accessed through reconstructions by modern historians, or pieced together sentence by sentence and year by year from whatever scattered mentions are made of them in contemporary historical writings on the lives of men around them.

Eleanor happens to be one of those rare medieval women whose lives have been reconstructed, and these efforts for the most part have been well worth it. As Ralph V. Turner notes in his article “Eleanor of Aquitaine, Twelfth-Century English Chroniclers and her ‘Black Legend,’” Eleanor is a popular topic of choice among historians of medieval Europe.<sup>1</sup> The appeal of writing about Eleanor lies not only in the actual events that she partook in, but also in the various legends and rumors sparked by this powerful and charismatic woman’s escapades. Because of these details, Eleanor’s story is one which fascinates, prompting biographies like Alison Weir’s bestselling *Eleanor of Aquitaine: A Life*, as well as Amy Kelly’s oft-reprinted *Eleanor of Aquitaine and the Four Kings*, first published in 1950. These works, as well as *Eleanor of Aquitaine: Queen and Rebel* by Jean Flori, supply much of the information on Eleanor’s life included in the first chapter of this thesis, which addresses questions of Eleanor’s personal, social, and political life as a powerful woman in the twelfth century.

Although there is still much debate about the facticity of the legends surrounding Eleanor, many of the facts of her life are well known. Eleanor was born around the year 1122, probably either in Poitiers or in Bordeaux, both cities being the domain of her father, Duke William X of Aquitaine and Poitou.<sup>2</sup> The first child of her parents, the lively Eleanor received a good education in childhood.<sup>3</sup> This education would prove quite useful, as her parents only bore two more children: a younger sister, and a brother who died in childhood, meaning that Eleanor would presumably be the one to inherit and rule upon her father’s death. When William X’s

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<sup>1</sup> Ralph V. Turner, "Eleanor of Aquitaine, Twelfth-Century English Chroniclers and Her ‘Black Legend’," *Nottingham Medieval Studies* 52 (2008): 17, accessed September 28, 2018, doi:10.1484/j.nms.3.427.

<sup>2</sup> Alison Weir, *Eleanor of Aquitaine: A Life* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2008), 13.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

death did occur in 1137, it was sudden, but not so sudden that he had not arranged his estate in a way that Eleanor could legally, as a female child, inherit her rightful lands. Eleanor found herself in the guardianship of King Louis VI of France.<sup>4</sup> That same year, Eleanor and Louis' young son of the same name were married, and the death of Louis VI quickly followed their marriage, placing the newly married couple on the throne of France.<sup>5</sup>

Eleanor's marriage to Louis was mostly uneventful, excepting a period between 1147-1149 when the couple departed for the Holy Land with the Second Crusade. Much scholarship has focused on Eleanor's role in this crusading endeavor. It is on this crusade that Eleanor seems to have decided to have her marriage with Louis dissolved, which eventually went into effect in 1152.<sup>6</sup> Eleanor remarried almost immediately; her new husband, Henry, already Duke of Normandy and Count of Anjou, succeeded King Stephen of England in December 1154 to become Henry II.<sup>7</sup> What follows for Eleanor is a long tenure as Queen Consort of the Angevin Empire, a part that Eleanor apparently took quite seriously, despite the fact that as the king's wife, her role technically included little more than the expectation of the birth of heirs. What is known of the political role that Eleanor took on mainly comes from her existing charters and letters. Historians of Henry's rule make almost no note of Eleanor's actions or influence; for example, if contemporary historians are to be believed, Eleanor had absolutely no reaction to the

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 87.

<sup>7</sup> Jean Flori, *Eleanor of Aquitaine: Queen and Rebel*, trans. Olive Classe (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 70.

famous Becket controversy in 1170-71 that blemished Henry's reign.<sup>8</sup> However, an event that has been frequently noted by historians is Eleanor's part in the attempted revolt against Henry by his sons in 1173, which resulted in her imprisonment until Henry's death in 1189.<sup>9</sup> Once free, Eleanor again became an active participant in the affairs of state, influencing the reign of her son Richard the Lionheart, and John Lackland after him, until she passed away in 1204.<sup>10</sup>

Aside from the important political events of Eleanor's life, she also contributed to the cultural and social worlds of the time with her patronage of the arts, and in particular the literary tradition that has come to be called "courtly love." The examination of courtly love literature forms the basis of this thesis paper's second chapter, which draws on scholarly works such as Roger Boase's *The Origin and Meaning of Courtly Love: A Critical Study of European Scholarship* and *Rethinking Chivalry and Courtly Love* by Jennifer Wollock to identify the common patterns in courtly love works and to examine what they reveal about gender and the operations of political power in Eleanor's times. Finally, chapter three reflects on the importance of the body as an element of power, within this literary tradition and multiple different existing social systems of the Middle Ages. This chapter will attempt to show the body's crucial role in establishing and producing power, expanding on Eleanor's own power as a woman with a female body in this period, and all the implications therein of her gendered form. Eleanor existed not just as a protagonist in a series of social and political events, but also as a physical person who was seen, felt, and heard—and perhaps more significantly, who herself saw, felt, and heard the world and the people around her. Historical writings can accurately address the facts and ideas of

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<sup>8</sup> Weir, 191.

<sup>9</sup> Flori, 135.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 202.

Eleanor's life, but cannot recreate her feelings, her physical presence, or even truly reproduce her image: no accurate and confirmed artistic portrayals of Eleanor during her lifetime exist.<sup>11</sup> As a physical, embodied entity, Eleanor will forever elude contact, but this impossibility of physical closeness is part of what continues to draw historians to reevaluate her story and her legend.

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<sup>11</sup> Weir, 18.



## Chapter 1: The Marriages and Myths of Eleanor of Aquitaine

To understand the narrative of Eleanor's life, one must first understand the context of the world in which she lived. The European world of the twelfth century, defined by its feudal or manorial economic system, heavily relied on the land and its products. Much administrative and legislative care was taken to ensure the products of various lands were accounted for, and passed on to the proper individuals based on inheritance. A famous example of the extreme importance of and reliance on land is the Domesday Book established by William the Conqueror in England in the year 1086. The new Norman king, having conquered and taken England from its former Anglo-Saxon rulers, thoroughly appraised every piece of his newly acquired lands; specifically, the Domesday Book noted the valuation of those lands and the resources that came from them.<sup>12</sup> The book's careful notation of the amount of land in each county of England, as well as the monetary valuation to be expected from each region, clearly shows the importance which land held within society. Therefore, issues of landownership generally influenced the social and political spheres to a great degree. In such a world, a person like Eleanor wielded an immense amount of influence.

Eleanor was born in the early twelfth century as the daughter of William X, Duke of Aquitaine and Count of Poitou. As the oldest child of her father, who had no surviving male heirs, Eleanor inherited the duchy of Aquitaine upon the death of her father in 1137 when she was fifteen years old.<sup>13</sup> The Salic Law, a centuries-old Germanic law which governed the regions under Duke William's control as well as much of the rest of Latin Europe, technically precluded

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<sup>12</sup> "The Domesday Book 1086 - Instructions and Extract," Internet History Sourcebooks Project, August 1996, accessed March 14, 2019, <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/source/domesday1.asp>.

<sup>13</sup> Weir, 20.

Eleanor from full dynastic inheritance; a portion of the text of the law states quite succinctly and clearly, “but of Salic land no portion of the inheritance shall come to a woman: but the whole inheritance of the land shall come to the male sex.”<sup>14</sup> However, prior to his death, Duke William made the cunning decision to legally bind his daughter to Louis VI, king of the Franks, a male ruler whose nominal leadership maintained the continuation of Aquitaine under Eleanor’s line. Abbot Suger writes of Duke William, in his *Life of King Louis the Fat*, “that before he went away to die on his journey, he had decided to place in Louis's hands the marriage of his most noble daughter Eleanor, and all his land to be safeguarded.”<sup>15</sup> The king saw no better option for Eleanor’s marriage than to wed her to his own son Louis.<sup>16</sup> In this way, Eleanor found herself married to the prince Louis in 1137. The death of Louis VI soon after the wedding meant Louis VII’s succession to the throne, and made Eleanor queen.<sup>17</sup>

This marriage was highly beneficial politically and economically both to the French royal family and to Eleanor. It cemented the continuation in the family line of the regions of Aquitaine and Poitou. For Louis VII, the acquisition of this land through marriage was no small achievement. Aquitaine and Poitou represented a large portion of modern-day France, an area significantly more sizeable than the small area surrounding Paris which represented the demesne of the kings of the Franks. The rulers of regions throughout France swore fealty to the French

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<sup>14</sup> "The Salic Law," in *Select Historical Documents of the Middle Ages*, ed. Ernest F. Henderson (London: George Bell and Sons, 1910), 176, February 1996, accessed March 2019, <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/source/salic-law.asp>.

<sup>15</sup> Abbot Suger of Saint-Denis, "Abbot Suger: Life of King Louis the Fat," Internet History Sourcebooks, October 1999, accessed March 14, 2019, <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/basis/suger-louisthefat.asp>.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Weir, 26.

king, meaning that the French royal family technically held dominion over all of modern-day France in name, including Aquitaine. In reality, however, the hereditary lands which they directly commanded and benefited from, known as the Île-de-France, were much smaller and not known for either the material wealth or the cultural richness that Aquitaine was.<sup>18</sup> This marriage directly joined the lands of Aquitaine to the king's demesne, greatly expanding the region that the king could claim lordship over.

