

Motherly Devotion and Fatherly Obligation: Eleanor of Aquitaine's Letters to Pope Celestine III

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*Quis non posset contristari,
piam matrem contemplari
dolentum cum Filio?*

...

*Vidit suum dulcem Natum
morientem, desolatum,
cum emisit spiritum.*

...

*Eia, Mater, fons amoris
me sentire vim doloris
fac, ut tecum lugeam.¹*

—From the *Stabat Mater*, 13th century

IN 1193, WHILE RETURNING FROM the Third Crusade, King Richard I of England was captured by Duke Leopold V of Austria and handed over as a prisoner to the Holy Roman Emperor Henry VI, who held him to ransom for the exorbitant sum of 150,000 silver marks, some two to three times the annual income of the English crown.² King Philip II of France offered the emperor 80,000 marks to *keep* Richard imprisoned indefinitely, which would have allowed Philip the opportunity to seize Richard's continental holdings and Prince John, the English crown. The Plantagenet possessions had been entrusted to Prince John and Eleanor of Aquitaine, the Queen Mother—Queen of England, former Queen of France, Duchess of Aquitaine, Countess of Poitou, et cetera—during Richard's absence. During the year of Richard's imprisonment, Eleanor wrote three letters to Pope Celestine III, first asking, then demanding, his intercession on Richard's behalf to end his captivity.³ Although Eleanor's name has come down to us mostly through her association with the rise of *fin' amor* and the courtly love tradition and as a tangential character in the Robin Hood legends, she was the wife of two kings and

the mother of two more, as well as a ruler in her own right. “Though her reputation derives largely from earlier events in her life,” Ralph Turner notes, “especially her unhappy marriages to two kings, she exercised her greatest political power as a widow,”⁴ and it is what she accomplished as a widow that is of interest to us here.

Back to the year 1193, when Richard was held captive by the Holy Roman Emperor and Eleanor approached the pope for intervention. While Celestine hesitated to get involved in the fraught political situation, Eleanor played a vital role not only in collecting the ransom and negotiating his release, but also in protecting Richard’s holdings from John’s attempts to usurp the throne:

When news arrived early in 1193 of Richard’s imprisonment in Germany, Eleanor assumed a position of direct authority in England. . . . John had menaced the kingdom’s peace since Philip II’s return from the crusade, and as soon as he learned of his brother’s imprisonment, he rushed to the French court to do homage to Philip for the Plantagenet continental domains. When John returned to England, declaring Richard dead and demanding recognition as king, Eleanor rallied the government to the captive king.⁵

Aware of Henry VI’s reputation and his hostile relationship with the Holy See, Eleanor was especially concerned that Richard had fallen into the Emperor’s hands. One outcome of Eleanor’s maneuvering was the three letters written in her name to Pope Celestine III seeking papal support for Richard’s release. Celestine had promised three times to send a legate to intercede on Richard’s behalf, but continued to postpone. Eleanor “felt that he should be doing a lot more to alleviate the situation, and . . . angrily castigated him for his tardiness in aiding a crusader who was supposed to be under the Church’s protection”;⁶ Richard should have been protected by the pope both as a crusader and as a Christian king. Turner remarks that the letters “witness her ‘passionate, wrathful frenzy to secure his release’ [and] express her almost religious devotion for her captive son.”⁷ Frequently referenced by historians and biographers, these letters give Eleanor a voice in a way unlike most of the other documents that have survived bearing her name. This article will concentrate on the manner in which gender and family roles—specifically,

the mother-father-son triad—are manipulated in these letters, and how Eleanor’s “religious devotion” serves to further her agenda, that is, to intercede on Richard’s behalf with both emperor and pope.

Eleanor of Aquitaine—a rare woman who has retained her patronymic title to posterity—led a long and varied career as one of the most influential—and certainly the richest—woman in Europe. From her early teens she was *suo jure* ruler of Aquitaine and Poitou and in 1137 made a dynastic marriage with Louis VII of France, by whom she had two daughters. In 1152, her marriage with Louis was annulled on the grounds of consanguinity within the fourth degree, although their two daughters, Marie and Alix, were declared legitimate and remained in the custody of their father. Eleanor’s dowry of her patrimonial lands, which had never been merged with the French territories, was restored to her. Two months later, Eleanor married Henry, Duke of Normandy—eleven years her junior—who, two years later, ascended the English throne as Henry II, claiming his right to the throne as the son of the Empress Mathilda, the only surviving legitimate heir of Henry I. During the last sixteen years of Henry’s reign (1173–89) Eleanor was imprisoned for supporting her younger sons’ revolt against their father, but she was released on Richard’s ascension to the throne in 1189.⁸

Eleanor had at least ten children who lived past infancy, nine of whom lived into adulthood and married themselves, though all but two—her namesake, Eleanor of Castile, wife of Alfonso VIII, and John—predeceased her. By the least estimate, she was 80 years old at her death in 1204.⁹ Her actual relationships with her children are a matter of supposition: many scholars view her leaving her two eldest daughters upon her divorce from Louis as reprehensible, although, since they were declared legitimate, it seems unlikely that they would have been permitted to leave their father’s court.¹⁰ On the other hand, Eleanor is documented as having travelled frequently and over long distances accompanied by the children of her second marriage, not an easy accomplishment given the difficulties of twelfth-century travel. RáGena DeAragon notes: “For no other noblewoman do we have similar evidence of such close contact with her children. . . . Contact is not equivalent to affectionate concern, of course, but here the evidence is insufficient. It is unlikely, for example, that messages between mothers and children

would have been preserved.”¹¹ Indeed, the few letters that have survived between Eleanor and her sons are related to matters of state and indicate the respect in which she was held by her sons and her ongoing political influence. They should not be read as evidence of a close emotional relationship, but rather as evidence of her ongoing dynastic mission. Turner argues that “Eleanor manifested her strongest maternal feelings in Richard’s and John’s adult years, as she struggled to help them secure their inheritances and preserve their possessions.”¹²

