

ROUNDTABLE: RE-PRESENTING ELEANOR OF AQUITAINE

*The SMFS Roundtable: "Re-Presenting Eleanor of Aquitaine: A Panel Discussion" was held at the 38th International Congress on Medieval Studies at Western Michigan University on May 10, 2003. It was organized and chaired by Bonnie Wheeler, Southern Methodist University. The panel followed the showing of *Lion in Winter*, which features Katharine Hepburn as Eleanor of Aquitaine. The remarks of participants Fiona Tolhurst, Constance Berman, and RáGena DeAragon follow.*



THE OUTLANDISH LIONESSE: ELEANOR OF AQUITAINE IN LITERATURE

The image the viewer gets of Eleanor of Aquitaine in Anthony Harvey's *The Lion in Winter* is that she was a woman of many talents and moods who was both dangerous and fascinating. This image is like the one a reader gets of Eleanor in literature—and for good reason: the lack of detailed records of Eleanor's life has enabled writers of annals, chronicle histories, and poems to create varied and fantastic tales about the woman who managed to be Queen of France and then England.¹ Because generic distinctions in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries among annal, chronicle, and literature are fuzzy at best, one striking pattern that emerges as a reader compares the historical and literary sources about Eleanor is that she is a figure at the mercy of continual literary reconstruction. Even in literary works such as Wace's *Brut* and Lawman's *Roman de Brut* where her reputation is invoked indirectly through the character of Guenevere, Eleanor of Aquitaine becomes an Everywoman whom each male historian or poet uses to praise or critique the women of his own culture and time. I would argue, then, that every version of Eleanor a reader or viewer encounters is, at least to some extent, literary—a product of the imagination of a writer using her as an emblem of womankind.

If we examine the image of Eleanor in Anthony Harvey's film, we discover a version of the Queen who is literary in three distinct senses. First, she embodies legends of Eleanor's supposed role as literary patron and presider over the courts of love present in many a historical source on Eleanor. Second, she has internalized, or has attributed to her, many of the legends that get woven into the fabric of both medieval and modern accounts of her life. And third, she is the product of another literary act—the screenplay's creative fleshing out of an already literary character.

In one of the film's most memorable scenes, the audience sees Eleanor in what is perhaps her best-known guise in popular culture: the literary patron and

presider over the courts of love—but with a Freudian twist. When Richard says he doubts his mother’s love, Eleanor suddenly speaks like a romantic and tragic heroine: “I want us back the way we were”—sounding more like his lover than his mother—but when Richard will not trust that claim, she switches to tragic heroine mode. Asking, “Shall I write my will to Richard?” and saying “I love you,” she tries again to tug at Richard’s heart, but he retorts, “The human parts of you are missing.” Eleanor then performs the tragic heroine’s self-destructive action—cutting her arm open in order to prove her love, saying “I will scratch a will” giving Richard “everything.” The Queen’s longing to be “hand in hand” with her son as she once was as well as Richard’s recalling that she was “lovely once” prepare the viewer for Eleanor’s literary reverie. As Richard embraces her, she pleads, “Remember how I taught you numbers and the lute and poetry? ... I taught you dancing too and languages and all the music that I knew, and how to love what’s beautiful. The sun was warmer then and we were every day together.” For Eleanor the literary patron and lady of the courts of love, poetry, power, and sexuality are intertwined: she explains, “I wanted poetry and power and young men who create them both.” It is her sexualizing this conversation about poetry that makes Eleanor’s connection to her son disconcertingly like that of a lover.