Besides the practical reasons for the marriage, it seems that Louis was quite personally pleased as well. William of Newburgh, a twelfth century historian, writes in his *Historia de rebus anglicis* ("History of English Affairs") that Eleanor "so completely bewitched the young [Louis]'s affections, by the beauty of her person" that he was quite "strongly attached to his youthful bride."<sup>19</sup> Despite this initial attraction on Louis' part, however, Eleanor may have found her marriage to Louis dull at best; Amy Kelly certainly presents Eleanor's experience this way, saying, "boredom (*accidia*) was one of the seven deadly sins, and the queen had need of absolution....She was bored with dialectic, bored with universals...bored with bishops and with abbés."<sup>20</sup> But the general inactivity comprising much of her marriage to Louis was broken by the excitement of the Second Crusade. Contrary to expectations of a proper queen's behavior, Eleanor insisted on accompanying the crusading party; in fact, legend has it that she inspired support for the crusade by riding about the town of Vézelay dressed as the mythological

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<sup>18</sup> Flori, 26.

<sup>19</sup> William of Newburgh, "Chapter 31: Of the Divorce of the King of France from His Wife, and of Her Marriage with the Future King of England," trans. Joseph Stevenson, in *History of English Affairs*, October 24, 2000, accessed March 2019, <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/basis/williamofnewburgh-one.asp#31>.

<sup>20</sup> Amy R. Kelly, *Eleanor of Aquitaine and the Four Kings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974), 31.

Amazonian queen, though this legend is not reported in the writings of her contemporaries and is therefore most likely a fabrication.<sup>21</sup>

Other rumors of her behavior on crusade hold more credibility, and in particular, she may have engaged in promiscuous extramarital affairs. Most notably, contemporaries suspected an affair between her and her uncle.<sup>22</sup> Whether or not this is true, the general unhappiness that seemingly followed Eleanor throughout her marriage to Louis finally reached its breaking point after fifteen years, and Eleanor boldly acted to end her unsatisfactory marriage. When the French crusader party halted in Antioch, on their crusading pilgrimage to Jerusalem, Eleanor called for an annulment on the grounds that she and Louis were too closely related for the marriage to be canonically legal.<sup>23</sup> Such marriages were prohibited by canon law, and therefore the sacrament of marriage between the pair had, in the eyes of God, never actually taken place and could therefore be dissolved.<sup>24</sup> Louis, appalled by her apparently unfaithful conduct and frustrated by the continued lack of a male heir, approved of this decision to annul their marriage, and the couple made their way back to France, where they separated and Eleanor returned to Poitou.

It seems from her behavior that Eleanor found Louis to be an unsuitable match from a personal standpoint; but a lack of love for one's husband would not necessarily provide enough reason for so serious an act as divorce. There was of course an understanding of and desire for

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<sup>21</sup> Frank McMinn Chambers, "Some Legends Concerning Eleanor of Aquitaine," *Speculum* 16, no. 4 (1941): 460, accessed October 30, 2018, doi:10.2307/2852844.

<sup>22</sup> Weir, 64.

<sup>23</sup> Flori, 53.

<sup>24</sup> See also "Ninth Ecumenical Council: Lateran I 1123," in *Disciplinary Decrees of the General Councils: Text, Translation and Commentary*, trans. H. J. Schroeder (St. Louis, MO: B. Herder, 1937), Canon 5, November 1996, <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/basis/latran1.asp>.

passionate romantic love among all classes at this time—but it was by no means an expectation in noble marriages. The transfer of land (and therefore, power) through marriage, and the politics surrounding this, were strong forces which had absolute control over the formulation of these kinships. Familial ties of the higher order were based primarily on landownership and not much else. Thus, the ultimate failure of Eleanor and Louis' marriage stems less from the fact that it was a loveless contract prescribed by their parents, which was true of many noble marriages at the time, but even more so from the thorough *political* incompatibility of the couple from Eleanor's eyes—and more possibly, from Eleanor's prior recognition of Henry of Anjou as a superior political and personal match.

Modern biographers seem reluctant to propose that Eleanor's main reasons for leaving Louis included plans to pursue Henry; Amy Kelly, for example, insists that Eleanor's desire for annulment was mainly due to her personal discontent: "life seemed stifled in Paris, quenched in winter desolation...her years of grace fleeing away, while she remained a king's hostage."<sup>25</sup> William of Newburgh, however, very clearly states his opinion that Eleanor's decision had more to do with her attraction to Henry, by all accounts a somewhat attractive and charismatic man, than it had to do with her possible distaste for Louis: "during her union with the king of France, she aspired to a marriage with the duke of Normandy, as more congenial to her feelings; and that, in consequence, she had wished for, and procured a divorce."<sup>26</sup> Eleanor had not only met Henry previously, but according to William of Newburgh, had decided that she would find Henry a much more personally agreeable husband.

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<sup>25</sup> Kelly, *Eleanor of Aquitaine and the Four Kings*, 74.

<sup>26</sup> William of Newburgh, *History of English Affairs*.

Clearly Eleanor may have preferred a marriage to Henry on personal grounds, but there were assuredly political motivations as well, and these should not be considered secondary. Aside from the immediacy of the need for Eleanor to marry upon her father's death, in order to retain her lands with her new husband as lord, Eleanor had not gained much from her marriage to Louis besides the title of queen. The lands which Louis brought to the marriage were almost inconsequential compared to hers, and besides which, his failure in leading the Franks on the Second Crusade left him "branded with the ignominy of not having accomplished his design."<sup>27</sup> However, even with political as well as personal reasons to leave her husband, it is unlikely that Eleanor would have annulled her marriage with Louis with the intention of staying unmarried. The world was an unfriendly place to single women of her caliber, as would be revealed to her even in the short time that passed between her marriages. Thus the consideration of Henry as a better match likely played a significant role in her choice.

The personal discontent between Eleanor and Louis was likely not a strong enough factor to be the central reason for such a serious action as annulment; nevertheless, it is interesting to examine the intimate personal motives that may have come into play, specifically with regards to sexuality. Indeed, contemporary and modern historians alike emphasize the personal—and specifically sexual—incompatibility of the individuals as a source of their eventual divorce. Eleanor was apparently a highly spirited person, with a sexual appetite that Louis appears to have lacked. Gerald of Wales emphasizes in his *De instructione principis* that "how queen Eleanor had conducted herself," with regards to her sexual nature, was "a matter of sufficient notoriety."<sup>28</sup> Alison Weir suggests in her biography of Eleanor that physical relations between

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<sup>27</sup>William of Newburgh, *History of English Affairs*.

<sup>28</sup> Gerald of Wales, "Gerald of Wales: The Death of Henry II and Comments on the Angevin Family, from *De Instructione Principis* (On the Instruction of a Prince)," in *The Church*

Eleanor and Louis were quite irregular; at one point during the marriage, “having learned that sexual relations between the couple had ceased,” the Pope Eugenius III intervened in order to facilitate sex between them.<sup>29</sup> Louis’ general lack of sexual interest is evidenced not only in his marriage to Eleanor, but within his second marriage as well. Gerald of Wales writes that Louis VII at one point suffered from a potentially fatal illness, which doctors decided was a result of “his prolonged continence and the deprivation from sex;” and in the absence of the queen, it was decided that Louis should be provided with “some girl” to relieve him of his ailment. Louis refused, despite the assurances of the bishop and other clergy that, as it was his only hope of a cure, it would not be punished as sin.<sup>30</sup> This “praiseworthy continence”<sup>31</sup> of Louis’ seems therefore to have applied to his marriage to Eleanor as well as his second marriage; according to William of Newburgh, at one point Eleanor “asserted that she had married a monk, and not a monarch.”<sup>32</sup> One may assume that this lack of sexuality was unsuited to Eleanor herself, as a woman described as spirited or downright promiscuous by contemporaries.

In many ways, Eleanor’s divorce from Louis VII in 1152 was a notable decision which demonstrated Eleanor’s ability to eschew tradition and carve her own path. Their divorce was enacted by Eleanor’s own request, and not by Louis, though it required his approval to be

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*Historians of England*, trans. Joseph Stevenson, 1st ed., vol. V (London: Seeley's, 1863), accessed February 2019, <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/source/geraldwales-dip1.asp>.

<sup>29</sup> Weir, 71.

<sup>30</sup> Gerald of Wales, "The Praiseworthy Continence of Louis VII of France," in *De Instructione Principis*, trans. J.J. O'Hagen (Leiden: Brill, 1979), April 1996, accessed February 2019, <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/source/hyams-louisvii.asp>.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> William of Newburgh, *History of English Affairs*.

authorized.<sup>33</sup> Nevertheless, having declared a divorce from her husband, she received back her lands in her own name and not her husband's. The divorce also freed her from her marriage to Louis VII, and enabled her to choose her next suitor, a choice that was not afforded to her when she was fifteen and married off to Louis. For the first time she was fully Duchess of Aquitaine, with no husband maintaining nominal control over the lands for her. Few women at the time had the directness of power which Eleanor now had over her duchy, and the duchy which she controlled was no small one.

As a now single woman with a vast estate, Eleanor was once again a highly desirable woman, with access to land and power. Now, however, she was her own mistress, a grown woman with no father or higher ranking relatives to arrange a marriage for her. In an age in which marriages arranged for political and economical benefit were the norm in noble families, Eleanor had taken control of her own narrative by arranging her divorce; the fact that she was then able to choose a new husband for herself, keeping in mind her own political interests and exercising her knowledge of the dealings of the world in which she lived, is an even more substantial way in which Eleanor managed to control her own fate.

One cannot access Eleanor's mind adequately enough to definitively say whether it was the complete failure of her marriage that influenced her to seek a divorce, or if it was a desire to control her own lands, or merely because she saw that a marriage to Henry of Anjou would be more successful—the two may have even secretly arranged plans to marry once she left Louis.<sup>34</sup> To say that her incompatibility with Louis, and their failure as a couple on personal grounds, was completely responsible for their annulment would be a misguided assumption inspired by

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<sup>33</sup> Weir, 86.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.



modern-day understandings of marriage and divorce. The anachronistic idea of a loveless or dispassionate marriage as a failure does not apply here, as such marriages were common among nobility, and a disinterested marital union was no cause for concern. But perhaps the political failure of her marriage, as well as the personal, drove her to the thought of annulment. Eleanor's marriage to Louis resulted in no male heirs, a disastrous crusade, and the gain of little in the way of resources when her own lands were already so plentiful on their own.