First though, a caveat: these three letters have survived among the papers of Peter of Blois, who had previously served under Henry II, and were written during his tenure as Eleanor’s Latin secretary from 1190–95. Some historians view them as having been composed entirely by Peter, with Eleanor contributing only her signature, and others as rhetorical exercises on Peter’s part.¹³ Eleanor, however, was unusually well educated for a medieval woman and could read Latin as well as her native Poitevan dialect;¹⁴ she would have learned Norman French later on and possibly some English, although “there is no evidence that [she] ever learned to write.”¹⁵ It is fair to assume that given both her political savvy—she survived and prospered as queen of two different courts, and duchess of a third—and her education, she would have exerted at least some control over the way in which Peter wrote the letters and represented her within them.¹⁶ In reading these letters, therefore, we must be conscious both of Peter’s theological and formal training in the liberal arts, rhetoric, and dictaminal forms, since he was no doubt involved in their writing as both scribe and secretary, and provided the rhetorical flourishes and plentiful Biblical allusions that pepper the letters, as well as of Eleanor’s education and control over her image.¹⁷ Regardless, what matters, as Joan Ferrante points out, is that the letters were written to the pope in the queen’s name and are certainly evidence of a textual representation of Eleanor.¹⁸ For the sake of simplicity, however, in this paper I will refer to Eleanor as the author of the letters.

While many historians have used these letters solely as documents to fill in the historical record, and they are frequently cited by Eleanor’s biographers, I will be concentrating on these three letters as literary texts, focusing on the three “characters” of the letters—Eleanor, Celestine, and Richard—and the tropes of the *mater dolorosa*, the *pater absens*,

and the *filius Christus* that correlate with each of the players as Eleanor uses them. These tropes line up with familial structures and the triad of the Holy Family and are particularly useful given the importance of the nuclear family unit during the Middle Ages.¹⁹

The *mater dolorosa*, the grieving mother, is visible in Eleanor's constant self-portrayal as weeping, falling to pieces, inconsolable at the loss of her son, and physically in pain at the thought of his imagined pain. At the same time, she is the patient sufferer of the cares and woes that God has imposed upon her in this life; she weeps for her son's future death knowing he will die without the intercession of his father. Both of the "fathers" addressed in the letters, Celestine and God, are absent from the action that Eleanor narrates, and indeed it is Celestine's very absence that motivates Eleanor to write in the first place. He is the passive recipient of Eleanor's missives, and is far physically—and emotionally, it seems—from Richard in his captivity and Eleanor in her suffering. The pope is also equated with Joseph, the surrogate father who is absent in Christ's later life. Eleanor portrays Richard as the anointed son, who is only ever the topic of her letters, never a participant, despite the fact that he is described in active terms as "Crusader," "anointed of the Lord," "soldier of Christ," and "pilgrim of the Cross." Instead, his captivity and his very lack of agency are the impetus behind the letters. As well, as an anointed king, Richard has claims to an almost Christ-like status and is possessed of the divine right of kingship; only to God and the pope does he owe duty. He suffers his captivity patiently, presumably accepting the torments of his oppressors, but abandoned by his fathers—earthly, spiritual, and heavenly—his mother is his only hope of salvation.

Given the manner in which Eleanor constructs epistolary personas for herself, for Celestine, and for Richard as part of a familial structure, it seems fruitful to examine that structure more closely. For although Richard and Celestine are members of the family structure that Eleanor creates, she, as the mother, is the key to the matrix. In her essay, "Stabat Mater" (1977), Julia Kristeva examines the way in which motherhood interacts with language, "the bridge between nature and culture," and stands at the intersection of the Symbolic and Semiotic:²⁰

Because the cuts and breaking inherent in giving birth and

childrearing do not imprint death in the mother's unconscious they introduce difference into language. . . . The mother resides in the prelinguistic phase and beyond the parentheses of language. . . . Motherhood means that the mother experiences the body and the transmission of speech as continuous with each other.²¹

The fact of motherhood operates in the unconscious and the imagination, and ties language into the body and the *experience* of motherhood. Susan Suleiman sums up as follows:

The order of the symbolic, which is the order of language, of culture, of the law, of the name-of-the-Father (to use Lacan's terminology), is especially difficult for women to accede to, whether for historical or other reasons. Motherhood, which establishes a *natural* link (the child) between woman and the social world, provides a privileged means of entry into the order of culture and of language. This privilege belongs to the mother . . . not only in contrast to women who are not mothers but also in contrast to men, whose relationship to the symbolic is itself problematical, characterized by discontinuity, separation, [and] absence. . . . But for the mother, according to Kristeva, the Other is not (only) an arbitrary sign, a necessary absence: it is the child, whose presence and whose bodily link to her are inescapable givens, material facts.²²

Motherhood therefore provides a woman with an entry point into the Symbolic order of language, but this point is privileged and belongs uniquely to women who have given birth, and it cannot be appropriated by anyone else. To be a mother is to inhabit a particular position, and since it is a position based on material facts, it cannot be altered: either one is or one is not. Kristeva views the maternal as prefiguring the entry into language for the child and a space for the mother as an individual and subject, focusing on the way in which the role of mother endows a woman with a recognizable identity, one that cannot be ignored by society. "The mother's subjectivity is characterized by the emergence of the capacity for concern for the other," and with that subjectivity comes a voice that cannot be silenced—when she is speaking of, or for, her child.²³ Thus Eleanor's voice in her letters to Celestine is a voice that is

demanding, that cannot be ignored. Her maternal capacity is embodied in that voice, and her position as mother demands that she speak, that she not be silenced. While a mother is a mother by virtue of having once given birth, can her status be undermined by the adulthood and absence of her child? The maternal seems to function regardless of the presence or absence of the child, but necessitates the presence of the mother. The child's necessary separation from the mother on growing up has minimal impact on her role. On the other hand, the father's relationship with the child is here predicated on his absence.

Let us take Kristeva's "maternal subject" and step backwards to Eleanor's letters. Corey J. Marvin, in *The Word Outward*, argues that "to enter into selfhood in this 'fallen' [postlapsarian and medieval] world [is] to do so within a precarious and uncertain linguistic construct. Self-awareness [is] reliant upon a set of systematic codes constantly in need of interpretation—codes that contain ambiguities and deceptions undermining interpretation and making direct knowledge impossible."²⁴ Eleanor's selfhood is doubly precarious because of her position as a woman; in order to claim and authorize a "self" who can speak, she must find precedent codes for a woman speaking. Eleanor needs a role model who can grant authority to her words and to the very fact of her voice; the obvious choice for her is the Virgin Mary.²⁵ As the Queen of Heaven, Mary is the most powerful woman Eleanor could possibly call upon—she has a close personal relationship with both God the Father and God the Son.²⁶ At the same time, she is a particularly multivalent figure, as Virgin, Queen, Bride, Mother, and Intercessor. The roles of virgin and bride are of no particular use to Eleanor, as she is no longer either, but the remaining three—queen, mother, and intercessor—offer her some useful, powerful, and vocal symbols to work with.

