Strategic Imaginations

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PART 2
PLACES AND SPACES OF POWER
THE QUEEN FROM THE SOUTH
Eleanor of Aquitaine as a Political Strategist and Lawmaker

Ayaal Herdam and David J. Smallwood

Courtly literature from the High Middle Ages could revel in fantastic images of ruling women set in surroundings of such exotic exuberance, as in the case of Queen Candacis from the *Strasbourg Alexander*, that their representation seemed to preclude ‘any resemblance to persons living or dead’. Yet the mechanisms of kinship and property in medieval Europe could in fact propel women of an aristocrat elite into positions of great power, some of whom, by dint of their status, wealth and character, became notorious throughout history. Eleanor of Aquitaine has fascinated authors for centuries. The fate and the personality of the woman who was successively queen of France and queen of England are intriguing. During her lifetime and up to the present, chroniclers, artists, writers and historians have constructed the legend of a character who has become the archetype of the rebel medieval queen. Her journey as a woman of politics, which is at the heart of this text, has been the subject of numerous commentaries. Like all historical reflection, these commentaries say something about the period in which they were made, examining, for example, the life of Eleanor through the prism of the creation of nation states or by trying to explain her actions psychologically.¹

Since the middle of the twentieth century, historians have insisted on the necessity to take into account every aspect, including economic and cultural, of the society in which the historical protagonists lived.²
We are going to follow this trend and show how the southern origins of Eleanor played an important role in her choices. For Eleanor, Aquitaine was of course the land of her ancestors, but it was also the power base from which her descendants could set out to conquer the known world, that is, to control as many significant territories as possible and to reach the highest tier of the hierarchy of nobility of her time. As an adult, Eleanor took her decisions according to her dynastic interests, which only occasionally coincided with those of her royal husbands. In case of a conflict of interest, she was capable of confronting and standing up to the ‘King of the North’, which earned her the sympathy of Aquitanian authors and the aversion of the Anglo-Norman chroniclers. The defence of her control over her lands was the priority, as it was the source of revenue from her duchy, its geographical situation and the network of loyalties that she maintained that represented her power base and a life insurance for her and her descendants. The territorial entities added by alliance, such as ‘France’ or ‘England’, were to a certain degree less important than the prestigious royal status which came with them: they were interchangeable and there were no indicators, in the twelfth century, of the future importance of a kingdom of France or of England any more than that of a kingdom of Sicily.

Today Eleanor is a star in Aquitaine. The small town of Belin-Béliet to the south-west of Bordeaux, which believes itself to be the birthplace of the duchess, boasts an Avenue Alienor, two schools named Aliénor, an Aliénor grill, an Aliénor pharmacy, an Aliénor optician, a Troubadour alley and even a road of Courteous Love. Throughout the region and beyond, we can find schools named Aliénor d’Aquitaine and various infrastructures, companies, restaurants and holiday homes bearing her name. Visibly, Eleanor has a good image in her region, even if the name does not guarantee that the pupils of an Aliénor secondary school know more about the geopolitics of the Middle Ages than those of a François Mitterand secondary school. If we look more closely, we can see that there has been a relatively recent return to a favourable outlook on Eleanor. The ‘black legend’, which was born in a background of rivalry between the clerical power and the temporal power, between the dynasties and finally between the nation states, made Eleanor a less than savoury character up to the middle of the twentieth century. Currently, the golden legend is more commonly written about. In 2014 and 2018, Clara Dupont-Monod’s novels, which were favourably reviewed by critics, portrayed Eleanor as a woman of action, cultivated and intelligent, superior to her royal husbands when
it comes to understanding strategy, self-determined when it comes to her love life. This fictional characterization contrasts singularly with the images of her in medieval fiction: Eleanor-Messalina, nymphomaniac, who cheats on her husband during the Crusades and who attempts to run away with a Turk, even with Saladin himself; Eleanor the cuckolded queen who forces her young rival Rosamund Clifford to choose between the sword or the poisoned chalice; Eleanor-Mélusine, who transforms herself into a serpent, like a biblical demon, and who escapes over the church roof during Mass. Lovers of historical series today will recognize a compassionate reinterpretation of this mythology (which predates Eleanor and even the Bible in the motif of the reptilian woman) in the depiction of the strong and beautiful queen, who comes from the south with her family of dragons.

**Space, Time and Matrimonial Strategy**

The legacy of the Dukes of Aquitaine that fell to a young, teenage Eleanor in 1137, included the control of an immense territory. It stretched from what is now the centre of France to the foothills of the Pyrenees and comprised, notably, the county of Poitou, with its booming twelfth-century economy, the fertile plains of Aunis and Saintonge, the woods of the Limousin and the vineyards of Bordeaux as well as a long seaboard on the Gulf of Gascony with the ports of La Rochelle, Bordeaux and Bayonne which were, at the time, more of economic and commercial than of military importance, since the Viking invasions had ceased and the nobles of northern Spain were allies. The population was concentrated in and around towns created in Roman antiquity and already, or still, important at the time of Charlemagne: towns such as Bordeaux, Poitiers, Saintes, Dax, Angoulême, Périgueux and Limoges had each developed their own cultural and economic identities, of which at least the first two must have been more impressive than Paris. The towns had specialized in quasi-industrial levels of production and were engaged in trade with other regions, creating wealth and the possibility of investment in defence and in urban development, but also the opportunity to levy taxes and charges to increase the power of the central authority. The lands around them were given over to providing the towns with food and primary materials. Even in the countryside far from the cities, the population density was probably greater than in other regions, mainly, but not exclusively, because the mild climate...
and advances in technology stimulated by the presence of, and trade with, the towns, resulted in efficient farming practices. Historians in this context point out the appearance and improvement of numerous mills in the region, which would indicate the development of cereal production. This in turn provided fodder for farmyard animals, which diversified the food sources for the rural population. The development of a feudal system on several levels, with at its head the dynasty of dukes, over a number of generations, had contributed to a beneficial stability. From a demographic, territorial and economic point of view, Aquitaine was clearly more important than the Kingdom of the Franks of Louis VI, which was limited, to all intents and purposes, to the Île-de-France. As for England, the lion of the Dukes of Aquitaine would become, fifteen years later, the largest of the three lions of the future Angevin Empire of Henry II Plantagenet.