Regardless of her reasons, Eleanor returned to Poitiers, the site of her main court, after the annulment of her marriage. As a newly single woman, Eleanor was a highly desirable marriage prospect, since a marriage to her came with her vast inheritance. As a result, she found herself in some danger on this trip; she narrowly evaded becoming the victim of kidnapping two times along the road to Poitiers.<sup>35</sup> These attempts to abduct Eleanor demonstrate the lengths to which suitors would go in order to secure her inheritance as their own land through the contract of marriage. Luckily, Eleanor did not fall victim to these abductions, and sent for her newly chosen husband as soon as she arrived in court.<sup>36</sup> Despite whatever autonomy her divorce afforded her, she could not remain unmarried for long.

Consideration of the thought that Eleanor's divorce was influenced by her desire to take control of her own lands leads to a very interesting line of questioning. There is some evidence to suggest that Eleanor would have been perfectly content to occupy her lands as a single ruler. Weir writes that "Eleanor also underlined her autonomy by annulling all acts and decrees made by Louis in Aquitaine, and by issuing charters in her own name and renewing grants and

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<sup>35</sup> Kelly, *Eleanor of Aquitaine and the Four Kings*, 80-81.

<sup>36</sup> Weir, 89.

privileges.”<sup>37</sup> In this brief period of totally independent rule, Eleanor established that she was quite capable of ruling, and even eager to do so. It seems that remarrying was still a better course of action for her, despite whatever enjoyment of autonomous rule she may have had; besides this, she did seemingly manage to enjoy some of that direct control over Aquitaine and Poitou later in her life, when her time as Queen Consort had ended and her favorite son Richard had been replaced by her youngest son John.<sup>38</sup> Remarriage may have been a matter of convention, or an easier choice to make than to stay a single, wealthy, and attractive woman in a world dominated by male rulers. Though she may have forgone her desire to rule independently in order to marry again, we can still happily speculate that she did enjoy this same autonomous rule to some extent once again when she was older.

Soon after arriving safely in Poitiers, Eleanor sent for her chosen second husband, the previously mentioned handsome young Henry of Anjou, and married him in a small ceremony in May of 1152.<sup>39</sup> Ten years younger than Eleanor, Henry was the great-grandson of the Norman who, in 1066, famously invaded the Kingdom of England to become King William I the Conqueror. Almost a century later, William the Conqueror’s great-grandson was not yet king of England, but the marriage immediately united Eleanor’s lands with Henry’s duchies of Normandy and Anjou, creating a territory that included a vast portion of France. The unification of these lands through the sacrament of marriage placed the couple as two of the most powerful

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<sup>37</sup> Weir, 89.

<sup>38</sup> H. G. Richardson, "The Letters and Charters of Eleanor of Aquitaine," *The English Historical Review* LXXIV, no. 291 (1959): 206, accessed September 28, 2018, doi:10.1093/ehr/lxxiv.291.193.

<sup>39</sup> Weir, 90.

rulers in Europe, despite the fact that Henry was only nineteen years old.<sup>40</sup> As a result of his high birth, in 1154, two years after their marriage, Henry took control of England and was crowned King Henry II to great acclaim.<sup>41</sup> Thus began the rule of the House of Plantagenet in England.

The unification of Henry's lands in Normandy with the newly inherited England, and the lands of Aquitaine and Poitou that Eleanor had brought to the marriage, created the expansive Angevin Empire. This empire stretched from England, through Normandy, and down to the Pyrenees on the southern border of Aquitaine. The area essentially represented all of Britain and half of modern-day France. From the flocks of sheep spanning the English countryside, to the loyal and wealthy Normans across the Channel, down to the balmy vineyards of the French southwest, the new English king and queen had plentiful resources at their disposal. It was quite a large territory to hold dominion over, and at Henry's side, Eleanor was queen of the whole. In choosing her second husband, she had done quite well.

As for Eleanor's private life (to the extent that the inherently public joining of two powerful noble families could ever be considered private in this period), her second marriage was also more successful than the first. It is hard to say whether more love existed between Eleanor and Henry than in her union with Louis, and it is just as hard to say whether Eleanor expected or even desired such love. Simply put, romantic affection occupied almost no space in the considerations of medieval noble marital arrangements. But Eleanor seemed to gain from her second marriage what her first lacked; at any rate, the political and economic gains, added to the apparent physical compatibility of the couple, meant that Eleanor stayed with Henry long enough to fulfill what could be considered her most important duty as queen: the birth of an heir. Henry

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 91.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 103.

and Eleanor had eight children together, including several male heirs who went on to become kings of England. Her sexual appetite was matched, if not exceeded, by his. Weir emphasizes that Eleanor and Henry “were both strong, dynamic characters with forceful personalities...and both had a strong sex drive.”<sup>42</sup> Throughout their marriage, Henry engaged in several extramarital affairs.<sup>43</sup> The most famous of his mistresses, Rosamund Clifford, was considered Henry’s great and passionate love.<sup>44</sup> Nevertheless, Henry was also able to fulfill his duty to Eleanor in the marital bed, besides which the creation of familial ties between them consolidated a great deal of political power. This was certainly a measure of improvement from Louis, in whom she had almost no real interest sexually or otherwise.

Whatever love or lust may have existed between Eleanor and Henry was certainly finite, as she eventually separated from him after roughly sixteen years of marriage. This separation, however, was notably different from her first with Louis VII. There is little indication that Eleanor cared to intervene in Louis’ life or politics after their divorce. She ceased to be a part of the French royal family and the political system in which she had participated for so many years, seemingly without a backward glance. Marie and Alix, her two daughters by Louis, were apparently entirely estranged from their mother following the divorce.<sup>45</sup> This estrangement should not be seen as cruel; Louis retained custody as the father, and Eleanor’s feelings for her children were likely detached enough to begin with that a steady continuing relationship, in a time when travel and correspondence were no small endeavor, was unlikely. The medieval sense

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<sup>42</sup> Weir, 92.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 83-84.

<sup>44</sup> Kelly, *Eleanor of Aquitaine and the Four Kings*, 151.

<sup>45</sup> Flori, 248.

of childhood, especially for women of the higher class, was different. Child mortality rates were high, besides which a woman of such high status would not be heavily involved with the rearing of her children; for example, it was uncommon for upper-class women to nurse their children themselves, tending instead to hire wet nurses for their infants.<sup>46</sup> Thus, Eleanor's lack of interaction with the family she left behind is not entirely strange. It does, however, put the end of her second marriage in an interesting light. Eleanor separated from Henry around 1168, but the two consistently interacted with each other until his death; one of these crucial interactions is the incident in 1173 wherein Eleanor encouraged her sons to revolt against their father, likely desiring her beloved sons (particularly Richard, her favorite) to benefit from these lands instead of a husband for whom she harbored some degree of resentment.<sup>47</sup> The exact source of their separation and her resentment towards Henry is unclear, but one may speculate that it had something to do with his passionate affair with Rosamund, or perhaps the widely publicized murder of Thomas Becket, which tainted his reputation.

While Eleanor's personal reasons for instigating this revolt remain unknown, the event constitutes one of the most significant ways in which Eleanor participated in and interfered with English politics, even after her marriage with Henry had effectively ended. Rebellions of sons against fathers had happened before, and were a familiar concept; the rebellion of a wife against her husband, however, was absolutely unprecedented.<sup>48</sup> The shocking nature of Eleanor's actions as a woman may explain why Henry, who forgave his seditious sons, imprisoned his wife for

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<sup>46</sup> "Marriage, Family, and Children," in *Medieval Italy: Texts in Translation*, ed. Katherine L. Jansen, Joanna Drell, and Frances Andrews (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 444.

<sup>47</sup> Flori, 100.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 102-103.

encouraging their deeds.<sup>49</sup> The strictness of Eleanor's captivity lessened gradually as her husband aged,<sup>50</sup> but she nevertheless remained a prisoner while her husband, and his memory of her actions, lived.

When Henry died in 1189, Eleanor jumped straight back into politics alongside her son Richard, now king. While he was away on the Third Crusade for the majority of the time from when he was crowned until his death, Eleanor ruled in his stead, especially during a period in which he was held in captivity.<sup>51</sup> Some of Eleanor's most moving, personal letters come from this period, in correspondence with Pope Celestine III, as she urged the pope to intervene on the German king's confinement of Richard. The strength of Eleanor's emotion regarding the treatment of her son comes across clearly: Eleanor writes,

Pitiful and pitied by no one, why have I come to the ignominy of this detestable old age, who was ruler of two kingdoms, mother of two kings? My guts are torn from me, my family is carried off and removed from me. . . . Two sons remain to my solace, who today survive to punish me, miserable and condemned. King Richard is held in chains.<sup>52</sup>

She later continues, "Why do I survive? Why do I, wretched, delay and not go to see the one whom my soul loves, conquered by poverty and iron? How could a mother forget the son of her womb for so long?"<sup>53</sup> These letters function as written affairs of state, at the same time reminding the reader that the politics of the state and the emotions of the family were essentially

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<sup>49</sup> Flori, 118.

<sup>50</sup> Richardson, 198.

<sup>51</sup> Richardson, 201.