In "Stabat Mater," Julia Kristeva presents a maternal voice that is activated only through the birth of the child, a voice that cannot be ignored or contained once a woman has crossed that threshold to become a mother. In her lyrical account of childbirth, set in opposition to the academic language of the rest of the essay, Kristeva comments on the emotive and affective qualities of the maternal voice. Eleanor's voice is allowed and empowered by her maternal status and reinforced by the status of her child (although Richard is the only child of importance in

these letters); she is not only “mother,” she is “*Queen Mother*,” the one to whom all other women must cede precedence, just as the human Mary is the Mother of God and one to whom all mortal women are subject. Margaret Bruzelius, in her Kristevan analysis of maternal imagery in Gabriela Mistral’s poetry, notes “as the model mother of Christianity, Mary gains voice—her ability to speak even though she is a woman in a male-regulated hierarchy—through her absolute identification with her child. The church glorifies Mary’s pain and tears at Golgotha as the supreme instance of her loving submission to her son—to her God.”²⁷ While I would hesitate to posit such submission to Richard by Eleanor, her identification with him is extremely strong, and she is willing to use the strength of that bond to her advantage.

The alignment of Eleanor-the-Queen-Mother with Mary-the-Queen-of-Heaven would have been obvious to the recipient of her letters: the most powerful woman in the world and the most powerful woman in Heaven match up neatly. And, as Barbara Newman remarks, “many women saw [Mary] not as standing ‘alone of all her sex,’ but as supremely imitable,” the highest-ranking human being, and the one to whom all others should aspire.²⁸ Eleanor, in the third letter to Celestine, calls on Mary as “mother of mercy” in her capacity as intercessor, but it is with Mary’s role as “mother” that Eleanor chooses to weight her argument. In “*Stabat Mater*,” Kristeva writes:

Striking a shrewd balance between concessions to and constraints upon female paranoia, the representation of virgin motherhood seems to have crowned society’s efforts to reconcile survivals of matrilinearity and the unconscious needs of primary narcissism on the one hand with, on the other hand, the imperatives of the nascent exchange economy and, before long, of accelerated production, which required the addition of the superego and relied on the father’s symbolic authority.²⁹

The emphasis is on Mary’s unique status as *virgo intacta* both pre- and postpartum, but her virginity is notable mostly because of her motherhood. Had she not become a mother, she would simply have been a virgin, which is not remarkable in and of itself. Eleanor, unlike her much later successor Elizabeth I, the “*Virgin Queen*,” was very much a mother

and wife; while Elizabeth underpinned much of her voice and authority on the fact of her virginity, Eleanor used her maternity.

But how does the widow fit into Kristeva's argument regarding motherhood? While not a virgin, Eleanor is husbandless, chaste, and her child is fatherless. Her only obligation is to her offspring, as she has left her father's authority for her husband's; on her husband's death, her duty is owed to her next nearest male relative, her husband's son. Kristeva offers the binary of virgin or mother, but the assumption is that a woman must either be virginal or involved in a sexual and procreative relationship, with Mary as the exception that proves the rule.³⁰ Widows with children, however, never lose their status as mothers, though they may be excluded from sexual, procreative relationships. These women, it seems, straddle the binary that Kristeva outlines between mothers and non-mothers, using their procreative status as mothers to "en-voice" their desires, to create a space where speech is possible—so long as those desires are congruent with the best interests of the child and their maternal roles. A widow was frequently an exception to many customs or laws that bound unmarried or married women, customs that might otherwise have restricted her geographical location or movements, her economic interests, or her legal standing.

The medieval subject, as Marvin notes, is "inextricably bound up with language. . . . Not only were the Middle Ages keenly aware of the materiality or embodiment of language—the rhythm of script on the eye, taste of words in the mouth—but they also knew that selfhood depended on language and speaking."³¹ The very embodiment and materiality of language that Marvin identifies is, I argue, bound up in these three letters with Eleanor's body, in particular, with her suffering, weeping, and mourning maternal body. That is, the state of her body as that of a mother, one who has given birth, as well as one who is in danger of losing the one to whom she has given birth, gives an extraordinary power to her words. She is, after all, a woman who dares to remonstrate, quite forcefully, with the pope—God's chosen representative on earth—and does not seem to have "difficulty with the Symbolic realm and with acknowledging and being acknowledged by the father or the husband."³² However, such a position necessitates that Eleanor have something more

behind her to entitle her to speak than merely the position of her late husband and eldest surviving son.

The *mater dolorosa*

As Eleanor creates her subject position within the letters to Celestine, she does so within a predetermined set of tropes. In order to successfully position Celestine so that he must cooperate with her, she must navigate the images of motherhood available to her—the most exemplary of all being the Virgin Mary. She asks, rhetorically, “Who will let me die for you, my son? *Mother of mercy, look on a mother of such misery*, or if your son, an endless font of mercy, exacts the sins of the mother from the son, let him exact them only from the one who sinned, let him punish the impious, not laugh at the punishments of the innocent.”³³ With only this one direct invocation of Mary, the *mater misericordiae* who intercedes for mortals—including Eleanor as the *mater miseriae*—with God, Eleanor neatly parallels their equal positions as mothers; she does not call on Mary as the *mater dolorosa*, for although Mary could commiserate with her, it is the role that Eleanor is attempting to inhabit for herself.

According to Marina Warner in *Alone of All Her Sex*, the cult of the *mater dolorosa* had its beginnings at the end of the eleventh century, and did not reach its peak until the fourteenth century.³⁴ The trope of the “Lady of Sorrows” upon which Eleanor draws would certainly have been recognized at the end of the twelfth century: the mourning mother of Christ was a well-established figure. Warner’s analysis of the *mater dolorosa* does not engage particularly with the representative function of this aspect of the Virgin; that is, that the mourning mother—much more so than the virgin bride—is a figure with which every woman who has lost a child can identify, which is a large number given the infant mortality rates of the Middle Ages.³⁵ A mother mourning the death of a child is an almost universal figure, but at the same time she is a specifically feminine one, one whose tears have been granted license by the women (the Virgin Mary, Mary Magdalene) who wept for Jesus at the foot of the cross. The mother who has lost a child has also fulfilled her duty to bear children and has suffered through the painful labor that is

womankind's punishment for Original Sin.³⁶ Mere mortal men cannot console, understand, answer, or silence the mourning mother.

