



DO WE KNOW WHAT WE THINK WE KNOW? MAKING ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT ELEANOR OF AQUITAINE

As Mark Twain (not known for his advice to historians) said: “Get your facts first, and then you can distort them as much as you please.” So when I was approached to write an essay comparing Eleanor of Aquitaine with her noble female contemporaries, I went searching for facts about the queen. I had read Amy Kelly’s *Eleanor of Aquitaine and the Four Kings* early in my graduate-school days and remembered my disappointment that the book, although readable, focuses much more on the kings than on the queen. Since I’d read almost nothing on Eleanor thereafter, I asked which biography to consult and was directed to that written by D.D.R. Owen.¹ There I found many of the facts I needed, but also an indication of how much about her life and activities is disputed—even such matters as the number of her children by Henry II.

Then I was invited to be on a panel devoted to Eleanor at Kalamazoo. I was pondering what topics to discuss in my presentation while proctoring an exam in my western civilization course, and I thought to look up Eleanor of Aquitaine in the course textbook. One of *the* most famous women of the middle ages was accorded only two sentences! That sent me on a survey of other western civilization texts. I discovered that Eleanor gets rather short shrift in many. Out of nine recent textbooks, Kishlansky, Geary and O’Brien’s *Civilizations of the West* gave her the most coverage; a two-page spread introducing the reader to the royal effigies at Fontevraud, then leading into the story of the Plantagenet kings and Eleanor.² Greaves, Zaller and Roberts included several paragraphs, while the other seven textbooks devote one paragraph or less to the queen. What the authors chose to include and the factual errors they made was also disturbing. What follows is an abridged “biography” of Eleanor of Aquitaine, compiled entirely from those nine textbooks. I’ll follow with some discussion of three key episodes in her life and an analysis of how she has been portrayed by scholars, biographers and textbook authors alike.

Orphaned at 15, she was left in the care of King Louis VI, who married her.³ Or perhaps it was Abbot Suger who arranged her marriage to the monkish Louis VII.⁴ She brought Aquitaine to the match, which either “more than doubled” or “multiplied by several times” the amount of land the French king had under his direct control.⁵ Their marriage either began badly, with the “new bride” discovering her distaste for “her pious, abstemious husband” and the new groom dismayed by “her strong, independent temperament”⁶—“a disaster from every perspective”⁷—or they got along well enough until Eleanor accompanied Louis on the Second Crusade. She accompanied him in order to bear him a male heir. The queen and her ladies “dressed as Amazons and thoroughly enjoyed the jaunt.”⁸ At Antioch, Eleanor shocked her royal

husband “by announcing that their relationship was illegal because of their blood ties.”⁹ Two texts mention the rumor of Eleanor’s affair with her kinsman Raymond of Antioch with no indication of whether those rumors were true.¹⁰ Louis put his foot down and she left Antioch with him; the royal couple saw Jerusalem. “Papal intervention kept the couple together until 1152.”¹¹ Back home and still sonless, their divorce/annulment was granted “by compliant clerics” for one of three reasons: incompatibility; the failure of Eleanor to bear sons; or on the grounds of consanguinity, depending on which text you consult. So Louis got rid of her, Eleanor got rid of him, or “they agreed to have the Church annul their marriage.”¹²

Two months later, Eleanor married Henry Plantagenet, either nine or eleven years her junior, and she bore him at least four sons (several texts do mention eight children in total). She was Henry II’s “feisty queen” but had less power than as queen of France “for he [Henry] dominated her as he dominated his barons.”¹³ Nonetheless, she was a “political force to be reckoned with during her first decade” as queen of England, serving as Henry’s “regent” when he was away from the kingdom. “Beginning in 1163, her functions [in Henry’s government] were largely ceremonial” and in 1168 (if not earlier) “he dispatched her to Aquitaine to govern her duchy.” That gave Henry the opportunity “to pursue an affair with his mistress.”¹⁴