<sup>52</sup> "A Letter from Eleanor of Aquitaine (1193)," *Epistolae: Medieval Women's Letters*, accessed December 16, 2018, <https://epistolae.ctl.columbia.edu/letter/141.html>.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

inseparable in this period, as kinship, whether through birth or marriage, was inherently linked to political power. In short, Eleanor left her second husband in 1168, but by no means did she ever leave the family or the state. While at the end of her relationship with Louis, she saw no reason to linger within a situation that did her little service, her ties of kinship with Henry meanwhile were a source of immense power and wealth which she stubbornly held on to. It was this authority, and not any romantic sensibility of the meaning of marriage, that shaped her creation of links in kinship with these men.

Eleanor's involvement with the tradition of courtly love suggests that she was by no means unfamiliar with the concept of fervent romantic love; and as her letters to Celestine regarding Richard show, she was certainly not devoid of passionate emotions. That said, during her lifetime she entered not one, but two marriages which ended in separation, with the main goal of each being the accumulation of land. The twelfth century was by no means an unromantic time, but Eleanor had more pressing matters to concern herself with than romance. Her exceptional agency as a woman in leaving one husband and political situation which did not favor her, for one that suited her much more, cannot be denied. It may be suggested that Eleanor merely went from one disappointing marriage to another. However, in truth, her insistence on a divorce from Louis and her subsequent pursuit of a more suitable husband, according to her own terms and desires, is nothing short of extraordinary.

As commendable as Eleanor's strong political decisions are from a modern standpoint, the actions of this bold and powerful woman resulted in much gossip from her scandalized contemporaries. Such rumors are subject to skepticism and to extensive scholarly debate, but for our purposes they can at the same time be considered part of Eleanor's history, though they may be entirely false. These tales often focused on her sexual exploits: as mentioned above, she

reportedly engaged in an extramarital affair with her uncle Raymond. Besides him, she also had a passionate affair with Saladin, the great Muslim leader and antihero of the later Third Crusade, with whom she intended to elope.<sup>54</sup> This very same Saladin is confirmed to have been about twelve years old at the time.<sup>55</sup> Thus, this particular legendary romance is almost certainly a fabrication. More believably, Eleanor may have had sexual relations with Count Geoffrey of Anjou, Henry's father. Gerald of Wales reports, "Geoffrey, earl of Anjou, when seneschal of France, had carnally known queen Eleanor;...he frequently forewarned his son Henry, cautioning and forbidding him in any wise to touch her... because she had been known by his own father."<sup>56</sup> The strong general bias against Henry and Eleanor in Gerald's work leads many historians to dispute the extent to which he can be believed in this matter; but, unlike Eleanor's affair with Saladin, it is certainly possible.

Yet another legend about Eleanor, this time not about her sexual encounters, is recorded to history only by Gervase of Canterbury. This chronicler states that Eleanor, following her sons' failed revolt against Henry, fled with her sons to Paris disguised as a man.<sup>57</sup> Though this incidence of cross-dressing only appears in this one source, it nevertheless provides an interesting interpretation of Eleanor's exercise of power in this attempted revolt. Here, her pursuit of male-coded power is indicated upon her physical form through her male clothing. This legend, especially if it is a fabrication, gives the suggestion of Eleanor and the power she wielded as being viewed with quasi-masculine qualities. In this way, this legend tells us something about

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<sup>54</sup> Chambers, 460.

<sup>55</sup> Flori, 5.

<sup>56</sup> Gerald of Wales, "Comments on the Angevin Family."

<sup>57</sup> Turner, 34.



how the figure of Eleanor was interpreted by those who wrote about her, as do the rumors of her extensive promiscuity. They are as meaningful in the study of Eleanor's life as any other accounts that have been factually confirmed. That Eleanor was an extraordinary woman is shown in many of the events of her life; if anything, the gossip and legends about her show even more clearly how much her character astonished, appalled, and inspired.

## Chapter 2: Literary and Political Framework of Courtly Love

One of the most important cultural developments of twelfth century Europe was the development of plentiful literature revolving around a tradition that has come to be called “courtly love.” This term refers not to a genre, but rather a medieval storytelling trope which spanned multiple interrelated genres, including troubadour songs and epic chivalric poems. Many of the most famous medieval works still known today fall under the category of courtly love, including Comtessa Beatriz de Dia’s love song, “*A chantar m'er de so qu'eu no volria* (I must sing a song I would rather not),” as well as longer poetic works such as Chrétien de Troyes’ *Lancelot, the Knight of the Cart* and other works in the canon of King Arthur. In fact, the term “courtly love,” or *amour courtois*, was coined in the late nineteenth century in articles on Chrétien de Troyes’ work.<sup>58</sup> Though the term was invented in the modern age, medieval writers of courtly love literature were nevertheless self-consciously aware of the themes subsumed under this term, and constantly built upon and adjusted them to their own needs.

Aquitaine is credited as the birthplace of courtly love, and this romantic tradition’s first iteration came in the form of the poetry of Duke William (or Guilhem) IX of Aquitaine, the first known troubadour. Troubadours, popular musical poets residing mainly in southern France in the later Middle Ages, penned love ballads to be performed to musical accompaniment. Essentially all troubadours incorporated some element of courtly love in their ballads. William’s “*Molt jauzions mi prenc en amar*,” or “Very happily I begin to love,” provides an apt example of some qualities found in courtly love literature:

*Sim vol midons s'amor donar,  
Pres soi del penr'e del grazir  
E del celar e del blandir*

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<sup>58</sup> Jennifer G. Wollock, *Rethinking Chivalry and Courtly Love* (Santa Barbara (CA): Praeger, 2011), 31.

*E de sos plazer dir e far  
E de son pretz tener en car  
E de son laus enavantir.*

“If my lady wants to grant me her love,/I am ready to receive it and to reciprocate/I am ready to discretion and cajoling/and to say and do what she pleases,/and to keep her worth into account/and to further her reputation.”<sup>59</sup> The verse shows the speaker’s utter dedication to fulfilling the desires of his chosen lady love, as well as his crucial commitment to upholding her honor, both to others and to himself. These are themes which appear countless times in romantic works of this sort, conveying a sense of elegance and duty within the medieval expression of love.

It seems that Eleanor was almost fated to have a life intertwined with the culture and expressions of courtly love. Not only did the tradition take root in her home duchy of Aquitaine, with the troubadours who sang so effectively on love, but the troubadour William IX was in fact her grandfather. In addition to these connections, her involvement in this flourishing cultural establishment extended far beyond a genealogical connection or geographical proximity. To understand the implications of Eleanor’s patronage of this cultural institution, we must address the intricacies of the term “courtly love” and the corresponding medieval romantic works under this expression.

Considering the multiple genres of literature dealing with courtly love, and the immense popularity of the subject, it is difficult to succinctly sum up every characteristic of the trope. However, the patterns often appearing in courtly love poems and stories are likely familiar to the modern reader, as they would have been to medieval ones. Courtly love stories and poems are

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<sup>59</sup> Guilhen De Peiteu, "Guilhen De Peiteu: Vers 9," Trobar.org, lines 37-42, accessed November 17, 2018, [http://www.trobar.org/troubadours/coms\\_de\\_peiteu/guilhen\\_de\\_peiteu\\_09.php](http://www.trobar.org/troubadours/coms_de_peiteu/guilhen_de_peiteu_09.php).

accounts of nobility, as the word “courtly” might suggest, but in these tales a character’s nobility is often demonstrated not through heritage but rather through actions over the course of the adventure. Characteristics such as bravery and loyalty—in essence, chivalry—establish the worthiness of the individual, rather than the presumed wealth and heritage. Within the tale, the individuals who prove their worthiness typically include a lovelorn knight and his love object, a highborn and often married lady for whom he pines day and night. The first stage of the romance shows the knight falling in love with his lady: there is much yearning, and plentiful description of his suffering as he wonders if she will return his love. The violence of the emotion is often quite striking. In *Lancelot, the Knight of the Cart*, Lancelot’s love pangs for Queen Guinevere are described with the imagery of physical wounds:

Love kept scratching open  
 The wounds he’d suffered for Love.  
 He’d never bothered to bandage them  
 Over, or tried to heal them:  
 From the moment he’d felt the blow  
 And known he was hurt, he’d never  
 Longed for relief or sought  
 To be cured but, grateful, hungered  
 For his pain.<sup>60</sup>

Despite the strength of Lancelot’s longing, the thought of giving up his love or attempting to ignore it is impossible; he craves the suffering, and the intensity of even the negative emotion is portrayed as more desirable than indifference. Similarly, Marie of France’s hero in the Breton lay “Guigemar” imagines that he is dying from the pain; he tells his love, “I am dying because of you; my heart is giving me great pain. If you are not willing to cure me, then it must all end in

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<sup>60</sup> Chrétien de Troyes, *Lancelot: The Knight of the Cart*, trans. Burton Raffel, ed. Joseph J. Duggan (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), lines 1341-1349.

my death. I am asking for your love. Fair one, do not refuse me.”<sup>61</sup> Generally speaking, the hero’s feelings of love in these stories is all-consuming and unbridled, and the pain it causes makes way for equally unbridled happiness when the lady admits her feelings as well.

After this, there typically follows a sequence wherein the knight proves his devotion to his lady by undertaking some sort of risky quest for her favor. The adventure narrative establishes not only the lengths to which the knight is willing to go to serve his lady, but also the character traits (including bravery, honesty, etc.) which make him a worthy chivalric hero. In this way, courtly love cannot be considered completely distinct from other medieval literary traditions such as the chivalric convention; within this medieval literature, such concepts were heavily intertwined. A chivalric element is apparent in many tales of courtly love, as the strength of the love is often demonstrated by the lovers’ dedication to each other, and the actions they will take for their love. As Andreas Capellanus explains in his late-twelfth century treatise, *The Art of Courtly Love*, “Every attempt of a lover tends toward the enjoyment of the embraces of her whom he loves; he thinks about it continually, for he hopes that with her he may fulfill all the mandates of love.”<sup>62</sup> Essentially, within these stories, love makes lovers do crazy things. The harp-wielding hero of the anonymously written poem “Sir Orfeo” traverses the wilderness for years, ultimately achieving a miraculous entrance into the terrifying fairy kingdom to recover his beloved Dame Heurodis;<sup>63</sup> Chrétien de Troyes’ Lancelot engages in bloody battle again and

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<sup>61</sup> Marie de France, *The Lais of Marie de France*, trans. Keith Busby and Glyn S. Burgess (London: Penguin Books, 1999), 49-50.