Kelly Oliver notes that “for Kristeva, the pregnant woman or mother is an incarnation of the split subject,” implying that Eleanor’s subjectivity is split with Richard’s, just as her desires are split with his.³⁷ But given that in 1193 she has two surviving sons—not to mention her daughters—her subjectivity should really be split many ways. Or perhaps the split is simply mother/child, where “child” can belong to a multiplicity of individuals. I would argue, however, that Eleanor’s subjectivity is mostly her own; while she makes use of her position as a mother, she is one of the very few women who had a voice within the symbolic order *before* the moment of motherhood—from the moment of her father’s death, in fact, and before her marriage to Louis VII. While Eleanor certainly amassed more and more authority to her voice through her association with the men in her life, both husbands and sons, her first exercises of her voice came at a time in her life when she was without close male relatives, as ruler of Aquitaine in her own right.

If it is true that “the maternal body is allowed joy only in pain [and as] Kristeva suggests that the silent ear, milk, and tears ‘are metaphors of nonspeech,’ of a ‘semiotics’ that linguistic communication does not account for,” then Eleanor’s persona in her letters should revel in her status as *dolorosa*.³⁸ Instead, the letters seek the avoidance of pain, for unlike the Virgin who knows—and, indeed, has known from the beginning—that her Son must die, Eleanor is trying to prevent the event that must cause her a grief that she will take no joy or satisfaction in. While invoking the tropes of the Virgin’s sorrows, Eleanor does her best to keep *her* son alive, rather than meekly or humbly accepting his death. But, while the sorrows and mourning that Eleanor invoke give power to her voice in a register that cannot be ignored, should she succeed in her quest to free Richard, then at the moment in which he is restored to her, she ceases to be able to align herself with the *mater dolorosa*, and she loses the power that she had assumed. Marvin differentiates between “good” mourning, where loss is transcended, and “bad” mourning, where the mourner refuses to transcend loss for the good of the community;³⁹ “transcending” her loss is precisely what Eleanor refuses to do—instead her loss *is* transcendental and she wields it for the good

of the very community that she is trying to protect. Eleanor uses her letters to Celestine to try to end Richard's death-like captivity, not in order to mitigate her own grief, but rather for the good of his spiritual subjects, to whom he is *de facto* father.

Eleanor is far from subtle in her use of Marian imagery in the letters and is conspicuous in her grief; "Release me, lord," she writes in the second letter, "that I may weep a little for my sorrow. For I do not know by what pact the impulse of anxiety relaxes from lament and the profusion of tears."⁴⁰ She writes her grief as unstoppable, a force to be reckoned with, and Celestine is not expected to be able to mitigate her suffering—nor does she want him to. Instead, Eleanor wants Celestine to be so uncomfortable with her "profusion of tears" that he accedes to her requests. Eleanor experiences grief as a physical pain as much as a spiritual or emotional one; it is violent and passionate. "[T]he arrows of the Lord are in me, and the indignity of it drains my spirit";⁴¹ she is literally pierced by pain, as Mary is at the prophecy of Simon, "Yea, a sword shall pierce through thy own soul also."⁴² In the second letter, Eleanor's pain is literally visceral, when "the Lord pierced us with grave wounds and cruel castigation! The tyrant [Henry VI] tore out my entrails from me and committed iniquities despoiling churches."⁴³ Eleanor repeats the image of her disembowelment several times, and in the third letter goes so far as to describe her own decay, a kind of life-in-death:

I am wasted away by sorrow, my bone clings to the consumed flesh of my skin, my years decline in sighs—would that they might give out altogether, that the blood of my already dead body, the brain in my head, the marrow of my bones might dissolve in tears, that I might completely vanish in weeping. My entrails are torn from me, I have lost the staff of my old age and the light of my eyes; it would answer my prayers if God condemned my unfortunate eyes to perpetual blindness so they might no longer see the ills of my people.⁴⁴

Here, however, not only are her bowels torn out, but a total decay of the living body takes place; and the extreme physical pain that Eleanor claims is unanswerable, a "non-language, . . . a 'semiotic' that does not coincide with linguistic communication."⁴⁵ Oliver argues, "the cult of

the Virgin controls maternity and mothers by doing violence to them. Like sacrifice, the cult of the Virgin contains the violence of semiotic drives by turning violence against them. The Virgin's only pleasure is her child who is not hers alone but everyone's, while her silent sorrow is hers alone."⁴⁶ Yet Eleanor's conscious invocation of these aspects allows her to position herself *alongside* the Virgin Mary, a place of particular power. Every word she writes is overshadowed by the presence of the Virgin; her voice echoes with Mary's. The violence is being done as much—if not more—to her son, and so she turns the violence of her voice against the patriarchy, so easily figured in the person of the pope, the patriarch second only to God the Father. At the same time, she calls on the ultimate Patriarch's Law, the Law of the Father, to enforce it upon the surrogate, Celestine III. "Who began [my life]," writes Eleanor,

let him destroy me, let him take his hand and cut me off; and let this be my consolation, that afflicting me with pain, he not spare me. 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. The young king and the count of Brittany sleep in dust, and their most unhappy mother is compelled to be irremediably tormented by the memory of the dead. Two sons remain to my solace, who today survive to punish me, miserable and condemned. King Richard is held in chains. His brother, John, depletes his kingdom with iron [sword] and lays it waste with fire.⁴⁷

Eleanor not only reiterates her visceral reaction to the thought of losing a son, but points out that she has already lost two; her grief is not only imagined at the thought of Richard's death, but real at the death of two of her other sons in the preceding decade. And while Eleanor has two sons left to her, her solace in her old age, only Richard is worthy of her care and must be protected against John's fratricidal and regicidal impulses.