The ducal family’s control over this vast territory could generate considerable revenues, as long as effective power was exercised, for the loyalty of the nobles who were supposed to represent the authority of the duke could not be taken for granted. Respect for the ties between the lord and his vassals needed to be demanded and maintained regularly, which meant the presence of representatives, an armed force and regular visits through the entire territory. The obligations of the vassals comprised, in principle, the payment of fiscal contributions, the reception and accommodation of the representatives of the ducal power, as well as military service and participation in the military campaigns or, from the twelfth century on, the payment of a sum which would free the vassal from his military obligations and allow the suzerain to recruit an army of mercenaries. Furthermore, the dukes and their representatives acted as judges and arbitrators in the conflicts between barons and could impose fines in the case of contempt for the rules. The power of the dukes tended to weaken from the centre to the periphery because it depended on the communication and means of networking as well as on the possibilities of establishing secondary centres and relays. The barons of the most remote regions, the south of Gascony and the east of the Limousin, only occasionally felt tied to the duke, whose visits were irregular and sporadic. The local lords frequently engaged in squabbles between themselves. Rival neighbours, primarily the counts of Toulouse, were always on the lookout for opportunities to increase their sphere of influence, and they were themselves the preferred target of repeated military and diplomatic efforts by the dukes of Aquitaine. Their vision of territory had to be in tune with the possibilities of
intervention, mobilization of resources and the construction or occupation of fortresses. The political heart of the duchy was the county of Poitou; the nearby periphery was perceived as a compact, coherent and well-known territory, the farther periphery had to be envisaged as a network of roads and small bastions of power which had to be defended and enlarged. The ducal family relied on a network of barons, loyal over many generations, like the nobles of Mauzé or Taillebourg, and certain members of these families were in permanent residence at the ducal court. Other territories, spread out over the duchy, depended directly on the duke's authority without belonging to another baron, and the duke could take control of certain lands as a result of legal disputes. Strategic points, like Angoulême, on the route between Bordeaux and Poitiers, deserved special attention, and indeed the relations between the dukes and the counts of Angouleme were often conflictual. Cultural homogeneity and even the geographical contiguity of territories likely to become part of the duchy were not important criteria as the external frontiers of the whole were not fixed and could change as a result of military or diplomatic conquests.

Through this legacy, which was rather complex to take on, Eleanor became one of the richest persons in the Western world upon the death of her father, and, by the same token, she also became potentially the most desirable pawn in the matrimonial strategies of the European high nobility. Actual information on this power vacuum and on the whereabouts of the heiress were strategically of the utmost importance. At the intersection of patrimonial, military and matrimonial ambitions, perverse side effects developed. Younger sons of noble families, who did not stand the best chances to inherit the lands and power of their parents and who remained on the substitutes bench until their elder sibling disappeared, could try their luck in ‘hunting’ for an heiress. The events going on around Eleanor indicated that these mechanisms were unfolding, and there was an urgent need to act. William X, duke of Aquitaine, died on Easter in 1137 near St Jacques de Compostelle, about a thousand kilometres away from Bordeaux, across the mountainous north of Spain. On his deathbed, he apparently expressed the desire to see his suzerain, Louis VI, king of France, of the Capetian dynasty, designate a suitable husband for Eleanor (who, while waiting, had to stay with her younger sister under the watchful eye of Geoffrey of Louroux, archbishop of Bordeaux). The king of France, himself close to death, looked no further than to his own son and heir Louis, who was immediately sent to Bordeaux with a troop of 500 men to fetch Eleanor.
and to make her his queen. Before the end of the summer of 1137 Louis VII, at the age of about sixteen, found himself the new king of France and married to a teenager who brought to the crown a territory far greater than his Capetian lands. Eleanor, as all heiresses and heirs of her time, had little influence on the choice of her husband, even if her father had come back safe and sound from his pilgrimage. If the duke had returned, she would perhaps not have been duchess of Aquitaine nor queen, for the duke – a widow since 1130 – would probably have gone on to look for a new wife and produce a male heir.