<sup>62</sup> Andreas Capellanus, *The Art of Courtly Love*, trans. John Jay Parry (New York: Norton, 1969), 30.

<sup>63</sup> See "Sir Orfeo." In *Norton Critical Edition Middle English Romances*, edited by Stephen H. A. Shepherd, 174-90. W. W. Norton and Company, 1995.

again, fighting valiantly in the hope of winning Queen Guinevere's favor. While courtly love literature expresses the sadness of unrequited love through words, showing the lover's musings on their uninhibited pain, the passion of requited love is perhaps even stronger. It can only truly be demonstrated by narrative deeds: the author shows the lover's passion by making him "exert [himself] to do deeds which are considered worthy of the rewards."<sup>64</sup>

Of course, the narrative element in these tales is especially variable, and examples of courtly love stories which contradict the general formula show how writers of courtly love, similarly to modern romance writers, enjoyed continually playing with the typical blueprint in order to expand, develop, and contradict readers' expectations. In Marie de France's lay "Lanval," the titular knight exposes his flawed nature through his inability to follow his lady's orders, and almost loses everything as a result: "He had returned to his lodgings, well aware of having lost his beloved.... He cursed his heart and his mouth and it was a wonder he did not kill himself."<sup>65</sup> Not only does Lanval lose his beloved, but he is forced by the king to appear in a court that is likely to doom him. Despite his substantial despair in this moment, Lanval's story ends happily, though not through any of his own doing—his lady inexplicably seems to forgive his blunder, and reappears at the end of the tale to save him from the king's punishment. This is a slight disturbance of the formula considered typical for courtly love. Rather than winning the lady's love with his worthiness, the knight reveals his unworthiness in his error, but still somehow manages to regain his love. Not only that, but the happy ending is the result of the woman's decision, and hers alone—although the reasons and the thought process leading to this decision are not divulged to the reader.

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<sup>64</sup> Capellanus, 40.

<sup>65</sup> Marie de France, 77.

Another notable feature of courtly love literature is that it often involves extramarital affairs. The concept of true love was not confined to married couples; in fact, it was frequently only outside of a marriage that these characters could find love. “Guigemar” tells the tale of a “noble, courtly, beautiful and wise” woman, whose elderly husband “was exceedingly jealous, as befitted his nature, for all old men are jealous and hate to be cuckolded.”<sup>66</sup> Her overbearing lord keeps her locked in a tower, and her opportunity to escape to achieve happiness comes when her love for the knight Guigemar semi-fantastically sets her free from her husband. Another lay set down by Marie de France, “Eliduc,” concerns a couple who do experience love within their marriage: “there was no man so valiant in the land. His wife was noble and wise, of good family and high-born. They lived together for a long time and loved each other with great loyalty.”<sup>67</sup> Despite their happy marriage, later in the story the husband falls passionately in love with another woman. Here the reader witnesses that even a happy and loyal marriage is still subject to collapse through the appeal of adulterous but true love.

These patterns, and many others, constitute the world of courtly love. In a sense, Eleanor was born into this world, just as it began to take shape. Throughout her life, Eleanor showed a clear fondness for the subject matter. Andreas Capellanus writes of Eleanor’s “Courts of Love,” which took real-world cases of lovers’ disputes and passed judgment on them based on the principles of courtly love. Capellanus is the only source of the existence of these courts, besides which the assertion that Eleanor ran them alongside her daughter Marie makes them doubly suspect, as there is no indication that Eleanor and Marie kept in contact after Eleanor’s divorce. Despite the questionable nature of the evidence supplied by the single source of Capellanus, the

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 111.

“Courts of Love” have become a crucial part of the legend of Eleanor, treated as factual history by historians such as Amy Kelly, who wrote that the courts “transformed the gross and cynical pagan doctrines of Ovid to something more ideal, the woman's canon, the chivalric code of manners.”<sup>68</sup> Notwithstanding the focus on these courts taken by some historians, the existence of only one contemporary source on them—and this being a highly literary, rather than historiographical, source—seems to indicate that they are essentially fictitious. However, this fabrication of Capellanus’ is no less fascinating simply because it is fiction. If anything, Capellanus’ creation of a judicial entity that reworked the concepts of courtly love into society, with Eleanor at its head, suggests the depth of the association contemporaries had between Eleanor and the cultural advent of courtly love. One can perhaps interpret Capellanus’ invention of the Courts of Love as a sort of allegorical explication of Eleanor’s involvement in the cultural and social legacy of courtly love literature. In any case, Capellanus’ anecdotes of these Courts can be added to the list of other such dubious reports and rumors that constitute her fascinating legend.

Eleanor’s factual attention to courtly love can be shown in her patronage of troubadours such as Bernard de Ventadorn. In patronizing such poets, Eleanor herself became the subject of this love poetry, an example of which is Bernard’s “Lancan Vei Per Mei La Landa,” which concludes with these lines:

If the English king and the Norman duke wish it, I shall see her before the winter takes us by surprise. By grace of the king I am English, and Norman, and if it were not for My Magnet, I would remain here until after Christmas.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Amy Kelly, "Eleanor of Aquitaine and Her Courts of Love," *Speculum* 12, no. 1 (January 1937): 13, accessed October 30, 2018, doi:10.2307/2848658.

<sup>69</sup> Bernard de Ventadorn, "Lancan Vei Per Mei La Landa," in *Bernard De Ventadorn: Poems*, Classic Poetry Series (Poemhunter.com), 18, 2012, accessed January 2019, [https://www.poemhunter.com/i/ebooks/pdf/bernard\\_de\\_ventadorn\\_2012\\_7.pdf](https://www.poemhunter.com/i/ebooks/pdf/bernard_de_ventadorn_2012_7.pdf).



The king-duke to which Bernard refers here is King Henry II of England, who remained Duke of Normandy after becoming the English king. Bernard's "magnet" is therefore Eleanor. The metaphor of Eleanor as his magnet expresses the sense of essential longing and desire to be around a loved one that is often a facet of courtly love, similarly to Lancelot's longing just to be near Guinevere. Here in Bernard's poem, however, the object of this longing is not a fictional character, as in other works previously mentioned, but a real-life political figure with whom Bernard had a personal relationship.

Unsurprisingly, there were rumors of an extramarital affair between Eleanor and Bernard. But it is not entirely clear within this poem whether Bernard's reverence and dutiful feelings for Eleanor are romantic in nature, or if they constitute a feudally inspired regard for a sociopolitical superior. Their relationship, as presented in the poem, is certainly not merely sexual in nature. Bernard expresses a desire to see Eleanor undress, but not in an inherently erotic sense: "She would do a wrong if she did not invite me to come to the place where she undresses, so that I may be at her command...and I would take off her graceful slippers."<sup>70</sup> In this excerpt, Bernard's goal in finding intimacy with his lady is not to engage in sexual intercourse, but simply to remove Eleanor's shoes, reminiscent of the role of a handmaiden. The enticement is not sex, but simply physical proximity to his fair lady in her most intimate state, creating a deeper emotional significance in his service to her. This passionate need to fulfill one's duty, divided as it is from eroticism, is reminiscent of the devotion that can be found in the idealized version of the lord-vassal relationship. Roger Boase writes, in his *Origin and Meaning of Courtly Love*, that it was "the feudal relationship between vassal and overlord which provided

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

the lover with a model for his humble and servile conduct.”<sup>71</sup> In fact, this poem’s conflation of the feudal duty with the romantic is present in many courtly love tales, in which the noble lady is often higher-born than the man who loves her, and therefore his actions in service of her will are both romantic and quasi-patriotic.

The trope of a dutiful lover, absolutely devoted to serving his noble lady’s will, would obviously have appealed strongly to aristocratic female readership at the time. More often than not, young women of the noble classes—Eleanor included—married for status and politics rather than any form of love. Courtly love romances almost encouraged the idea that ladies might never find such deep, passionate love within the marital bond. In reading courtly love literature, a woman might find comfort in the idea that there was still love to be found outside of marriage, and that this was morally acceptable, and could even be a blissfully fulfilling experience. In fact, Andreas Capellanus goes so far as to assert that it is “firmly established that love cannot exert its powers between two people who are married to each other.”<sup>72</sup> Romantic love was not just improbable, but *impossible* within a marriage, at least according to Capellanus. Therefore, if a noblewoman’s heart strayed from her marriage, and she found herself experiencing romantic feelings for a man other than her husband, all this was natural and blameless. The understanding in medieval society of the existence of strong romantic love was reconciled with the extremely common practice of loveless political marriages through the narratives of courtly love literature.

The feudal tone of the power given to the female body in much of courtly love literature can be seen as an indication of the appeal to such noble ladies, as well as being perhaps linked to

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<sup>71</sup> Roger Boase, *The Origin and Meaning of Courtly Love: A Critical Study of European Scholarship* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1977), 35.