But despite the powerful physical imagery that Eleanor uses, it all serves one purpose: to authorize her voice and arguments against the pope, for her grief can be used as an excuse for the harshness of her

demands and remonstrations, “the overflowing of [her] heart and the violence of [her] grief evoked some less cautious word against the prince of priests. Grief is not very different from illness.”⁴⁸ It is her grief that impels her to speak, and the recipient of her words cannot—or ought not to—take offence or ignore her. “Let no one be surprised, then, if the power of grief makes the words more harsh, for I lament a public loss while the private grief is inconsolably rooted in the depths of my spirit. For the arrows of the Lord are in me, and the indignity of it drains my spirit.”⁴⁹ In effect, her grief gives her voice, or more generally, a mother’s grief should not be silenced, but rather must be heard. Likewise, Mary’s grief cannot be silenced—though her right to lament is frequently questioned by exegetes, since she ought not to be sad at the thought of Christ’s death, because of his future resurrection, nor in the face of God’s will, since “mothers, all mothers, purchase speech through pain, and if they are not speaking from the authority that pain gives them, they are not really speaking.”⁵⁰ The “Lord’s arrows” invoke the martyrs, whose corporeal sufferings release their voices, giving speech to the mute or unceasing voices to overcome their tormentors. The pain and suffering of the physical body—even if only metaphorically—enables a truthful speech; Eleanor cannot lie or equivocate for her body is in too much pain; her pain must also be true, for she speaks it.

Eleanor locates her voice in her grief which itself has a physical manifestation in the pain that she writes. Eleanor ends her second letter quoting Job, placing Celestine in a position where her words must be accepted as a veracious outpouring of grief: “But with equanimity, I ask, father, that your benignity accept that it issued from sorrow, not from deliberation. I have sinned, and if I may use the word of blessed Job, ‘what I have said, would that I had not said, therefore I say no more, and I put my finger over my mouth.’”⁵¹ Bruzelius notes that, “it seems as though women who speak as mothers can only speak as the sorrowing Mary because within our culture happy mothers have no voice: they have not purchased the right to speak through pain.”⁵²

The *pater absens*

The absence of the father-figure plays a key role in Eleanor's appeal to the pope, who is literally the father of Christians, though he is perhaps more of a foster-father, for God the Father is the ultimate and supreme Father of Christ, all humanity, and the Church, not only of Christians. The Father, head of both the earthly family and the Holy Family, is particularly responsible for the well-being of his family, and must secure their interests.

As pope, Celestine plays a dual role as a figurative father to both Richard and his mother. He is the head of the Church, the father of the Christian family, a true *pater familias*; his authority as father comes from the Father. But he is in the odd position of being a father while still under the authority of his own father, both of them wed to the Holy Church. The Oedipal triads begin to overlap each other as Mary and Jesus are included in this matrix. While we cannot attribute any conscious intent on Eleanor's part to invoke the Freudian family romance, she does play on Celestine's position within that matrix: "I ask your paternity to recall what a friend my husband the king [Henry II], father of this king was to you and how faithful; consider how benign to paternal devotion his successor has been."⁵³ To simplify, Eleanor is asking her spiritual father the pope to remember the biological father (Henry II) of the king (Richard I)—to whom he is also spiritual father—both of whom are the metaphorical sons of Eleanor's own pontifical father. The complexity of the affiliations is such that Eleanor has a vast arsenal of relationships on which she can call. With the constant emphasis on paternal roles within a short sentence, Eleanor is not willing to let Celestine forget or renege on the duty he owes in exchange for Richard's acceptance of "paternal devotion."

"As parents, they [God the Father and the Virgin Mother] suffer the pain and death of their Son together. . . . He mourns with her over the body of their son."⁵⁴ And yet, regardless of God the Father's grief over his Son's death, he is physically absent from depictions of Mary's lamentations for the dead Christ as is Christ's earthly surrogate father, Joseph.⁵⁵ Whether Christ's body is held by Mary herself or by Joseph of Arimathea and other disciples, Joseph is not in the picture, and while

God is present in these scenes as God the Son, God the Father is not to be seen; instead Jesus cries out on the cross: "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"⁵⁶ Within the familial bonds that Eleanor draws, Richard has indeed been forsaken by Celestine, who does not seem to grieve with Eleanor or share in the pain of Richard's impending death as the *mater dolorosa* often shares an affective crucifixion with her Son. Instead, the forsaking is profound, and both spiritual and physical: not only does Celestine reject his role as Richard's "father," he also ignores the supplications of Richard's mother. Yet, if Richard has been forsaken by his father, he is that much more like to Christ on the Cross, who feels his Father has abandoned him in his hour of need. Linking Richard with the Crucified Christ through paternal absence only serves to strengthen Eleanor's rhetorical position.

Eleanor takes the matter up directly with Celestine: "The son of God, by the witness of the prophet, descended from heaven to lead the vanquished from the lake in which there was no water. Is not what was fitting for God fitting for the servant of God? My son is tormented in chains and you do not descend nor send to him; you are not moved by Joseph's grief."⁵⁷ David Herlihy points out that Joseph is almost entirely absent in early medieval writings as well as iconography, but Celestine seems even more ineffectual than the absent Joseph, who at least mourned Christ's death.⁵⁸ Eleanor indicates her past and present goodwill towards the papacy, but holds nothing back in stating her demands: "I ask that your life/soul be safe while you strive to procure with swift legations, with salutary admonitions, with thundering threats, with general interdictions, with terrible judgments, the freedom not of your sheep but of *your son*. Truly you should offer your life for him, you who until now have not wanted to say or write one word."⁵⁹ Celestine's hesitancy to act in this matter incites Eleanor to write, "Give my son back to me, man of God, if you are a man of God and not a man of blood. If you are sluggish in the freeing of my son, may the Highest exact his blood from your hand."⁶⁰ The curse of God's judgment that Eleanor calls down on Celestine is a serious one, and one that he might be expected to take seriously: his failure to act as befits both a spiritual and temporal father is deserving of divine punishment.