For noble families, especially royal or ducal families, marriage was not a personal affair between two individuals but an opportunity to form alliances and to unify and enlarge the family’s territories. Marriage was a diplomatic instrument, which Eleanor later in life used with a certain virtuosity. The other ways to obtain alliances and territorial gains were through military operations and, to a lesser extent, homage and favours rendered to the powerful. None of these methods, including the marriage game, were infallible and future-proof. There were risks related to incomplete information concerning elements that could influence the outcome, not in the least the unpredictable behaviour of the characters that were involved in the game. The benefits expected from the marriage alliance related not to the couple but to their lineage, thus transcending individual lifetimes (which were on average much shorter and more fragile than today.) The marriage of the duchess to the new king of France was, in theory, in the interest of both families. The Capetians were extending the territory under their control in a spectacular manner, which promised new revenues, more military options, more weight in the relationship with neighbouring kingdoms and the emperor. Louis VII’s prestige increased considerably by adding the titles duke of Aquitaine and count of Poitou to that of king of France. For her part, by becoming queen, Eleanor moved up a rank, which brought her supreme legitimacy and access to the military power of the king, something that could prove useful in her relations with the ostensibly turbulent lords of her duchy and with the inhabitants of the towns. Access to royalty, furthermore, constituted an objective in itself for the noble families. It was materialized by the strategy of marrying up to someone with a higher status, which improved the status of one’s own lineage. The partner of inferior status was standard a young girl, promised to an adult male. The waiting procedure was already a form of social advancement, because it enabled the young members of the inferior family to accede to the court of the great to receive a better
education. The bride would eventually come at the head, in other cases this environment enabled siblings of her family to be occupied at the court, to make a career in administration, or to excel in the use of arms, simply by being a member of the bride’s family. To Eleanor, access to royalty must have seemed like a return to the status her lineage had previously occupied, since the dukes of Aquitaine considered themselves descendants of the Carolingian dynasty. A personal family mythology claiming royal origins, even biblical ones, was a frequent narrative in the high nobility of the twelfth century. All noble individuals considered themselves interim representatives of an illustrious community that transcended time and space. To propel one’s lineage to the peak of the hierarchy of temporal power, that is, to become emperor, could be the ambition of a lifetime.

Queen of the Franks, a Short-Lived Intercultural Experience?

In the twelfth century, the population of the duchy of Aquitaine spoke several varieties of at least two languages: the langue d’oïl (especially Poitevin dialects in the north) and varieties of the langue d’oc/Occitan in the south (Gascon) and the east (Limousin and Languedocien), if we ignore the Basque language, spoken at the outer periphery. Occitan was one of the languages used in the ducal court, even if the teaching of young nobles and administrative documents were in Latin, as in other royal and ducal courts and in the ecclesiastical schools. William IX, or ‘the Troubadour’, Eleanor’s grandfather, appears to be the first poet of the Occitan language whose works have survived to this day; the poet Marcabru, who visited Eleanor at the royal court, spoke in Occitan, as other members of the queen’s entourage probably did, forming an Occitan-speaking community at the royal court. Biographers mention other cultural elements which differentiated Eleanor from her husband’s entourage and from her new subjects. Women from the south were assertive in front of men; they were freer in their relations with others, wore more colourful and sophisticated clothes and enjoyed music and poetry. Compared to the court of the dukes of Aquitaine, reputed to be joyful and noisy, that of the Capetians is described as austere. The arrival of the young queen and her entourage stirred up the pejorative stereotypes that dated back to the arrival of Constance of Arles, wife of the King Robert II, in 1003, or to the first Crusade of 1096 to 1099, which had joined the knights from the north and those
from the Mediterranean zone and infused them with tensions typical of intercultural contact.

Even more important could be the difference in expectations with regard to a woman of power. Aquitaine and the south had a history of women who exercised the functions of feudal lords over lands inherited from their fathers. Hillion\textsuperscript{13} mentions the rules of transmission of specific territories in the south of Occitania: in Aquitaine, Béziers, Narbonne and in Provence, daughters inherited the whole of the territories and powers in the absence of a direct male heir. Only the county of Toulouse, which was dominated by men of the church, had adopted a special law that explicitly accepted only legitimate sons as heirs. The conflict between Eleanor and the counts of Toulouse was a result of this ambiguous situation, because Philippa, the wife of William IX and Eleanor’s grandmother, was in conflict with a relative who had eventually taken the title of count of Toulouse. William IX periodically claimed and occupied the county in the name of his wife, and Eleanor was therefore convinced she had ancestral rights over the county. She later pushed her two successive royal husbands and her son, Richard the Lionheart, to undertake military expeditions against Toulouse.

The most visible example of a female lord in the south remains Eleanor’s contemporary Ermengarde of Narbonne (1127–1196). Viscountess after the death of her father when she was only five years old, she became a pawn in the matrimonial and war strategies of her neighbours when she was an adolescent. She eventually became an active and autonomous player in the game of the seigniories of the south, where she arbitrated, for example, the military conflict between Stephanie of Provence, another female lord, and the count of Barcelona, a relative and supporter of Ermengarde at Arles in 1156. Other tales and documents of the period, for example, the trade treaties with other towns situated on the Mediterranean Sea, tell of the status of Ermengarde as the sole sovereign of Narbonne and as the most important political figure in her town and in the viscounty.\textsuperscript{14} More than that of Eleanor, the name of Ermengarde of Narbonne is associated by historians with the development of a flourishing artistic and intellectual life in a seigniorial court of the twelfth century, and she achieved a special place amongst feminine figures in the literature of her time, such as the songs of the troubadours, but also in the famous 1186 ‘Treatise on Courteous Love’ by Andreas Capellanus and even in the 1230 ‘Orcadian Saga’,\textsuperscript{15} before falling into oblivion until rediscovery by the novelists of the twenty-first century.
On the other hand, in the north and the centre of Europe, a queen was supposed to exercise an indirect influence as the seignior’s wife, and eventually as mother, as long as this seemed useful to the heirs, before retiring to an abbey or living peacefully on her dower rights. In the public space, she had to limit herself to works of charity, or, of course, to the support of religious communities such as abbeys and priories. With the Capetians, the queen could advise her husband in the council chamber and was meant to appear publicly for important ceremonies, as the mother of Louis VII had done with Louis VI. Everything that distinguished Eleanor from previous queens met the disapproval of the churchmen, who were more influential in the north and the centre of Europe than in the south. Although they worshipped the Virgin Mary, they held a doctrinal mistrust of women, believing them to lead men into sin and to be essentially more emotional and less reasonable than men. Entertainment such as festivals and games, which frequently took place at the court of the dukes of Aquitaine, were considered a threat to the events marking the religious calendar. The songs of the troubadours, praising, amongst other things, the pleasures of extramarital love, even without explicitly mentioning sexual activity, between a knight and his noble lady, must have constituted another form of subversion with regard to Christian morality.