<sup>72</sup> Capellanus, 106.

the direct involvement of highborn women such as Eleanor in the development of the tradition. The empowerment of the female body is often seen in many poems, very similarly to Bernard's desire to remove the shoes from Eleanor's feet. These tales often contain scenes of physical closeness and intimacy that often verge on the erotic, but rarely are explicitly sexual. To return to the example of *Lancelot*, the knight's return to court after questing leads to great joy for him and the queen:

Was the queen there to share [the celebration]?  
Indeed she was, most of all.  
And how? My God, where else  
Would she be? Had she ever been happier  
Than his coming made her? Could she keep  
Herself from running to greet him?<sup>73</sup>

The nearness to each other alone brings them unparalleled joy, though their relationship remains unconsummated. Wollock describes the tendency of such narratives towards a plot wherein "the lover adores a distant, ideal, or unattainable object."<sup>74</sup> The unattainability of this love object is often due to her higher social rank, as well as her marital status.<sup>75</sup> For these reasons, their love remains physically unsatisfied, an eternally unconsummated yearning.

Yet this inability to satisfy physical intimacy does not necessarily present a problem, frustrating though it may be for the lovers. Frustration and lack of sexual fulfillment leads to "sublimation" of the lower-born lover, as he "improves his conduct and his character by contemplating his lady's moral and physical excellence."<sup>76</sup> The fact that the sexual act cannot be fulfilled leads to the constant consideration of the lady's body and its nobility, therefore enabling

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<sup>73</sup> Chrétien de Troyes, lines 6829-6834.

<sup>74</sup> Wollock, 39.

<sup>75</sup> Boase, 83.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

the lover himself to elevate in character and nobility. The desire and yearning that many chivalric heroes show for their noble ladies is a desire for bodily proximity; physical intimacy here acts as a part of performance of political allegiance. If the lack of explicit sexual content in the courtly romances seems unrealistic from the understanding of modern romance, it is because it is: the nobility of the body, rather than the sexuality of it, is one of the main differences between a medieval understanding of literary romance and a modern one. In medieval romances the sensual and corporeal are almost inherently linked with a sense of feudal, chivalric, or proto-patriotic devotion to nobility. Courtly love reflects feudal understandings of power and prestige, specifically linked to women; and this concept is interrelated with courtly love literature's desire for and obsession with close physical proximity, without sexual gratification as the final goal.

With this frame in mind, it is entirely possible that Eleanor's thorough involvement with this twelfth century literary trend had an emotional depth beyond her hereditary and geographical connections to it. At fifteen, Eleanor became subject to one of these utterly impassionate political marriages; years later, after freeing herself from the first, she entered another marriage. This second one, though potentially more fulfilling than the first, was still mainly inspired by practical motives. One may be able to infer that the depth of Eleanor's patronage of this tradition may have been driven in part by a resemblance she saw between herself and the heroines of such stories. However, there is little proof, besides this contextual frame, that Eleanor's great interest in romance literature stemmed at all from a personal desire for such passion; she may well have had interest enough simply from the fact that her grandfather was one such courtly lover. But even William IX's poems were said to have been inspired by his most impassioned love affair, with a woman called *Dangerosa*, whose romantic involvement with the Duke was quite public.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Weir, 12-13.

The popularity of romances must stem from a personal interest of some sort; for some it was perhaps a reflection of emotions they themselves had, while for others it may have been a wish fulfillment, a means of experiencing a love they perhaps never would. Eleanor was no prude—whether any of her rumored love affairs bear truth, the fact alone that such rumors existed indicates a perception of her as a woman somewhat against the norm, with the ability for such passions that seem never to have been fully accomplished by her husbands. Patronage of the tradition of courtly love may in this way be seen as representing an exertion of her power to access such romantic love, even within politically motivated marriages.

### Chapter 3: Power of the Body in Literature, Life, and Legends

The non-sexual adoration of the body in courtly love poetry, and the political practice of itinerant courts, like the one that Eleanor grew up in, are two ideas united in one concept: the body as the source of social power. One was a literary examination of the body's power in society, while the other was a practical application of the body as a means to establishing political power. The importance of the body as a unit of power is reflected here in both governmental practices as well as literary practices; its preeminence can be shown within other social systems at the time, even ones which are primarily based in the conceptual rather than the physical.

The corporeal body has a paradoxical existence in the Christian belief system of the twelfth century. The god it venerated is a non-corporeal entity, but such is the extent of contradictions that many elements of Christianity and the Catholic Church uphold the concept of the body's role in social, political, and religious power. Christian worship observes not only the conceptual God in the form of the Father and the Holy Spirit, but also has as perhaps its "face" the image and person of Jesus Christ. Potentially the most visible element of the Christian theology, and the element from which the religion acquires its name, Christ himself was the literal embodiment of God on Earth. His physical, bodily existence was highly significant in more than one way. The Crucifixion of Christ, as a symbol of salvation for the whole of humanity, only enabled Christians to find their salvation because the physical, human flesh of God underwent bodily suffering and death upon the Cross. The importance of the manifestation of God in the human flesh of Christ is emphasized in the canons of the Fourth Lateran Council, a highly important ecumenical council which convened in 1215 and officially canonized many

Christian doctrines that had been understood for centuries. The First Canon explains the Crucifixion and the Resurrection thus:

Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God made flesh by the entire Trinity, ...made true man, composed of a rational soul and human flesh...suffered on the cross for the salvation of the human race, and being dead descended into hell, rose from the dead, and ascended into heaven. But He descended in soul, arose in flesh, and ascended equally in both.<sup>78</sup>

The issue of Christ's bodily flesh therefore carries deep significance even within the Christian system, though it is at the same time a religious system which emphasizes the spiritual, highly conceptual celestial sphere over the physical and worldly present.

The subject of transubstantiation within Christianity also attests to the power of the body; theological argument on the nature of the Eucharist, and whether or not it indeed required consumption of the actual body of Christ, was an important subject of theological debate in the period. Canon One of the Fourth Lateran Council defines the issue of the Eucharist in this way: "Jesus Christ, whose body and blood are truly contained in the sacrament of the altar under the forms of bread and wine; the bread being changed (*transsubstantiatio*) by divine power into the body, and the wine into the blood."<sup>79</sup> Although in its perceived form the Eucharist continues to resemble bread and wine, it does indeed transform into the literal body of Christ. The significance of this canon in demonstrating the importance of the physical body in medieval Latin Christendom must be stressed; in taking a stance on the issue, the Catholic Church defined the regularly performed sacrament of communion essentially as ritual cannibalism, rather than

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<sup>78</sup> "Twelfth Ecumenical Council: Lateran IV 1215," in *Disciplinary Decrees of the General Councils: Text, Translation and Commentary*, trans. H. J. Schroeder (St. Louis, MO: B. Herder, 1937), Canon 1, March 1996, accessed December 2018, <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/basis/lateran4.asp>.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

choosing the far easier, and somewhat obvious, position that the Eucharist only symbolically signified Christ's body. The act of taking communion, meant to inspire deeper connection with the highly nonphysical, conceptual Christian divine, nevertheless involved the literal consumption of the physical body of the Savior. The canonical understanding of the Host as the actual flesh of Christ grants a deeper meaning to the act of taking communion, as it endows the ritual with unique power. Therefore it may be said that the physical presence of the body held such power in this period that, even within the highly symbolic and ritualized system of conceptual power that was Christendom, the material body still held a special significance.

Expressions of the power of the body within courtly love literature are of course much different from those shown in Christian theological debates and ritual practices. It should be noted that, within the courtly love literature that we have examined, the empowerment of the body is mainly focused on the female body specifically. Courtly love literature supplied a contrast to the Christian church's efforts to redefine and reinforce gender roles, placing the noble woman as central to the tale and creating around her a moral ideal to be imitated.<sup>80</sup> Twelfth century church reforms included efforts to sharply reenforce clerical celibacy, and with this in mind Church officials "sharpened their attacks on women's sinful nature" and "redefin[ed] women's proper sphere to restrict their public roles."<sup>81</sup> Therefore, courtly love themes of the lady as a moral and social superior, as well as being to some extent an erotic physical object that was often sexually unobtainable, countered the social notions of women promoted by the Church. As interpreted by the clergy, the power of women's bodies—if they had any at all—was limited to

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<sup>80</sup> Boase, 32.

<sup>81</sup> Turner, 18.



the ability to corrupt men's bodies through lustiness. To those who wrote of courtly love, however, women's bodies were the location of nobility, honor, and even austerity.

The disconnect between the Church's interpretations of the power of the body and the courtly love tradition's interpretation thereof is unsurprising when one considers the possible origins of much of the courtly love tradition. Courtly love romance has been suggested as predominantly non-Christian in its origins and pro-woman in its content. Previous research has shown that it is very possible that the origins and much of the influence that gave rise to courtly love were passed to Christian Europe through Islamic cultures. Roger Boase, for example, points to three distinct similarities between Islamic lyric tradition and courtly love; these include "formal and stylistic elements," "common themes and motifs," and "analogies between the concept of love in both lyrical traditions."<sup>82</sup> The crusading efforts of the later Middle Ages led to plentiful opportunities for Christian Europe's interaction with the Muslim world, with the cultural clash leading also to a cultural exchange.<sup>83</sup> Perhaps even more important was the Muslim presence in Spain during this time period; Aquitaine, as an area in the south of France and therefore in close proximity to Spanish Muslim rule, makes perfect sense as the forebearer of Muslim-inspired courtly love into medieval European culture.<sup>84</sup> As a literary tradition with its roots in Islamic cultures and ideals, and therefore in some ways fundamentally at odds with Christian morality, courtly love diverged from the Church's attempts to religiously, socially, and politically enforce gender roles, specifically pertaining to women.

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<sup>82</sup> Boase, 64.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>84</sup> Wollock, 32.