What Eleanor got up to on the continent varies by text, but almost all of them talk about her role in cultural developments. The queen “established a court in Angers, the chief town of Anjou, that became a center of patronage.¹⁵ There, or perhaps at Poitiers (where she supposedly moved in 1179 after separating from Henry to live with her daughter Marie, countess of Champagne),¹⁶ “she and her sons and daughters spent much of their time” and there the queen and her court fostered the development of the courtly love tradition.¹⁷ Or else she simply *introduced* those traditions to a new group, because Eleanor had grown up “amid the courtly games of love and knew them intimately.”¹⁸ While experts might “debate the extent of her role as a patron of literature and art, the roots of courtly love were undoubtedly in her court...The troubadours who gathered at her court to sing her praises eventually spread their passionate lyrics throughout much of France, England, Spain and Sicily.”¹⁹ She presided over “a center of literary production, and her patronage was responsible for the flourishing of French romances and Provençal love lyrics.”²⁰ According to one of the writers she patronized, Andreas Capellanus, “Eleanor and her daughters set up a court to correct men who erred or to set tasks, such as fighting in a number of tournaments, for those wishing to win the love of a particular lady.”²¹ Those women and others of the aristocracy helped to make “knowledge of court etiquette...as important for a nobleman as battlefield experience.”²²

“In time, Eleanor’s problems with Henry became even more serious than those she had had with Louis.”²³ Henry alienated her by the way he “attempted to rule his wife’s lands with an iron hand” or because he excluded “his sons from real authority.”²⁴ Eleanor stirred up her sons to rebellion to get revenge for Henry’s affair or because he was excluding her from real authority.²⁵ Those

sons now “spent most of their time in revolt against their father, often with the assistance of their mother.”²⁶ In 1173, the queen, “disguised as a man,” was on her way to join her eldest son in his rebellion against Henry.²⁷ The king tried to “force her into the convent at Fontevault. When she refused, he imprisoned her” in Winchester Castle.²⁸ “An exasperated Henry finally placed Eleanor in captivity in 1174.”²⁹ The chronology of her captivity varies depending on the text; one states that she was under house arrest from 1179 to 1189, while another had her in Poitiers establishing courts of love in 1179.³⁰ King Henry’s death brought about her release, and ‘she again assumed an active political life, providing both military and political support for her sons.’ Eleanor “virtually governed England until Richard” could arrive there. “Close to Richard, she exercised considerable power throughout his reign, especially after he was captured while returning from the Third Crusade.”³¹ But Kishlansky says the dowager queen “governed the vast Angevin realm single-handedly” while Richard amused himself in war, both in the Holy Land and on the continent.³² She raised his ransom and succeeded in getting Richard released.³³ “Four months after Richard’s return, she retired to Fontevault Abbey...in June 1194. She was buried there ten years later in a nun’s habit.”³⁴ Only one text takes note of her role in John’s reign:

[At Richard’s death in 1199], Eleanor then worked as best she could to support her youngest son, John, as king of England and to preserve the dynastic network of her family. When King Philip Augustus, the son of her former husband, wanted to marry Eleanor’s granddaughter, Blanche of Castile, to his son, the future Louis VIII, Eleanor, although in her late seventies, made the arduous winter journey across the Pyrenees to Castile in order to fetch the bride. Worn out by her exertions, in 1202 Eleanor freely retired to the monastery where Henry had attempted to send her more than a quarter century before. She died there peacefully in 1204.³⁵

The sheer number of factual errors, contradictions, and suppositions this composite account contains is staggering. But as much as we might decry the state of textbook history, making it easy to dismiss this as the typical watering down of knowledge that happens as scholarship gets transmitted to the introductory levels of the undergraduate curriculum, some of these errors, contradictions and poorly-founded suppositions come from the pages of more scholarly publications. The textbook authors are not necessarily making it up or poorly transmitting the work of scholars.