Ancient historians and biographers as well as their modern and contemporary counterparts invariably qualify Eleanor’s influence on Louis VII’s decisions as thoughtless. These decisions affected, to varying degrees, the dynastic interests of Eleanor and related to her duchy or to her sister Aelith/Petronilla, who would have had to replace Eleanor if she should die without issue. Louis threw himself into military expeditions against the burghers of Poitiers and against the count of Toulouse before starting a conflict that opposed him to the clerical authorities on the nomination of the archbishop of Bourges (a town which was in the duchy of Aquitaine and which Louis claimed to be under his power as king and duke). A conflict with the count Theobald of Champagne over an amorous relationship between Aelith and a relative of Louis, Raoul de Vermandois, who was married to the sister or the niece of Theobald, ended in a war. It is tempting to think that by all these actions Louis wanted to assert his royal power vis-à-vis the church and his vassals, to demonstrate the ducal power in Aquitaine, to pursue the expansion of his territories and to prove his courage in the eyes of his wife. Apart from the submission of the commune of Poitiers, which was no military match to the king’s knights, the young couple’s strategies produced one failure
after the other. Excommunicated by the Pope, Louis and Eleanor had to appeal to the support of the abbot Suger in order to gain that of the influential Cistercian preacher Bernard of Clairvaux, the future Saint Bernard. He restored order and put everyone back in place, including the queen, who was ordered not to interfere in political matters any longer and to submit to the will of God and the king if she wished to have an heir. As a penance, Bernard suggested Louis to undertake a pilgrimage, which ended in the disaster of the second Crusade. This episode indicated the end of Eleanor’s influence over Louis, passing it on to the churchmen who, from that date onwards, spurred the royal policies.17

The loss of the county of Edessa pushed Bernard to call for a crusade. Louis and Eleanor ‘took the cross’, as Eleanor’s grandfather had done before them. The stay of the royal couple in Antioch, with Raymond, Eleanor’s uncle, who had become the head of this Christian principality in the Orient, is often portrayed as a simple stop-off on the road to Jerusalem. However, it corresponds to a strategic aim more specifically linked to the dynastic interests of the Aquitainians. Raymond, the brother of William X, was a potential candidate to the title of duke of Aquitaine, yet he had been kept at a distance from the succession stakes in 1137, when the opportunity to tie the ducal family with the Capetians had come up (and because of the speed with which this union had to be acted). The status of prince of Antioch made Raymond an important vassal of the emperor of Byzantium and a potential participant in the hierarchical game in this part of the world. Beyond familial and cultural ties, it was strategic ambition that brought Eleanor and Raymond together, as they both fostered the idea of this world ruled by the lineage of the dukes of Aquitaine. Albeit posthumously, Raymond’s ambitions would be fulfilled when his daughter Marie, princess of Antioch, married Manuel Komnenos in 1160 and became empress of Byzantium until 1180 – even if she neither managed to hold on to power after the death of her husband nor established her son on the throne.

Separation and Return to the Country

Historians consider that the initiative for the separation of the royal couple in 1152, which resulted in Eleanor recovering her freedom in her early thirties, came from the duchess herself. According to John of Salisbury, a chronicler present at the time and considered sober and
worthy of confidence, Eleanor had already mentioned consanguinity as a possible motive for annulling the marriage during the marital dispute at Antioch in 1148. On the king’s side, Louis would have consented to let his wife go, since after fifteen years of marriage, she had given birth to two girls but not to a male heir. Separation opened the way to a new marriage for the king of France, yet, as it happened, it was also in the dynastic interest of Eleanor to have an heir for Aquitaine. The fact that she was a woman should not lead us to believe that she did not share the preference for a male heir. She probably even shared the belief, typical of the period, of God-willed inequality between the sexes in terms of sovereign power. It seems likely that she too would pin her hopes on another partner to produce a son in order to pass on to him Aquitaine and the lineage of the dukes William. She remarried, to Henry of Anjou (whom historians call Plantagenet, whereas, at that time, the name only applied to Geoffrey of Anjou, his father), without letting her suzerain and ex-husband Louis VII know, while his approval would have been necessary but unlikely for strategic reasons, indicates that she had probably already made plans before her separation from Louis.