Throughout *The Lion in Winter*, the viewer gathers evidence that Queen Eleanor knows herself to be a figure of legend while other characters appear to know her persona only in its filtered-through-literature-and-legend form. Eleanor is aware of her reputation for beauty since she says to her son Geoffrey, “Be sure to squint as you approach. You may be blinded by my beauty” and teases herself about her former beauty. She asks herself, “Where is that mirror? I am Eleanor, and I can look at anything. My what a lovely girl! How could her king have left her?” Anthony Harvey’s Eleanor has lived and enjoys recounting the fantastic story of her playing Amazon while on Crusade, one in which historians and biographers since Agnes Strickland have often indulged. She explains to Henry, “I even made poor Louis take me on Crusade. How’s that for blasphemy? I dressed my maids as Amazons and rode bare-breasted halfway to Damascus. Louis had a seizure and I damn near died of windburn. But the troops were dazzled.” Eleanor delights in her outlandish sexuality of the past as well as in risqué actions she could take—such as hanging jewels from her nipples. This Eleanor knows full well the rumors of her hatred and supposed murder of Rosamund, but she denies having anything to do with Henry’s lover’s death. When discussing Rosamund with Henry, Eleanor notes in jest the exact number of years, months, and days her rival has been dead in order to express her loathing for the woman who took her place in Henry’s bed. Both when she accuses Henry of throwing her out of his bed for Rosamund and when she speaks of his former mistress to his current one Alais, Eleanor oozes hatred: “She smiled to excess, but she chewed with real distinction.” Hepburn’s Queen takes a similar delight in goading Henry with the possibility, and then the assertion, that she slept with his father Geoffrey. She claims never to have touched Henry without thinking of his father’s “beautiful” body and that she had sex with Geoffrey when Henry was in the next room. Her assertion makes her the embodiment of the rumor she was attracted to the father before getting interested in the son. Just as this Eleanor is aware

of the rumors about her and her father-in-law, she is aware of the rumors that she encouraged an intimate relationship between her son Richard and the young King Philip of France. The Queen initiates the most dramatic scene in the film by sending Richard to Philip “as a friend.” What the film adds is Philip’s having engaged in this intimate relationship in order to torture Henry with the reality of it later.

King Henry’s understanding of his wife comes right out of the chronicle histories that noted the political threat she represented to him as well as suggested the inappropriate nature of both his courtship of Eleanor (along with her lands) and her adulterous activities, activities that caused Henry to consider divorcing her. Henry’s first words to her in the film, “Did the Channel part for you?” reveal his awareness of her power. He notes her having encouraged several civil wars against him, and he does not dispute her claim that “I damned near won the last one.” Even his calling her “the great bitch” suggests her power. When Henry talks of his courtship of Eleanor, however, he waxes poetic about how much she and her lands attracted him: “When I married Eleanor I thought you lucky man...She owns the Aquitaine, the greatest province in the continent, and is beautiful as well.” Alais reflects Henry’s romantic mood by noting that Henry adored Eleanor then. Later in the film Henry refers to his wife as “a woman out of legend... Not in Alexandria or Rome or Camelot has there been such a queen.” O’Toole’s Henry even puts into action the chroniclers’ suggestions that the King considered divorcing Eleanor by creating a plotline in which he threatens to have the Pope annul his marriage. His insult to Eleanor—“What’s your count? Let’s have the tally of the bedspreads you’ve spread out on”—reflects chroniclers’ accusations she was an adulteress many times over, a “democratic drawbridge” (as O’Toole’s Henry puts it) worthy of annulment. Through its characters’ awareness of Eleanor as a literary figure, *The Lion in Winter* can indulge in repeating the fantastic legends that enhance its image of Eleanor as a dramatic and passionate woman.

It is precisely this image of Eleanor of Aquitaine as a drama queen that *The Lion in Winter* cultivates so consistently. By doing so, however, it adds another layer to the Queen’s character, fleshing out an entity already rife with literary and legendary imaginings—transforming Eleanor into a tragic figure who suffers and inflicts suffering. Harvey’s Eleanor is, primarily, the queen of losses. When she talks of her imprisonment, she sobs to Henry, “I am against the wall. To be a prisoner. To be bricked in when you’ve known the world... These ten years have been unimaginable, and now you offer me the only thing I want [freedom] if I give up the only thing I treasure [the Aquitaine].” Even the crown, her “comfort and...company” does not remove the “desolation” of prison. In a private conversation with Alais, the Queen responds to Alais’s desire to see her suffer by weeping. Alais’s hugging the Queen and weeping with her only underscore the Queen’s role as a walking tragedy.