From the beginning of the correspondence, Eleanor does not seem

to have had any high regard for Celestine's actions in this matter, and in response her grief is no longer containable within her body, but expands to encompass all of Christendom:

Peoples ripped apart, the lacerated multitude, desolated provinces, and the whole western church, consumed by laments, in contrite and humbled spirit beg you whom God set over peoples and kingdoms in every fullness of power. I beg that the clamor of the afflicted enter your ears; for our calamities are multiplied beyond number. You cannot pretend not to know of the crime and infamy, when you are the vicar of the crucified, the successor of Peter, the priest of Christ, the anointed of the Lord.⁶¹

His refusal to hear the clamor of the afflicted is criminal, and Eleanor begs him not to turn away from his children. What father would forsake his child in pain? Indeed, "the whole tragedy of this evil will redound on you, since you are the father of orphans and judge of widows, the consoler of the grieving and sorrowing," although Celestine is failing to act as either father to an orphaned Richard or as consoler to Eleanor, a widow bereft of her children; John is of no importance to her other than the threat that he poses to Richard.⁶²

Celestine's position comes with obligations that he is, in Eleanor's view, hesitant to fulfill: "Lord, in your power the King will rejoice and the Roman church, which now is so culpably slow in his liberation, will blush, not without tears, that it did not help/recognize such a son in such anguish."⁶³ Eleanor is calling on shame to motivate him, if nothing else will:

Let your hand seize judgment and with the power conferred on you by heaven take the staff of sinners from above the fate of the just, and with the shield of your good will protect my son. Do not let the son of iniquity harm the innocent any further. When the innocence of my son the king has witnesses near and far, you have no excuse from sin. What excuse could modify your sloth and lack of care, when it is clear to all that you have the power of freeing my son and lack the will?⁶⁴

Celestine, by failing to protect his spiritual son as well as the son of

his Father, Eleanor seems to say, casts doubt on his own worthiness to wield the “power conferred by heaven” on him by his Father. The tone is also threatening as Eleanor points out the “witnesses near and far” that leave Celestine with no excuse for his lack of action; that Eleanor feels that she has the authority to make such an overtly aggressive statement to Celestine invites the question as to just how powerful Eleanor is in her position as mother, that she can confront the Father. But this threatening voice is nonetheless not a position at odds with Eleanor’s alignment of herself with Mary, who, in her role as intercessor, is at times both aggressive and threatening in her pursuit of salvation on behalf of her devotees.

The *filius Christus*

Richard, the last of the crusading kings, earned by his military prowess the title of *Cœur de lion*, “the Lionheart.” One of England’s most famous kings, he was absent from the country for the majority of his ten-year reign, leaving for the Third Crusade almost immediately upon ascending the throne in 1189, followed by his captivity, and his final release in February 1194.⁶⁵ He died in 1199 at the siege of Chalus-Chabrol in Limousin, upon which his younger brother John ascended the throne. His captivity was illegal, since the harassment of a Crusader was forbidden and he was under the protection of the Church; Henry VI’s actions “against the king whom, on his holy pilgrimage, under the protection of the God of heaven and the care of the Roman church, he captured and restrained by imprisoning chains and whom he is killing by prison/fear” are therefore reprehensible under the aims of the Crusades.⁶⁶

In the three letters written by his mother regarding his captivity, Richard is an entirely passive figure, despite the active and heroic epithets that are given to him (*Crusader, Anointed of the Lord, Soldier of Christ, Pilgrim of the Cross*). He is more as Eleanor describes him in the third letter, “that very delicate youth, impatient at such affliction, will be pressed by his torments and driven to death by his tortures,” ignoring the fact that this “delicate youth” was a thirty-six-year-old warrior who had fought battles across Europe and the Middle East.⁶⁷ But while Eleanor needs to stress his heroism as important since it indicates both

his value and his valor, his passivity in this situation is more important. And indeed, there is nothing much that Richard can do other than wait for Eleanor to collect the ransom that Henry VI is demanding.

Richard's feelings are immaterial to the letters, other than as Eleanor can assign, interpret, or manipulate them in order to further her demands to Celestine; it is *her* feelings that are vocal, her grief that is dangerous. "But what I grieve for is closer to me and more intolerable: the tyrant crucifies my son; the highest pontiff hides it; there is no one to redeem or save him."⁶⁸ Of course, the aligning of Richard with Christ on the Cross is clear, and the excommunicate Henry VI becomes the tyrants Herod and Caesar slaughtering the innocent; but Celestine is also the pontiff who looks away and is perhaps of equal responsibility with the Jewish priests who condemned Christ. At the same time, although Richard is "crucified," he is not Christ and cannot carry out his own redemption and is therefore in need of a third party to do so. And here, with the collecting of the ransom and maneuvering on his behalf, Eleanor in effect becomes the redeemer of her son, his savior, an assumption of roles that normally belong to the Son. She functions, in fact, in the role that Herlihy identifies as specific to medieval mothers, as "protector and intercessor of her growing and grown sons."⁶⁹ She is, in his view, "ideally placed to serve as intermediary between the often conflicting male generations . . . well-placed to listen and to speak, to convey pleas and proposals in both directions. The mother's unique position within the natural family [cannot] fail to affect cultural attitudes toward motherhood itself and its functions."⁷⁰ The intercessional role that Herlihy describes for mothers becomes a position of power for a woman as well as an obligation. That is, while she has the power to intervene between father and son, she must do so, for the benefit of both. Neglect of this duty leads to familial strife. At the same time, Eleanor can also be seen to be functioning within a Kristevan "herethics" that is "founded on the relationship between the mother and child during pregnancy and birth. This ethics sets up one's obligations to the other as obligations to the self and obligations to the species," an internalized ethics that obligates Eleanor's actions.⁷¹

Eleanor, as protagonist and agent in the letters, takes advantage of that position of intercessor to negotiate between her son and his "father."

While there is no actual conflict between the two (as there was between Richard and his biological father), the lack of action on Celestine's part is unacceptable as far as Eleanor is concerned: "Our king is confined and on all sides anguish oppresses him,"⁷² ignored and abandoned by his father, while "the Roman church, with clasped hands, is silent to so many injuries of Christ, let God rise up and judge our cause and look on the face of his anointed."⁷³ Richard's brother John is attempting to seize his land while his fellow monarch Henry raises hands "against the anointed of the Lord, my son. One torments him with chains; another lays waste his lands with cruel hostility."⁷⁴ She is determined to fulfill the duties of the role of mother, the obligations to attain her child's well-being, and she does not much care how she accomplishes it, for she must, as mother, use all the means at her disposal to protect him and his interests. But by aligning herself with Mary and then mapping their relationships onto the Holy Family, Eleanor is able to strengthen her position not only through her affiliation with Mary, but also by aligning her son with Christ, each only serving to reinforce the other. Celestine, as the absent father, becomes the ineffectual figure of the *senex* Joseph.