Henry Plantagenet had a dynastic potential superior to that of Louis VII, as the county of Anjou and the duchy of Normandy were promised to him, which made him richer than the king of France in the case the latter should lose the duchy of Aquitaine. The mother of Henry Plantagenet, Matilda of England, was not only the legal heiress of her father, Henry I, king of England, but also the widow of Henry V of the Holy Roman Empire, and she bore the title of empress of the Romans until her death (though without ever exerting any power over this empire). However, she was engaged in a struggle against her cousin Stephen of Blois, who had had himself crowned king of England. In 1152, at the moment of his marriage with Eleanor, Henry Plantagenet was not entirely certain he would become king, but he led the military campaign against Stephen of Blois, whose support was diminishing and who acknowledged Henry as successor to the throne in 1153. The marriage between the duchess of Aquitaine and the future king of England turned the geopolitical situation in Western Europe upside down by creating a vast assembly of Atlantic territories which historians call ‘The Plantagenet Space’, ‘Plantagenet Empire’ or ‘Angevin Empire’. This territory was ruled by Henry Plantagenet, who became King Henry II of England, for several decades, but Eleanor was the only person to see the beginning and the end of this empire.
Eleanor’s legal and jurisprudential activity during her stay in Aquitaine after the separation from Louis VII seems to be substantiated in the Rôles d’Oléron, a collection of rules on commercial maritime law written around 1152 at the headquarters of the navigator’s guild on the Isle of Oléron near La Rochelle, and enacted as laws around 1190 during Eleanor’s regency of the Plantagenet Empire. This first maritime code to be applied along the Atlantic coast was improved in the thirteenth century and was incorporated in the Black Book of the English admiralty, which served as a basis for modern maritime law. The first version of the Rôles d’Oléron comprised only the first twenty-four articles (and so did not include the drastic punishments laid down in the later versions) and mentioned only the ports of Bordeaux (articles 1, 4, 8, 11, 13) and La Rochelle; the Channel Islands ports are only mentioned in the later versions. The only merchandise explicitly mentioned is wine, showing that trade in this commodity was sufficiently developed enough at the time to be considered important by the seignior of the region. Certain writers have noted the similarity with the Lex Rhodia iactu, which had been in force in the Mediterranean since antiquity. Even if we do not know to what extent Eleanor personally contributed to the content of the Rôles d’Oléron, she could have been aware of the Lex Rhodia through Aquitaine’s southern position and its long history of trade relations with the Mediterranean zone. Education at the ducal court was of a high quality and Roman legal literature was part of it. It is equally possible that she became interested in the organization of maritime trade in the Mediterranean while taking part in the crusade that made her acquainted with political, administrative and cultural centres like Byzantium and Rome. A comparison between the Rôles d’Oléron and the Lex Rhodia reveals some similarities of content and form. In both cases, the format is a compilation of short articles, which summarize in a few sentences a contentious situation that could arise during the transport by sea of merchandise, and then indicate the actions to take. For example, how to share the loss when goods have to be jettisoned overboard for the safety of all (art. 8 of the Rôles, art. 9 of the Lex Rhodia) or if a fight breaks out between sailors (art. 12 Rôles, art. 5 Lex Rhodia). The ancient versions of the Rôles were written in ‘pseudo-Occitan’ or in ‘a French resembling Gascon’ since the documents had to be understood by the ship’s captains and merchants concerned.
Surviving the King and Governing the Empire of the Plantagenets

Biographers suppose that Eleanor was convinced that she could impose her will on the young Plantagenet, given their age difference. Events indicate however that, above all, she concentrated on her role as royal progenitor until the end of her fertility. She gave birth to nine children by Henry, six boys (with two dying very young) and three girls. The fact that she had books on medicine, and especially gynecology, sent from Byzantium to support the efforts of her own doctors confirms her commitment to this cause. Her journeys with her children, retraceable thanks to the royal administration, indicate that she acted in conformity with the matrimonial and territorial diplomacy of Henry II. Son Henry ‘the Young’, heir to the throne of England after the death of his elder brother William, was married at the age of five in 1160 to Marguerite of France, aged two and a half and daughter of King Louis VII, who was the suzerain of the Plantagenets for the duchy of Normandy. Son Richard, the future Lionheart, was betrothed at the age of two to another daughter of Louis VII, Alice of France. Eleanor subsequently had to look after Richard as the couple planned to give him the duchy of Aquitaine, while ‘young Henry’ was to take the throne of England, the duchy of Normandy and the county of Anjou. The younger son, Geoffrey, born in 1158, was to take possession of the duchy of Brittany, and the late son, born in 1166, remained provisionally John Lackland, before being given the title of seignior of Ireland in 1183. The daughters of Eleanor and Henry were sent off to distant courts for their future husbands at a young age. Matilda, future duchess of Saxe was nine years old (the duke of Saxe, aged thirty-six, was the wealthiest of the Germanic princes and in competition for the title emperor of the Romans); Eleanor, future queen of Castile, was seven and Jeanne, future queen of Sicily, was eleven. There are no clues that would allow us to think that Eleanor, queen of England, would have opposed this matrimonial strategy. The king was often absent and during these absences she took the formal regency of parts of the empire and joined him whenever he asked.