A survey of the literature on Eleanor of Aquitaine reveals that time after time, scholars who accuse their predecessors of “exaggeration and anachronistic fantasy...wish-fulfillment and projection” or “gossip” about the queen cannot avoid the lure of doing the same. Even those who claim to limit themselves, as one historian recently did, to constructing a narrative of Eleanor’s life “based solely on her acts and the writings of her contemporaries, with any elaboration being...inferentially responsible” could make blanket statements about the queen’s emotional state such as that the first eight years of her marriage to Louis “were unhappy.”³⁶ Perhaps as a prosopographer I employ a different epistemology.

I will examine only a few events of Eleanor's life that have received frequent mention in the western civ. textbooks: the alleged affair between the queen and her uncle Raymond of Antioch; Eleanor's role in the development of courtly love; and her motives for involvement in the rebellion of her sons against their father in 1173–74.

Alison Weir, in her 1999 biography of Eleanor, states that "In the face of all the *reliable* contemporary evidence, it is puzzling to find that most of Eleanor's modern biographers do not accept that she had an adulterous affair with Raymond, when *in fact* the sources make it clear that she had tired of Louis and had begun to seek emotional—and possibly sexual—satisfaction elsewhere" (my emphasis).³⁷ This, despite strong social and religious taboos against sexual relations between uncle and niece and Raymond's reputation as a faithful husband, which Weir mentions elsewhere? Many, including Owen, have examined all the contemporary evidence—"reliable" or otherwise—about the time Eleanor and Louis spent in Antioch. Only one truly contemporary writer, William archbishop of Tyre, accuses Eleanor outright of adultery with Raymond—but he was a teen when the French royal couple were in the Holy Lands, though with the queen closely guarded, in obvious disgrace after leaving Antioch, and rumors flying, it would be no wonder if William drew a mistaken conclusion about the reason for the queen's disgrace.³⁸ John of Salisbury, secretary to the pope who reconciled the couple in 1149, tells only of Eleanor's indiscretion.³⁹ Other chroniclers had clearly heard the rumors and assumed the worst. An historian should be aware that where there's smoke there may or may not be fire. We will never know if Eleanor committed incestuous adultery with her uncle—and what does it matter to her significance to western civilization if she did?

Almost all the textbooks which mention Eleanor speak of her in relation to the development of courtly love, although they differ on the extent of the queen's role or the placement of her court or the presence of her eldest child, Countess Marie, at that court. While one text cautions that "the experts" disagree about Eleanor as patroness, there is supposedly no doubt that "the roots of courtly love were undoubtedly in her court."⁴⁰ Yet the fact is that all these points are debated by the experts. Amy Kelly and Marion Meade made much of the courts of love described by Andreas Capellanus. Even Owen, who attempted to divide myth and legend from fact in his biography of the queen, could not bring himself to totally reject Andreas Capellanus's depiction of the courts of love as fiction.⁴¹ Later scholars rejected or cast serious doubt on the notion that Andreas was present at Eleanor's court or that of her daughter Marie, and served as a sort of court reporter, as he describes himself in *De Amore*. It has been theorized that he wrote at and for the court of King Philip Augustus around 1190—a court where Eleanor was routinely vilified. Thus we should be skeptical of viewing the courts of love as anything but fictional, though we need not go so far as Elizabeth A.R. Brown and deny Eleanor any interest in literary or artistic patronage.⁴² Miriam Shadis makes a good case for Eleanor the patroness.⁴³

Finally, there is the rebellion of the princes in 1173–74 which Eleanor is supposed to have instigated, and the motives for her involvement. While most texts have claimed that the queen indeed was a major player in her sons' rebellions, and have ascribed her motive to revenge for Henry's public flaunting of his beloved mistress Rosamund Clifford, some claim that she wanted revenge for Henry's heavy-handed rule of her lands: "What so stirred the Queen must have been that public flaunting of the favorite, of which Giraldus [Gerald of Wales] speaks, in those palaces where she herself had reigned...the special flagrancy of the Clifford episode whereby the queen was affronted aroused for her...the support of her sons."⁴⁴ Brown mentions the queen's desire for revenge for "being excluded from [the] ceremony" at which Raymond of Toulouse rendered homage to Henry II and Richard as count of Poitou. She makes Eleanor a key player in the rebellion, perhaps the mastermind behind it.⁴⁵