This is not to say that the courtly love literature should be interpreted as “feminist” literature, according to modern standards, but it may be construed as a contrast to the presumed misogyny of the Middle Ages. While there are certainly reasons to push back against the idea that courtly love literature was “feminist” for the most part, it did often endow women within the stories with a greater sense of power, though not autonomy. That women in many of the stories often do not control their own plots and narratives, and must rely on men to fulfill their needs, bespeaks a certain patriarchal bias of the narratives. As Boase states, “Courtly Love counterbalanced clerical misogyny, but it could scarcely have had a liberating influence.” He then points out an imbalance of many of the transactions in that “women were under a moral obligation to reward services performed on their behalf.”<sup>85</sup> Nevertheless, the empowerment of women and women’s bodies, to the extent to which it did occur within these stories, is still a counterpoint to a rigid religious system that did not afford women any opportunity to fulfill socially dominant roles.

Setting aside, for the moment, courtly love’s literary pursuit of the idea of physical bodily power, the real-world practice of sociopolitical power of the body was also divided along gender lines within this period. The practice of itinerant courts, though they were not exclusively male, still most often manifested in the movements of men’s bodies due to the fact that men were almost always the rulers of large landholdings. Such rulers moved from city to city and court to court, rather than staying permanently in a single residence, though they did often have preferences—for instance, William X’s favorite court was at Poitiers.<sup>86</sup> The concept of providing the people with access to a ruler’s physical body was understood by all rulers during this time

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<sup>85</sup> Boase, 76.

<sup>86</sup> Weir, 15.

period. Itinerant courts afforded people throughout the land an opportunity to see the person whose control they were under, to whom they owed allegiance, and therefore the king's physical presence by means of the itinerant court effectively ensured the loyalty of his subjects.<sup>87</sup> Capital cities did not exist as such; although the thirteenth century saw the beginnings of permanent administrative establishments that would evolve into the modern capital city, the kings and courts of this time were still very much itinerant.<sup>88</sup> The cite of the king's body was, in effect, the capital. Political power was not as immaterial a concept then as it is in the modern day, and a ruler's physical presence often needed to be felt throughout the land that was ruled. Indeed, when Eleanor and Louis finally agreed upon the annulment of their marriage, they journeyed throughout the lands which Eleanor would be receiving back, making their rounds to the various seats of government to ensure the smooth transfer of power back to her.<sup>89</sup>

Proximity to the corporeal figure of greatness was essential in the practice of doing homage and swearing fealty, as well. A thirteenth-century statute on the process of doing homage states, "When a Freeman shall do Homage to his Lord of whom he holds in Chief, he shall hold his hands together between the hands of his Lord." This action was then followed by a verbal oath.<sup>90</sup> The physical contact between ruler and subject solidified the social pact under

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<sup>87</sup> Bernard Guenée, *States and Rulers in Later Medieval Europe* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988), 78.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

<sup>89</sup> Weir, 87.

<sup>90</sup> "Modus Faciendi Homagium & Fidelitatem (The Manner of Doing Homage & Fealty), C. 1275," ed. Jerome S. Arkenberg, in *The Statutes of the Realm: Printed by Command of His Majesty King George the Third, in Pursuance of an Address of the House of Commons of Great Britain, From Original Records and Authentic Manuscripts*, ed. A. Luders (London: Record Commission, 1810-1828), August 1998, accessed February 2019, <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/source/1275fealtyhomage.asp>.

which a subject became vassal to his lord. A freeman doing homage to his lord not only had to be in his lord's presence in order to do so, but actually had to give the lord his hands, lending physical importance to a solemn verbal pact.

Noblewomen, on the other hand, often held their social power within their bodies specifically through their ability to bear sons, a power which still relied on the involvement of men in their lives. The body as the source of power, particularly for women, can be seen in the importance of a woman's ability to bear children, and specifically sons, as heirs. Eleanor's lack of a male heir in her first marriage was seen as part of the valid grounds for the annulment between herself and Louis VII of France.<sup>91</sup> The birth of only female children to the couple was not only a political issue, but an omen of sorts that their marriage was invalid in the eyes of God. In her subsequent marriage to Henry II of England, she bore three sons who grew up to be kings. These children were a significant political success, produced and borne directly of her body.

However, Eleanor's power still remained rooted in matters other than her ability to bear children. In fact, the lack of a male heir during her time as queen consort of France was, to Louis, something he was willing to overlook in favor of the other, more crucial things that his marriage to her had to offer. Alison Weir emphasizes the reluctance on Louis' part to annul their marriage: "Through Eleanor, Louis had acquired vast domains.... But if the royal couple's marriage was dissolved, Louis would lose Eleanor's inheritance, which would then pass to whoever else she married."<sup>92</sup> Louis' main preoccupation was with Eleanor's lands as part of her hereditary bequest, and not with her seeming inability to bear a son. Childbearing and the production of heirs functioned as an important part of noble women's social role, comprising

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<sup>91</sup> Weir, 73-74.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

much of the usefulness that a noble woman could provide in a political marriage. As a noble woman, however, Eleanor played a political role large enough that her lack of an heir could be overlooked for a time. Therefore, Eleanor's political power here was in a sense genderless, embedded in her fortuitous birth and familial relations, in spite of a heavily gendered feudal legal system.

The manner in which gender operated to enforce or to destabilize a person's power during this time is a concept also applicable to courtly love, and in this sense Eleanor's power was still distinctly female. In relation to this concept, courtly love literature was as much a manner of inspiring a certain form of vassalage as it was an expression of romantic love. The worship of the body, found in the political movements of leading nobility as well as courtly love poetry, is repeated in other works from Bernard de Ventadorn. In "Bel M'Es Can Eu Vei La Brolha," Bernard writes, "I ask God one gift: that my mouth, which is fasting, receive from her a sweet kiss as break-fast. I demand too great a reward."<sup>93</sup> Bernard craves the physical contact of a kiss from his lady, but to such an extent that he portrays the kiss as food or nourishment, and not as a sexual act. Just like the lands which a vassal under the manorial system would receive from his lord, the physical contact Bernard receives from his lady provides him with his sustenance. In another poem, which is not necessarily written about Eleanor but nevertheless written by Bernard as a troubadour of her court, he expresses his affection for his unnamed love in explicit political terms: he refers to her as his "Courtly One,"<sup>94</sup> and requests of her, "Good lady, I ask you nothing at all/Except to make me your servant,/For I'll serve you as I would a good lord,/And never ask

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<sup>93</sup> Bernard De Ventadorn, "Bel M'Es Can Eu Vei La Brolha," PoemHunter.com, 2012, accessed December 15, 2018, <https://www.poemhunter.com/poem/bel-m-es-can-eu-vei-la-brolha/>.

<sup>94</sup> Bernard De Ventadorn, "Non Es Meravelha S'Eu Chan," PoemHunter.com, 2012, line 31, accessed January 15, 2019, <https://www.poemhunter.com/poem/non-es-meravelha-s-eu-chan/>.

for another reward.”<sup>95</sup> The lack of sexual intention in his service is clear, especially in his desire to serve her as he would a “good lord.” Here, socially presumed heterosexuality can lead the reader to interpret this line as a nonsexual desire to provide service in terms of physical closeness. He desires, as a courtier, to serve her in any way that he can, and his personal and romantic emotions are linked with the sociopolitical meanings of courtly status.

In this way, Eleanor of Aquitaine fit well into the context of gendered empowerment of the body in courtly love literature, as a woman who was ultimately quite boisterous, gregarious, and operated with a fairly high level of political power during a time when women were essentially considered unfit for political rule. Efforts to portray Eleanor as an example of female exceptionalism during the Middle Ages do her a potential disservice. The foundation of her power—the enormity of her land inheritance—is essentially unrelated to her greatness as a woman in the Middle Ages. But her manipulations of marital relationships for her own social and political gain cannot be divided from her gender, and neither can her interest in the literature of courtly love that put herself and women in general on a moral pedestal. Courtly love had a lasting social impact from its beginning in the twelfth century onward.<sup>96</sup> Eleanor, as a woman, clearly had a hand in establishing this tradition, whether it was through her patronage of romantic poets like Bernard, or through her Courts of Love, which can be interpreted as attempts to enact the literary tradition in the practical social sphere. Even though Andreas Capellanus is the only source on Eleanor’s Courts of Love, perhaps indicating that they are legendary rather than historical fact, the association between Eleanor and the courtly love tradition was strong enough that Capellanus placed Eleanor and her daughter at the center of the concept of “courtly love”

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid., lines 22-25.

<sup>96</sup> Wollock, 151.

being enacted in real society through these courts. This is to be counted among her power as a social and political figure, and not simply any executive actions she may have taken during her time as queen. All of these things combined into the power within her personage that made Bernard write about the wish to simply be in her vicinity as she undressed.

Aside from Bernard's literary attempts to be physically close to Eleanor's body as a form of nearness to power, there were also events within Eleanor's life that show the potency of closeness to, or indeed ownership of, her female body. Henry's imprisonment of Eleanor, following her attempt to rebel against him by supporting her sons, can be seen in this way as an attempt to control the social, political, or cultural power through the limitation of her physical body. With the limitation of her physical movement came the limitation of her political influence as well; once she was freed following Henry's death, she was able to fully reconnect with her power in the public sphere. An earlier incidence of an attempt to control her body came in the attempted abductions while she was traveling from Paris to Poitiers after her separation from Louis. These attempts at kidnapping Eleanor show the significance of ownership of the body. Two separate "suitors" made these efforts to abduct Eleanor, because physical possession of her body equated to the gain of her power, land, and political influence. The simple act of physically holding her in one's control, with the goal of claiming her body in marriage, would endow the would-be abductors with her own power.