Having passed the age of forty-five, Eleanor had accomplished her mission to ensure abundant offspring and became more involved in her duchy, of which Richard was the next designated duke. Henry II had experienced problems in controlling the barons of Aquitaine, who had little inclination to accept the ‘King from the North’. An indicator of the conflictual relations between the king’s men and the men of
Poitou was the fact that Patrice of Salisbury, who was in charge of the queen’s protection, was killed on his arrival in 1168 and the murder attributed to the seigniors of Lusignan. Most of the barons of Aquitaine welcomed the return of the duchess, accepted the renewal of their homage and acknowledged Richard as the future duke. During her stay in Aquitaine from 1168 to 1173, Eleanor issued seventeen charters, the majority of which associated the name of her son with her own, which leads us to think that one of her intentions was to introduce Richard as her successor. It was with him that she toured the important places and laid the first stone of the monastery of Saint-Augustin de Limoges, the town where Richard was crowned duke in 1172. Eleanor’s policy with regard to the religious establishments is interpreted as the intention to establish a sense of continuity between Richard and his Carolingian ancestors, which is a telling example of Eleanor’s efforts to make the network of loyalties serve the interests of the dynasty. The content of these charters concerns donations and rights attributed to churches and monasteries but do not in the least concern the relations between the barons of the duchy, military activities or any policy outside the duchy. Interestingly, during this time, Henry II did not issue any charters concerning Aquitaine. Does that mean that the queen and duchess had sovereignty over these lands? The strategic presence of some of the king’s men makes this hypothesis less plausible: both the bishop of Poitiers and the archdeacon and treasurer of Poitiers were English, and one of Eleanor’s councilors was Norman. On the other hand, the majority of her entourage were from Aquitaine; she named her uncle Ralph de Faye seneschal of Aquitaine, and the charters are certified by the seigniors of Aquitaine as witnesses. The receipts of the duchy, however, remained centralized in the royal coffers and it was the king who provided an income to his wife and his sons.

Tensions grew in the royal family concerning the inheritance of the empire and the wielding of power that made the sons rebel against their father. What part did Eleanor play in her sons’ revolt? Whatever else, she supported the rebellion of the young Henry, the heir already crowned king (at her initiative to undermine Henry II’s authority), against his father, who monopolized the sovereign power. Henry II’s decision not to add the county of Toulouse to Aquitaine but to make the count a direct vassal could have sparked the conspiracy. After all, Eleanor considered herself rightful heiress of Toulouse and control of this county would have given her duchy access to the Mediterranean Sea. Yet the military forces of the young Henry and of the seigniors of Aquitaine raised by Eleanor
and Richard were defeated by Henry II’s mercenary army. Eleanor was arrested and imprisoned in the fortress of Chinon but refused to retire to the abbey of Fontevraud (which may prove that there was some kind of negotiation between her and her husband). She remained in supervised residence in England from 1174 until the death of Henry II in 1189, refraining from any political activity apart from appearing beside her husband when the latter judged it useful. The exile of her daughter Matilda with her Germanic family to the Plantagenet court relaxed the terms of Eleanor’s captivity, who was authorized to go to Aquitaine in the middle of the 1180s in the company of Matilda.

Her liberation by Richard, named Coeur de Lion (the Lionheart), who had become king after the death of his brother Henry the Young and of his father Henry II, finally marks the beginning of a third career for Eleanor: that of a queen of England who could truly reign. Eleanor was about sixty-seven years of age at that time, and the geographical and dynastic situation had changed substantially since her captivity. Her sons Geoffrey and Henry were dead, Richard was heir and duke of Aquitaine and John count of Mortain. The new king of France, Philip II, not as remotely peaceful as his father, aimed to reconquer Normandy and the other continental possessions of the Plantagenets with the help of John and soon of Arthur, heir to Geoffrey, duke of Brittany. Eleanor did not leave for Aquitaine immediately, which she knew to be safe in the hands of her son Richard. Her first act as queen of England was granting amnesty to the political prisoners of Henry II, which worried the English clergy. Next, she strongly supported the matrimonial diplomacy of Richard, who no longer wanted to marry his fiancée Alice of France but as duke of Aquitaine needed an heir to continue the lineage. Eleanor wanted Richard to pass on the duchy and the kingdom to his son. It is unclear whether she arranged the marriage of Richard to Berengaria of Navarre or whether negotiations between Richard and Sancho of Navarre were already under way when Eleanor started to take a hand. In any case, Eleanor took Richard’s bride to him in Sicily (where he was on crusade), a risky undertaking that shows the urgency to find a solution to ensure the continuity of the dynasty. An alliance with the king of Navarre was also in keeping with the geopolitical interests of Aquitaine, as it secured the southern periphery of the duchy and modified the power balance with the counts of Toulouse, eternal rivals in the south (in 1196 the Toulousains were temporarily appeased by the marriage of Jeanne, Eleanor’s daughter and widow of the king of Sicily, with the heir to the county of Toulouse).
As Richard had set off on crusade, his viceroy, William Longchamps, attempted to govern the kingdom, but he found himself opposed by the English barons, the clergy and soon by John. The matter was settled by Eleanor. Though with no other title than that of queen mother, she returned from Sicily, replaced William and co-governed the country with Richard’s ally, Gauthier de Coutances, archbishop of Rouen. She negotiated with the king of France, Philip II, on the break-off of the engagement between Richard and Alice, Philip’s sister, and acted in the tense relationship between her sons Richard and John. Richard did not trust his brother and forbade him to return to England during his absence, but Eleanor, realizing that John was in fact the logical heir to the throne should Richard die without children, obtained authorization for him to return. When the danger of a French invasion of England became acute, it was the queen mother who ordered the coasts to be fortified, as we learn from the chronicles. 31