Eleanor was most certainly a force to be reckoned with in Plantagenet politics, "enforcing royal directives, prohibiting papal legates' movements, attesting royal charters, and attending the *magna curia regis*"; her sons seem to have had strong feelings for her, as "[d]uring their reigns, she took precedence over their wives, enjoying a queen-regnant's perquisites."⁷⁵ That is, Eleanor had not only the position with which to make her demands to Celestine in the first place, but also the political power to back them up. She essentially wielded Richard's power in his absence, and therefore assumed the "right" of an anointed monarch to sustain the demands she made on another of the divinely anointed. But rather than force that particular issue, Eleanor chooses to manipulate the maternal tropes available to her, exploiting them, as Parsons and Wheeler argue, for the benefit of her children.

What I wish to emphasize in these three letters are the ways in which Eleanor manipulates her roles—as queen, as mother, as widow—in order to strengthen her position in a particularly fraught political situation. Taking her inspiration from the most powerful and irreproachable female role model, Eleanor positions herself in a particularly strong locus

from which to speak and carry out her goal—the “redemption” of Richard from captivity. While she is still obviously speaking from within a patriarchal discourse, Eleanor assumes characteristics of the Virgin Mary in order to obtain a voice for herself that must not be ignored. I would argue further that Eleanor, by her use of the maternal figure within a patriarchal discourse, manipulates what is literally the Law of the Father. It is the law not only created by and enforced by the Father, but also the Law that dictates the Father’s own actions, that which he must do, his duty of care to his family. While in “Stabat Mater” Kristeva argues that the Virgin Mother is basically a figure of patriarchal oppression, I see Eleanor’s use of Marian imagery as a powerful play on her part, though she is still working within a masculine or patriarchal discourse. As Parsons and Wheeler point out, “Medieval mothers, however shaped by patriarchies with which they themselves colluded, often exploited those systems for the benefit of all their children.”⁷⁶ Whether Eleanor’s letters had any effect on Richard’s release is a matter of speculation; her political and economic actions, however, were undoubtedly vital to the resolution of Richard’s imprisonment.

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END NOTES

1. Who would not be have compassion / on beholding the devout mother / suffering with her Son? . . . She saw her sweet Son / dying, forsaken, / while He gave up His spirit. . . . O Mother, fountain of love, / make me feel the power of sorrow, / that I may grieve with you.

2. By Pernoud’s calculation, this works out to approximately 34,000 kgs. of silver. See Régine Pernoud, *Aliénor D’Aquitaine* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1965), 248.

3. These letters are available online, with both the Latin text and English translations, through the *Epistolae* database (<http://epistolae.ccnmtl.columbia.edu>). The Latin text is also available through J.-P. Migne’s *Patrologia Latina* (hereafter, *PL*), vol. 206:2–4, under the headings, “*Aleonorae reginae Anglorum ad Coelestinum*.—*Pontificis opem implorat pro liberatione Richardi*

regis Anglorum, filii sui,” “*Ejusdem epistola altera.—Similis argumenti*,” and “*Ejusdem epistola tertia.—Similis argumenti*.” See Joan M. Ferrante, “Licet longinquis regionibus corpore separati’: Letters as a Link in and to the Middle Ages,” *Speculum* 76, no. 4 (2001): 877–95.

4. Ralph V. Turner, “Eleanor of Aquitaine in the Governments of Her Sons Richard and John,” in *Eleanor of Aquitaine: Lord and Lady*, ed. John Carmi Parsons and Bonnie Wheeler (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 77.

5. *Ibid.*, 84.

6. Alison Weir, *Eleanor of Aquitaine: A Life* (New York: Ballantine, 1999), 283.

7. Turner, “Richard and John,” 85.

8. There are many comprehensive biographies of Eleanor available. I have made the most use of those by Alison Weir and Régine Pernoud.

9. Weir suggests that Eleanor was born in 1122, probably in Poitiers, though some other historians suggest dates as early as 1120 (Weir, *Eleanor of Aquitaine*, 14); she died at Fontevrault Abbey on April 1, 1204 (*ibid.*, 342).

10. See Lois L. Huneycutt, “Public Lives, Private Ties: Royal Mothers in England and Scotland, 1070–1204,” in *Medieval Mothering*, ed. John Carmi Parsons and Bonnie Wheeler (New York: Garland, 1996), 299.

11. RáGena DeAragon, “Wife, Widow, and Mother: Some Comparisons Between Eleanor of Aquitaine and Noblewomen of the Anglo-Norman and Angevin World,” in *Eleanor of Aquitaine: Lord and Lady*, 103.

12. Turner, “Richard and John,” 77.

13. See B. Lees, “The Letters of Queen Eleanor of Aquitaine to Pope Celestine III,” *The English Historical Review* 21, no. 81 (1906): 78–93.

14. Weir, *Eleanor of Aquitaine*, 16.

15. *Ibid.*, 17. Reading and writing were considered to be separate skills, and not always taught together. Thus one could learn to read without ever learning to write.

16. Alison Weir makes an extensive point of this matter:

Copies of the letters she sent were preserved among the papers of her secretary, Peter of Blois, who almost certainly had a hand in their composition, since his style is evident in parts. . . . Some modern historians believe that Peter composed the letters himself as an exercise in Latin rhetoric. There is no record of their dispatch, nor of their receipt in Rome. Yet this does not mean to say that the Pope never received them, since most letters of the period are lost. It is true that these remarkable letters were not attributed to Eleanor until the seventeenth

century, yet why the connection was not made earlier remains a mystery, given the salutations, the authenticity of the detail, and the passionate sentiments expressed, which are in keeping with what we know from other sources of the period of Eleanor's feelings, actions, and character. Moreover, there is some evidence of a papal response to the second letter. The conclusion must be, therefore, that Eleanor not only initiated this correspondence but was also its coauthor. Weir, *Eleanor of Aquitaine*, 283.

17. Peter of Blois "had been educated in the schools of Paris and had for a time been attached to the court of Sicily. Such was his reputation as a scholar that Henry II had invited him to England and conferred upon him several court offices, including that of secretary to the King. . . . A brilliant writer, he peppered his letters with sharp, acerbic wit and perspicacious observation; Henry had been so impressed by them that he had amassed a collection." Weir, *Eleanor of Aquitaine*, 272.