Apart from the deduction that Henry would not have incarcerated the queen for the rest of his lifetime because of a minor indiscretion on Eleanor's part, Roger of Wendover seems our only source to name Eleanor, and even then he reports her role as rumor. He states that King Louis had instigated the rebellion of the princes, "and, as is said in some quarters, Eleanor queen of England herself." Roger is more willing to say that the queen capitalized on the Young King's actions, since she apparently sent Richard and Geoffrey to Paris "in order to join with him [their brother] against their father."⁴⁶

As for the motive of revenge for Henry's affair: Gerald of Wales is one of the few to discuss the king's affair with Rosamund Clifford, and he says the affair became public only *after* Eleanor was in captivity, thus Eleanor could not have been reacting to the *public* nature of the affair when (and if) she plotted against her husband.⁴⁷ That she might have ample cause to resent his private and relatively discreet affairs or other actions of the king is another matter, but we will never know the exact motives behind her actions.

I haven't gone into great depth here, but I hope I've provided enough evidence to suggest that many "facts" about Eleanor are actually speculation, and perhaps not even "good guessing."⁴⁸ Ann Trindade, the biographer of Eleanor's daughter-in-law Berengaria, argues that so much has been written of Eleanor that she's become mostly a fictional person.⁴⁹ Thus it is not surprising that the authors of western civilization texts have been challenged in deciding how to present this queen. They could have done worse. Their short statements do not generally try to relate Eleanor with other women of her time, allowing her to stand alone. That may give the impression that she was unique, and in some ways I think we all agree that she was. The problem is to determine when she was and when she wasn't. One of the more significant problems is how little we yet know about the context of her life. Women of the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries have not yet been the subject of extensive research; this has left scholars free to evaluate Eleanor based on our own assumptions about women of the twelfth century. That is being gradually remedied, as research is providing scholars with information about other queens, heiresses, and noblewomen.⁵⁰

But back to the textbook presentations of Eleanor. There is a definite imbalance of information presented, with the young queen much more likely to be mentioned than the older, politically astute queen, and more emphasis on her personal relations—particularly the more scandalous of them—than on her political roles. Several reasons come to mind which might explain this. Demand for more coverage of women's history in western civilization texts may cause some male authors to bow to that pressure by including information which marginalizes powerful women. By failing to mention Eleanor's importance as ruler of her inherited realms, an active agent and advisor to husbands and sons, the queen is subtly discredited. Ironically, the text written by a team led by feminist historian Lynn Hunt has relatively little on Eleanor. There has also been a shift in philosophy in the writing of historical textbooks, from works relatively devoid of personality to an emphasis on story and personality, perhaps in an attempt to capture the attention and appeal to the interests of students in survey courses. Are scandal, courts of love, and getting revenge on a straying husband intrinsically more interesting than political roles? Ask your students. But as the purpose of textbooks is to enable and contribute to instruction and learning, perhaps there is a way of including more about the significance of this queen while recounting facts that the student audience will find interesting and memorable.

My advice to those writing about Eleanor: give us the facts as you can determine them and your best guess when you can't, distinguish between the two, and then distort away!

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¹ D.D.R. Owen, *Eleanor of Aquitaine: Queen and Legend* (Oxford: Blackwell's, 1996).

² Mark Kishlansky, Patrick Geary, Patricia O'Brien, *Civilization in the West*, 5/e (New York: Addison Wesley Longman, 2003), 264–65.

³ Kishlansky, 264.

⁴ Mortimer Chambers et al., *The Western Experience*, 8th edn. (Boston: McGraw Hill, 2003), 310.

⁵ Chambers, 312, "more than doubled;" Thomas Noble et al., *Western Civilization: The Continuing Experiment*, 2/e (Houghton Mifflin), 329, "multiplied by many times."