When Richard was taken prisoner and transferred into the authority of the Germanic Emperor Henry IV upon his return from the crusade, Eleonor, at the age of seventy, had to act on several fronts: she thwarted his brother John, who declared Richard dead in his eagerness to succeed him; she raised the enormous ransom the emperor demanded for his hostage; and she influenced the Pope to put pressure on the emperor. In 1194, she set off to take the ransom to Germany and negotiate Richard’s freedom and, on her return with her son, she reactivated the networks of his ecclesiastical and worldly supporters to restore his authority. After the re-establishment of Richard’s royal legitimacy, she returned to Aquitaine, where she took up residence in the abbey of Fontevraud, between Poitiers and Angers. There is little mention in historiography of Eleonor’s political activities during the period 1194–1199. While she had no reason to disturb the reign of her son and heir Richard, certain clues seem to indicate that her dynastic preoccupations still occupied her time. Her daughter Matilda, married to Henry the Lion, duke of Saxony and of Bavaria, had gone into exile to the Plantagenets with her family in 1182 after her husband had been banished by the Emperor Henry IV. There is proof that their son, Otto, grew up in the vicinity of his grandmother Eleanor. An act from 1194 exists by which Richard attributes lands in Cumberland to Adam, Eleanor’s chef, in gratitude of the services he had rendered “to our dear mother and to our dear nephew, Otto, the son of the Duke of Saxony.” 32 While this document indicates a cordial family atmosphere, there is also a political side to it because Otto had already distinguished himself by agreeing to go
to Germany as a hostage while awaiting the definitive payment of the ransom for his uncle King Richard. Richard knighted him and named him count of Poitou and duke of Aquitaine in 1196, and in the following years, Otto took an active part in the military conflicts between the Plantagenets and the Capetians. Eleanor and Richard probably wanted to establish the half-Germanic half-Angevin Otto as Richard’s heir, since Richard was still childless after five years of marriage. However, the prince left for Germany as a candidate to the succession of the Emperor Henry IV. Otto’s presence in Bordeaux is confirmed for the last time in 1196. Later that same year, he became one of the two kings in dispute over Germania (and rendered the duchy of Aquitaine back to Richard) and was finally crowned emperor of the Roman Empire by the Pope in 1209. For a good ten years, he remained at the summit of the noble hierarchy of the Western world, realizing posthumously the ambitions of his grandparents and parents.

On the unexpected death of Richard during a military operation in 1199, the question of the succession to the throne became acute. Eleanor decided to support her son John against her grandson Arthur of Brittany, who at that time was aged only eleven or twelve but was supported by the French King Philip. After sending an army against her grandson’s forces, which were attacking Anjou, Eleanor once again had to activate her network to affirm her sovereignty over Aquitaine, and she had to renew her homage to the king of France to prevent him from invading her duchy. Through charters that accorded rights to the seigniors of Aquitaine and to the inhabitants of the towns and religious establishments, Eleanor gained their support for John. A treaty between John and Philip II that appeased the relationship between the Plantagenets and Capetians stipulated that Eleanor would go back to Spain to fetch her granddaughter Blanche of Castile to marry her to Louis, Philip II’s heir. However, when she was in her eighties, Eleanor found herself once again in the middle of a conflict between the Plantagenets and Capetians, when her grandson, Arthur, now aged fifteen or sixteen and allied to the King Philip II of France, attacked her with his knights while she was travelling. Arthur sieged the fortress of Mirebeau, where Eleanor had taken shelter, and she had to be relieved by John.

When Eleanor died the following year at Poitiers or Fontevraud, the arrangement of her tomb that transcended her individual existence was a last sovereign gesture. She lies at the Abbey of Fontevraud, an institution she had supported all her life, in the company of several
members of her family, including her son Richard and her husband Henry, although he had preferred to be buried at the Abbey of Grandmont, in the Limousin. Life-sized effigies, ordered by Eleanor and rare for this period in Europe, possibly inspired by Byzantine tombs, show her desire to demonstrate the royal status of her dynasty beyond death.

After a formidable lifetime in the currents of dynastic and territorial power struggles, one can return to the question whether Eleanor was a sovereign queen in the strict sense of the word. She was indeed, but only for fairly short periods. Louis VII likely often acted in her interest or according to her wishes during the first years of his marriage, which does not make her an autonomous sovereign subject. The period 1152–1153 is too short to be considered a political entity, and when she did seem to have enjoyed partial sovereignty in Aquitaine between 1168 and 1173, Henry put a brutal stop to this. From 1189 onwards, Eleanor acceded to a more complete power, be it in accord with or in the place of her sons Richard and then John. Her dynastic interests, which were the continuation of the lineage of the dukes of Aquitaine, coincided naturally with those of her crowned sons. The chronology of Eleanor’s political career is comparable to that of other women of the high nobility in Europe at the time: her youth was dependent on territorial and dynastic ambitions, her marriage allowed her to influence her husband as a sovereign and as a widow she could exercise regency in attendance of a male heir’s majority. Apart from these structural analogies, no doubt Eleanor’s fighting personality set her at the centre of the political system.