The body as a source of political or of social power can be seen not just in Eleanor's history and the love poems around her, but is mirrored in the cases of other historical or even legendary figures as well. Specifically, an attempt to exhume the body of a distinctively British legendary figure took place within the reign of Henry II. The Plantagenets, the dynasty of English monarchs which includes Eleanor, took action to excavate a grave at Glastonbury

Abbey, with the claim that it was the grave of King Arthur. The obsession with the body of the larger-than-life figure of King Arthur, who has to this day never been satisfactorily identified as a real historical figure, extended beyond his death, as can be seen in the examination of this grave that was thought to be his. Gerald of Wales gives an account of the exhumation of the supposed King Arthur in his treatise, *De Instructione Principis*, published c. 1223. Gerald's account of Arthur's bones hyperbolizes the size of the skeleton, and thus the body of the man himself when living:

It must also be known that the discovered bones of Arthur were so large that it can be seen to have fulfilled these words of the poet: "And wonder at the giant bones in the opened graves." [Virgil, *Georgics* I.497] Truly the shinbone of that man (Arthur) when placed next to the shin of the tallest man there, whom our abbot showed to us; and fixed in the ground next to his foot, greatly extended across the knee of that one by three fingers. Moreover, the skull was spacious and large to the point of being a freak or prodigy, so much so that the space between the eyebrows and the space between the eyes would contain entirely a small handwidth. However, ten wounds or more were apparent on the skull, one of which was greater than all the others, which made a large hole, and which alone seemed to have been fatal; the wounds healed in a solid scar.<sup>97</sup>

The attempt to portray the skeleton of Arthur, revered at the time as perhaps the greatest "King" in English history, illuminates once again the association between the physical body and the concept of power, nobility, and authority. The size of Arthur's bones, as described by Gerald of Wales, indeed reflect the legendary greatness of his life. The focus alone on discovering and identifying the physical remains of this great, long-dead figure, speaks volumes to the desire for the witness of greatness in its bodily form. It is a continuation of attempts to be able to point to the physical, the bodily of those in power, even long after their death. King Arthur was and is a

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<sup>97</sup> Gerald of Wales, "Medieval Sourcebook: Gerald of Wales: The Discovery of the Tomb of King Arthur, from *On the Instruction of a Prince (De Instructione Principis)*, C. 1223," Internet History Sourcebooks Project, August 1998, accessed January 14, 2019, <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/source/1223gerald-arthur-tomb.asp>.



symbol of power and greatness, similarly to the symbolic Eleanor that has been built up through the centuries, with her legends as well as her factual history.

The desire for proximity to and intimacy with authority, especially pertaining to Eleanor, continues in a sense with modern-day historians and the attempts to define various semi-historical accounts of Eleanor as legendary or as factual historical events. The physical, temporal distance between today's scholars and Eleanor's living body in the twelfth century makes it impossible to definitively conclude whether certain events did or did not come to pass. This does not stop historians from trying, however. Indeed, Alison Weir notes the efforts to debunk specifically the sexual rumors, writing, "it is puzzling to find that most of Eleanor's modern biographers do not accept that she had an adulterous affair with Raymond."<sup>98</sup> Ralph Turner, for example, suggests that Eleanor's rumored affair with Raymond is most likely false; chroniclers who indicate the affair only do so because they "found shocking her questioning the validity of her marriage, breaching the submissiveness that a male-dominated Church...imposed on women."<sup>99</sup> To be sure, this argument in itself is very plausible, but does not exclude the possibility of the rumor's accuracy. Seemingly affected by some discomfort, Amy Kelly almost entirely skirts over both this rumored affair and the rumor of Eleanor's affair with Geoffrey of Anjou, only directly addressing the latter in order to discredit it.<sup>100</sup> And though Weir seems comfortable accepting Eleanor's sexual exploits as fact, she is nearly disdainful of the idea that the Courts of Love could be genuine.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Weir, 66.

<sup>99</sup> Turner, 26.

<sup>100</sup> Kelly, *Eleanor of Aquitaine and the Four Kings*, 77.

<sup>101</sup> Weir, 176.

At the same time, scholars who pursue an understanding of Eleanor's deep emotional motives behind her actions face the same impossibility in that, without Eleanor herself present, her feelings can never be known. Assumptions of her motives and personal emotions affecting her reasoning should be made lightly. Historians such as Weir are quick to make the point that Eleanor and Henry were somewhat enamored of each other upon meeting, with this being a primary reason for their subsequent marriage.<sup>102</sup> It should be noted that this assertion of Eleanor's emotional or physical desires as a primary cause, while perhaps truthful to some extent, stems mostly from what Ralph Turner describes as a "conventional thinking that ranked women as less rational than men," thus leading to the assumption of "personal, emotional or sexual motives to her quick remarriage."<sup>103</sup> Her personal motives are lost to history, and possibly the conjecture that personal feelings inspired this remarriage plays into certain medieval chroniclers' sexist attempts to characterize her as emotionally and sexually driven.

On the other hand, to downplay the role which her sexual preferences may have played in her choices contributes, in some sense, to the idea of a powerful woman's sexuality as shameful. These rumors indicate something about the way in which Eleanor was viewed; furthermore, attempts to ignore or to disprove these tales are unnecessary efforts to protect her reputation. Courtly love literature demands the defense of a lady's honorable chastity; history does not demand such a defense of honor, nor does Eleanor herself. While it is true that any and perhaps all of these rumors should be considered suspect due to the biases of those writing them, at the same time, an overeager approach in historiography to debunk these rumors not only gives credence to the idea that promiscuous women in history are undeserving of our admiration, but

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<sup>102</sup> Weir, 85.

<sup>103</sup> Turner, 31.

also runs the risk of eliminating that which we can learn from these rumors. Eleanor ceased to exist as a physical person some eight centuries ago; the Eleanor which we examine now almost inherently includes her legend. Indications of what her contemporaries may have thought of her are now part of her story itself, whether verifiable or not. The existence of certain potentially historical, potentially legendary accounts is fascinating in and of itself, and gives a grand picture of the scope of Eleanor's influence and the understanding of her by her contemporaries as an extraordinary personality. Legends of her sexuality, while they may have been entirely fabricated efforts to defile her name, still show a useful picture of Eleanor as a woman of passions, whose life was bold enough that such claims could be believed. Other legends, like the image of the Amazonian Eleanor bestride her horse, reflect the perception of her female leadership as audacious and brash. Historians have mostly written this episode off as a complete falsehood, but it is still an amusing tale worthy of mention. It is, of course, quite understandable and useful to seek certainty about whether an event was real or invented. This quest for utter certainty reflects, to some extent, a desire for complete intimacy with the historical figure; but this intimacy can never be fully realized, and at some point the legends tell us more themselves than proving or disproving them can.

Let us return briefly to the discussion of Arthur's bones. If the reader accepts only the strict impossibility of the tomb as belonging to the "real" King Arthur, then the unearthed bones are nothing but bones. Conceding to the belief that they are potentially the bones of King Arthur, they become not just bones, but instead take on the role of colossal, symbolically powerful, physical reminders of an equally colossal life. Both are useful approaches to acknowledge; one is certainly more fun. Such ponderings upon the facts and the fallacies regarding historical figures are, of course, regular exercises in historical writings, not merely pertaining to Eleanor. Indeed,

this thesis paper has attempted to make such claims regarding her motives and the veracity of her legends. But perhaps in recognizing the inherent futility of such exercises, one can come to understand why such extensive practices in attempting to know the unknowable exist. In a sense, historiography can perhaps be seen as a ritualized way of trying to achieve intimacy with the historical figure, similarly to the ritualized intimacy that Bernard seeks in his poem. Efforts to definitively conclude which historical records of Eleanor are true and which are false, in some way, can be interpreted as attempts to metaphorically strip her (or her legend) down and, just like the troubadour, find a moment of intimacy with the powerful Eleanor of Aquitaine at her most raw bodily self. Once the moment of intimacy has been realized, however, Eleanor must clothe herself again. What can be said with some certainty about Eleanor is this: rumors and legends, as discussed by twelfth century historians as well as modern-day biographers, indicate a deep fascination with her. Her stubborn, lifelong evasion of a noblewoman's typical role in society, whether good or bad, was of nearly legendary status.

## Conclusion

A great deal of tension, and even contradiction, lies within Eleanor's legacy as one of the most powerful women of the Middle Ages. The political importance of landholdings during the twelfth century was such that, by nature of her immense inheritance, Eleanor already held a great deal of power independently of her identity as a woman. By chance, and not by merit, she was her father's sole heir, and thus she rose to political prominence through the easy step of generational succession. Her gender is only significant here in that the longstanding legal gender restrictions of Salic Law made it unlikely for her to inherit such great wealth as a female child; nevertheless, she did inherit it.

At the same time, however, her manipulations of the gender system within which she lived led her to become the Queen Consort of the Angevin Empire, the subject of love songs, and the mother of kings. Her female body as the foundation of her power reveals much about the social structure of the time. Perceptions of women and of the female body as almost inevitably powerless within this period are not entirely false, as her political rulings would for the most part come secondary to her husbands' and sons'. But, as demonstrated in the courtly love literature of the time, some of which was indeed written about Eleanor herself, high-status noblewomen occupied a sociopolitical rung above non-noble men, who were socially required to venerate them merely due to the nobility of their bodies. Gender restrictions, while an important social constraint, were not as significant as noble status across the gender divide. Though Eleanor's body was female, her bodily flesh still remained the site of the authority conferred upon it by its noble birth.

This veneration of Eleanor's body as the site of her power in many ways continues to the present day. The reality of what she did or did not do during her lifetime holds significance for

many scholars. Perhaps ideally, one could definitively identify which events told of her life were physical occurrences, and which ones were rumors—thus enabling scholarship to strip her of the factually incorrect legends, like the removal of her “graceful slippers”<sup>104</sup> in order to reveal the intimate, authentic flesh underneath. But even royal bodies are subject to decay, and perhaps the bare bones which are left are not worth the trouble of unearthing them. All that remains are the stories, and we are all the more richer because of them.

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<sup>104</sup> Bernard de Ventadorn, “Lancan Vei Per Mei La Landa,” 18.

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