18. Ferrante, "Letters as a Link," 886.

19. See F. and J. Gies, *Marriage and the Family in the Middle Ages* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987), especially chapter 7; David Herlihy, *Medieval Households* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985); Georges Duby, *Love and Marriage in the Middle Ages*, trans. Jane Dunnett (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

20. Kelly Oliver, *Reading Kristeva: Unraveling the Double-Bind* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1993), 66.

21. Idit Alphandry, "Religion and the 'Rights of Man' in Julia Kristeva's Work," in *Psychoanalysis, Aesthetics, and Politics in the Work of Kristeva*, ed. Kelly Oliver and S. K. Keltner (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2009), 232-33.

22. Susan Rubin Suleiman, "Writing and Motherhood," in *Mother Reader: Essential Writings on Motherhood*, ed. Moyra Davey (New York: Seven Stories, 2001), 125-26.

23. Alphandry, "Religion," 231.

24. Corey J. Marvin, *Word Outward: Medieval Perspectives on the Entry Into Language* (New York: Routledge, 2001), xxi.

25. See Joan M. Ferrante, *To the Glory of her Sex: Women's Roles in the Composition of Medieval Texts* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1997), 4.

26. For a psychoanalytic reading of the Holy Family, see Barbara Newman, "Intimate Pieties: Holy Trinity and Holy Family in the Late Middle Ages," in "Visions of the Other World in Medieval Literature," ed.

Brian McFadden, special issue, *Religion & Literature* 31, no. 1 (Spring 1999): 77–101.

27. Margaret Bruzelius, “Mother’s Pain, Mother’s Voice: Gabriela Mistral, Julia Kristeva, and the Mater Dolorosa,” *Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature* 18, no. 2 (1999), 215.

28. Newman, “Intimate Pieties,” 87; Ferrante, *Glory*, 4.

29. Julia Kristeva, “Stabat Mater,” in “The Female Body in Western Culture: Semiotic Perspectives,” ed. Susan Rubin Suleiman, special issue, *Poetics Today* 6, nos. 1/2 (1985): 149.

30. *Ibid.*

31. Marvin, *Word Outward*, xvii.

32. Alphandry, “Religion,” 233.

33. Eleanor of Aquitaine, “Letter to Pope Celestine III (141),” 141.2 (my italics); *Matrem tantae miseriae respice misericordiae mater* (PL 206:3.2).

34. Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary* (New York: Vintage, 1983), 210; Kristeva, “Stabat Mater,” 143.

35. Estimates vary from 20%–50%; the higher figures include childhood mortality (1–10 years of age), as well as infant mortality.

36. Genesis 3:16.

37. Oliver, *Kristeva*, 49.

38. Kristeva, “Stabat Mater,” 249, quoted in Oliver, *Kristeva*, 51.

39. Marvin, *Word Outward*, 11.

40. Eleanor of Aquitaine, “Letter to Pope Celestine III (140),” 140.2.

41. Eleanor of Aquitaine, “Letter to Pope Celestine III (139),” 139.2.

42. Luke 2:35.

43. Eleanor of Aquitaine, “Letter to Pope Celestine III (140),” 140.4.

44. Eleanor of Aquitaine, “Letter to Pope Celestine III (141),” 141.2.

45. Kristeva, “Stabat Mater,” 143.

46. Oliver, *Kristeva*, 50.

47. Eleanor of Aquitaine, “Letter to Pope Celestine III (141),” 141.3. The Young King, Henry, died in 1183; Geoffrey, the Count of Brittany, in 1186.

48. Eleanor of Aquitaine, “Letter to Pope Celestine III (139),” 139.2.

49. *Ibid.*

50. Bruzelius, “Mother’s Pain, Mother’s Voice,” 228–29.

51. Eleanor of Aquitaine, “Letter to Pope Celestine III (140),” 140.9.

52. Bruzelius, “Mother’s Pain, Mother’s Voice,” 216.

53. Eleanor of Aquitaine, “Letter to Pope Celestine III (140),” 140.6.

54. Pamela Sheingorn, “The Maternal Behavior of God: Divine Father

as Fantasy Husband,” in *Medieval Mothering*, ed. John Carmi Parsons and Bonnie Wheeler (New York: Garland, 1996), 81.

55. Newman explores this in some detail in her essay “Intimate Pieties,” 83. She does provide examples of, for instance, “The Father’s Pietà,” however they are all from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

56. Matthew 27:46; also quoting Psalm 23.

57. Eleanor of Aquitaine, “Letter to Pope Celestine III (141),” 141.7.

58. “The *Patrologia Latina* of J. P. Migne, consisting of more than 200 volumes of doctrinal writing before the year 1216, does not, in its index of cited saints, provide a single reference to Joseph.” Herlihy, *Medieval Households*, 127.

59. Eleanor of Aquitaine, “Letter to Pope Celestine III (141),” 141.6 (my italics).

60. Eleanor of Aquitaine, “Letter to Pope Celestine III (141),” 141.6; *Redde igitur mihi filium meum, vir Dei, si tamen vir Dei es, et non potius vir sanguinum* (PL 206:3.6).

61. Eleanor of Aquitaine, “Letter to Pope Celestine III (139),” 139.2.

62. *Ibid.*, 139.3

63. *Ibid.*, 139.9.

64. Eleanor of Aquitaine, “Letter to Pope Celestine III (140),” 140.5.

65. See Pernoud, chaps. 19 and 20.

66. Eleanor of Aquitaine, “Letter to Pope Celestine III (139),” 139.3.

67. Eleanor of Aquitaine, “Letter to Pope Celestine III (141),” 141.4.

68. Eleanor of Aquitaine, “Letter to Pope Celestine III (140),” 140.8.

69. Herlihy, *Medieval Households*, 120.

70. *Ibid.*, 121.

71. Oliver, *Kristeva*, 66.

72. Eleanor of Aquitaine, “Letter to Pope Celestine III (139),” 139.3.

73. *Ibid.*, 139.4.

74. Eleanor of Aquitaine, “Letter to Pope Celestine III (141),” 141.9.

75. Turner, “Richard and John,” 78.

76. Parsons and Wheeler, “Introduction,” xv.