Eleanor certainly experienced the profound inequality of the sexes in the political life of the Middle Ages and its universal negative perception of powerful women. On the other hand, she was no victim. It is impossible to know what the career of her brother William Aigret would have been if he had reached adulthood, yet because he was a man, it is extremely unlikely that he would have been able to employ the wealth of his duchy to get access to the throne of either France or England. Eleanor’s sovereign phases after the death of Henry II and during the absence of Richard were determined by the military activity of the kings. While the male seigniors of the twelfth century reinforced their positions by monopolizing power, their politics of policing and war weakened their own personal existence and created a deficit of male heirs that, in certain circumstances, allowed heiresses access to the head of local and regional seigniories. Eleanor did not become
queen of France by her own choice but because she was the sole heir to the greatest fortune in Western Europe. In order to execute her own dynastic project and to conquer an ‘impossible sovereignty’,

Notes

1 Nineteenth-century historians, notably Agnes Strickland, Lives of the Queens of England, vol.1 (Cambridge: University Press, 1854) and Jules Michelet, Histoire de France (Paris: Flammarion, 1893), are often quoted as examples of a particularly hostile attitude towards Eleanor, which seems to be connected to the nationalism that was typical for the era. Strickland mistrusts Eleanor because she was French, Michelet because she was English. The two are however in agreement that she possessed moral flaws, which supposedly prevented Eleanor from being a ‘good’ queen of France or of England. This assessment can still be found up to the 1970s, for example in Elizabeth A.R. Brown, ‘Eleanor of Aquitaine – Parent, Queen, and Duchess’, in Eleanor of Aquitaine, Patron and Politician, ed. William W. Kibler (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1976), pp. 9–34. Furthermore, biographers of the twentieth century, such as Régine Pernoud, Aliénor d’Aquitaine (Paris: Editions Albin Michel, 1965) and D.D.R. Owen, Eleanor of Aquitaine – Queen and Legend (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1993) frequently indulge in psychological speculation to explain Eleanor’s actions.


For a theoretical approach to the relationship between European kings and queens serving their dynasties in the Middle Ages, we suggest the works of Theresa Earenfight, e.g. Queenship in Medieval Europe (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013) and ‘A Lifetime of Power: Beyond Binaries of Gender’ in Medieval Elite Women and the Exercise of Power, 1100–1400: Moving beyond the


4 Yannick Hillion identifies another castle of Belin near Surgères and so nearer to Poitiers, as the possible birthplace of Eleanor. See Hillion, Aliénor d’Aquitaine, p. 10.


6 The legend of the fairy Mélusine is still very much alive in the Lower Poitou, for example at Vouvant, in the department of the Vendée.


8 Jean Favier, Les Plantagenêts, p. 36.


12 This is not the opinion of Catherine Léglu and Marcus Bull, who refer to the present usage of Occitan, the town of Poitiers being outside the Occitan zone. See ‘Introduction’, in The World of Eleanor of Aquitaine, p. 3. On the other hand, several sources suggest that the limit between Occitan and ‘langue d’oil’ was further to the north at that time. See, for example, Jean-René Trochet, ‘Limites ethnographiques traditionnelles dans le Centre-Ouest, Pays, langues et systèmes agraires’, in Limites floues, frontières vives: Des variations culturelles en France et en Europe, eds. Alain Morel and Christian Bromberger (Paris: Maison du Patrimoine ethnologique, Collection Ethnologie de la France, 2001), pp. 69–89.

13 Yannick Hillion, Aliénor d’Aquitaine, p. 15.
18 Regine Pernoud’s *Aliénor d’Aquitaine* supposes that the jealous rage of Louis VII, reported by John of Salisbury, was set off by the fact that uncle and niece spoke Occitan to each other and Louis did not understand.
19 Subsequently, her first son by Henry II was also called William. He died very young and never became duke of Aquitaine.
21 One might also think that the king had ambitions to take on the title of emperor of the Romans on the death of his mother. King Conrad III of Hohenstaufen, who managed the Germanic Roman Empire during this period, had never been crowned emperor. If Henry had done this, it would have made an empress out of Eleanor, but access to this ultimate stage on the noble ladder remained beyond their reach. Elizabeth A. R. Brown, ‘Eleanor of Aquitaine: Parent, Queen and Duchess’, in *Eleanor of Aquitaine, Patron and Politician*, p. 22.
25 Rather than five, according to Yannick Hillion, *Aliénor d’Aquitaine*, p. 194.
27 Yannick Hillion, *Aliénor d’Aquitaine*, p. 239.
29 According to Elizabeth R. Brown, ‘Eleanor of Aquitaine – Parent, Queen, and Duchess’, p. 18.
31 See Yannick Hillion, Aliénor d’Aquitaine, p. 394.
32 Ralph V. Turner, ‘Eleanor of Aquitaine in the Governments of her sons Richard and John’, in Eleanor of Aquitaine, p. 79.
33 Hucker calls him an emperor who was Guelph by origin but Plantagenet by education, pointing out the Angevin elements in his coat of arms, the Anglo-Norman management of his court and his collaboration with his uncle John, king of England against the king of France from 1209 to 1214. See Bernd Ulrich Hucker, Otto IV. Der wiederentdeckte Kaiser (Frankfurt, Leipzig: Insel-Verlag, 2003), p. 36.
34 Hucker, Otto IV., p. 364.
35 Arthur’s mother, Constance of Brittany, was Eleanor’s daughter-in-law but was seriously hostile to the Plantagenets. She had sent her son to Philip in order to separate him from Richard.
36 Blanche’s reign over the Kingdom of France from 1226 until the majority of her eldest son, the future Saint Louis, took place in more favourable circumstances than the ones her grandmother had to face.
38 See also Martin Aurell’s preface in Edmond-René Labande, Pour une image véridique d’Aliénor d’Aquitaine, p. 13.
40 Yannick Hillion, Aliénor d’Aquitaine, p. 482.