⁶ Noble, 329; see also Chambers, 312: "the couple's incompatibility soon became clear."

⁷ Kishlansky, 264.

⁸ Chambers, 313.

⁹ Richard Greaves, Robert Zaller, Jennifer T. Roberts, *Civilizations of the West*. 2nd ed. (New York: Addison Wesley Longman, 1997), 218.

¹⁰ Chambers, 313; Greaves, 218.

¹¹ Greaves, 218.

¹² Lynn Hunt et al., *The Making of the West: Peoples and Cultures, A Concise History* (Boston & New York: Bedford St. Martin, 2003), 364.

¹³ Hunt, 364.

¹⁴ Greaves, 218. In this text, "regent" is nowhere defined.

¹⁵ Donald Kagan, *The Western Heritage: Brief Edition*, 2nd ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1998), 136.

- ¹⁶ Kagan, 136.
- ¹⁷ Chambers, 304; Greaves, 212.
- ¹⁸ Margaret King, *Western Civilization: A Social and Cultural History, 2/e* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2003), 242.
- ¹⁹ Greaves, 212–23.
- ²⁰ Kishlansky, 265.
- ²¹ Chambers, 305.
- ²² Kagan, 147.
- ²³ Kishlansky, 265.
- ²⁴ Kishlansky, 265.
- ²⁵ Greaves, 212.
- ²⁶ Kishlansky, 265.
- ²⁷ Hunt, 364–66.
- ²⁸ Kishlansky, p. 265; for naming of Winchester Castle, Hunt, 366.
- ²⁹ Greaves, 212.
- ³⁰ Kagan, 136.
- ³¹ Jackson Spielvogel, *Western Civilization, 5/e* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2002).
- ³² Kishlansky, 265.
- ³³ Greaves, 213; Kishlansky, 265.
- ³⁴ Greaves, 213.
- ³⁵ Kishlansky, 265.
- ³⁶ Elizabeth A.R. Brown, "Eleanor of Aquitaine Reconsidered: The Woman and Her Seasons," in *Eleanor of Aquitaine: Lord and Lady*, ed. B. Wheeler & J. C. Parsons (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).
- ³⁷ Alison Weir, *Eleanor of Aquitaine: A Life* (New York: Ballantine, 2000), 66.
- ³⁸ William of Tyre, *A History of Deeds Done Beyond the Sea*, trans. E.A. Babcock and A.C. Krey (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1943), 181.
- ³⁹ John of Salisbury, *Memoirs of the Papal Court*, trans. Marjorie Chibnall (London: Thomas Nelson, 1956), 52–53.
- ⁴⁰ Greaves, 212–13.
- ⁴¹ Owen, 152–56.
- ⁴² Elizabeth A.R. Brown, "Eleanor of Aquitaine Reconsidered: The Woman and Her Seasons," in *Eleanor of Aquitaine: Lord and Lady*, 2.
- ⁴³ Miriam Shadis, "Piety, Politics, and Power: The Patronage of Eleanor of Aquitaine and Her Daughters Berenguela of León and Blanche of Castile" in *The Cultural Patronage of Medieval Women*, ed. June Hall McCash (Athens, GA: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1996), 202–27.
- ⁴⁴ Amy Kelly, *Eleanor of Aquitaine and the Four Kings* (New York: Vintage Books, 1957), 191.
- ⁴⁵ Brown, 13.
- ⁴⁶ Roger of Wendover, *Flores Historiarum*, ed. H.G. Hewlett (London: Roll Series, 1886-9) I: 91–92.
- ⁴⁷ Gerald of Wales, *Opera*, ed. J. S. Brewer (London: Roll Series, 1861-91) 8:165.
- ⁴⁸ John Arnold, *History: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 12.
- ⁴⁹ Ann Trindade, *Berengaria: In Search of Richard the Lionheart's Queen* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1999), 63.
- ⁵⁰ See, for example, *Eleanor of Aquitaine: Lord and Lady*, ed. B. Wheeler & J. C. Parsons (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).