As the film’s plot develops, Eleanor’s painful isolation from Henry becomes apparent. When the Queen talks of her love of Henry, she suggests how much she admired him when she found “a mind like Aristotle’s and a form like mortal sin,” and when her son Geoffrey asks her why all the plots, she

declares, "I wanted Henry back." To Henry himself she claims she remembers when they met "down to the hour," the color of his stockings, and how little *talking* they did. She tells him that it is enough to be "trotted out for state occasions" if she can see her husband, and says lovingly, "You are still a marvel of a man." However, Henry reminds her that they "do not touch at any point" and later on she demonstrates her isolation by asking to watch Henry kiss Alais out of "intellectual" curiosity. After he refers to his Queen as "the dragon in the doorway" and asks Alais to be with him because he is "an old man in an empty place," Eleanor's suffering is evident. Despite her desire for reconciliation with Henry and for the members of her family to love each other, the Queen's life is filled with losses—Henry's blotting out her son Richard as heir and his loving another woman while she languishes in prison being at the top of the list. The family drama in the dungeon shows Eleanor that her sons are willing to kill their father and that Richard considers himself an assassin because of her training. Her life as portrayed in the film, therefore, approaches the plot of a Greek tragedy.

When Eleanor begs Henry for an end to their struggles, she suffers grief as he applauds her performance by clapping his hands in her face. She claims she still adores Henry and he accuses her of lying. She bemoans the fact that they have "mangled everything [they've] touched." Finally she collapses under the weight of her greatest loss—Henry—sobbing, "I've lost you and I cannot ever have you back again. You are all that I have ever loved. Christ, you don't know what nothing is. I want to die. I want to die. Henry, I want to die." The Queen's claim that "My losses are my work" is true within the world of the film. Her final declaration of love—"I should have been a great fool not to love you"—is a prelude to their agreement to spar again at Easter, an encounter that will likely result in another loss for her.

This Eleanor is also, however, spectacularly cruel to her husband and sons. When Henry tells her he never loved her, she responds "good. That will make this pleasanter." She tells him she fights over which of their sons will get the throne only because he cares. She takes delight in the idea of watching Henry give Alais to Richard in marriage because she wants it to hurt him. In response to Henry's claim that they "do not touch at any point," she asks, "Can't you feel the chains?" Having flaunted her power over him, she then reminds the King she has only to delay the annulment and he might lose his chance of begetting a son on Alais and claims she would encourage her sons to kill any child of Alais's anyway. She then enjoys telling Henry that if he goes to the Pope, she will join with all three of their sons and the young King Philip and rebel against him.

Eleanor is equally cruel to her three sons. She criticizes both John's and Richard's appearance upon her arrival at Chinon and tells all three boys, "If I had managed sons for [Louis] instead of all those little girls, I'd still be stuck with being Queen of France and we should not have know each other. Such, my angels, is the role of sex in history." To Richard she says, "had I been sterile, darling, I'd be happier today," while to Geoffrey she says nothing at all after greeting him—asking only whether King Philip has arrived yet. When Richard

proves not as pliable as she had hoped, she tells him “I gave the church up for boredom; I could do as much for you.” She offers even her favorite son a chilling ultimatum: “Love me, little lamb, or leave me.”

The Lion in Winter offers the viewer a moving portrait of a literary Eleanor by building upon her reputation as a woman of letters and legend whose life offers great fodder for any writer who wants a highly dramatic female character. Although the casting of Katherine Hepburn invites viewers to blur the line between the historical Eleanor and the literary and legendary portraits of a woman who is both politically dangerous and wildly oversexed, medieval chroniclers and subsequent biographers of Eleanor had turned the Queen into an irrevocably literary figure long before this film was made.

—Fiona Tolhurst, *Alfred University*

¹ For full discussion and new views of this complex queen, see the essays in *Eleanor of Aquitaine: Lord and Lady*, ed. Bonnie Wheeler and John C. Parsons (New York: Palgrave, 2003).

