

# Inventing Eleanor

The Medieval and Post-Medieval  
Image of Eleanor of Aquitaine

Michael R. Evans

B L O O M S B U R Y



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# Introduction: Eleanorian Exceptionalism

## ‘An incomparable woman’?

Eleanor of Aquitaine is one of the most famous women in medieval history, yet also one of the most inaccessible, ‘[f]amiliar and elusive, well-known and yet ultimately unknowable’, in the words of Theresa Earenfight.<sup>1</sup> RáGena DeAragon has posed the question, ‘do we know what we think we know about Eleanor?’<sup>2</sup> We possess comparatively little evidence of her life from twelfth-century historians. Georges Duby reckoned that we have only nine sources for her life history,<sup>3</sup> while John Parsons and Bonnie Wheeler remark that ‘[r]arely in the course of historical endeavor has so much been written, over so many centuries, about one woman of whom we know so little.’<sup>4</sup> The frequent appearance of lengthy biographies of Eleanor would suggest an abundance of evidence for an account of her life, yet many of these works have at their core the same sparse chronicle and literary references, a flimsy foundation on which a large edifice of speculation has often been erected. Richard Barber argues that ‘to print all the records and chronicle entries about Eleanor would take less than a hundred pages.’<sup>5</sup> In the absence of hard evidence, these biographies have often been fleshed out by speculation and the creation or perpetuation of myths.

The attraction of Eleanor of Aquitaine to post-medieval historians, novelists and artists is obvious. Heiress in her own right to Aquitaine, one of the wealthiest fiefs in Europe, she became in turn queen of France by marriage to Louis VII (1137–52) and of England by marriage to Henry II (1154–89). She was the mother of two of England’s most celebrated (or notorious) kings, Richard I and John, and played an important role in the politics of both their reigns. She was a powerful woman in an age assumed (not entirely correctly) to be dominated by men. She was associated with some of the great events and movements of her age: the crusades (she participated in the Second Crusade, and organized the ransom payments to free Richard I from the imprisonment that he suffered returning from the Third); the development of vernacular literature and the idea of courtly love (as granddaughter of the ‘first troubadour’ William IX of Aquitaine, she was also a patron of some of the earliest Arthurian literature

in French, and featured in one of the foundational works on courtly love); and the Plantagenet–Capetian conflict that foreshadowed centuries of struggle between England and France (her divorce from Louis VII and marriage to Henry II took Aquitaine out of the Capetian orbit, and created the ‘Angevin Empire’). She enjoyed a long life (she was about eighty years old at the time of her death in 1204) and produced nine children who lived to adulthood. The marriages of her offspring linked her (and the Plantagenet and Capetian dynasties) to the royal houses of Castile, Sicily and Navarre, and to the great noble lines of Brittany and Blois-Champagne in France and the Welfs in Germany. A sense of both the geographical and temporal extent of Eleanor’s world can be appreciated when we consider an example from the crusades. Eleanor accompanied her husband Louis VII on the Second Crusade in 1147–9; when Louis IX went on crusade over a hundred years later, he left France in the care of Blanche of Castile, a Spanish princess and Eleanor’s granddaughter, whose marriage to Louis’s father had been arranged by Eleanor. Just this single example shows her direct influence spanning a century, two crusades and three kingdoms.

Eleanor’s life story also comes down to us accompanied by a whiff of scandal. A ‘Black Legend’<sup>6</sup> was formed within her own lifetime and in the decades immediately after her death by clerical chroniclers who viewed her with suspicion as a powerful and independent woman. Incidents from her life such as her rumoured incest with her uncle, Raymond, Prince of Antioch, or her dressing as a man to flee from her husband Henry II following a failed rebellion that she supposedly instigated, were framed by these chroniclers to paint her as a licentious and rebellious woman. The Black Legend was inflated by posthumous exaggeration or invention, so that as early as the mid-thirteenth century her rumoured affair with Prince Raymond was transformed into a dalliance with Saladin. The later Middle Ages and early-modern period added further calumnies, notably the legend that she murdered Rosamond de Clifford, her rival for the affections of Henry II.

If the medieval and early-modern image of Eleanor was a largely negative one, the twentieth century saw a backlash – inspired to a great extent by Second-Wave Feminism – which sought to restore the image of Eleanor, with a few added embellishments. A ‘more flattering kind of character distortion’ developed that created ‘an idealized picture of her as a romantic figure.’<sup>7</sup> For authors such as Amy Kelly, Régine Pernoud and Marion Meade, Eleanor became a feminist heroine, political thinker and activist, patron of the troubadours, judge of the ‘Courts of Love’ and bearer of the enlightened culture of the *Midi* to a gloomy and

priest-ridden north. While providing a useful corrective to the Black Legend, the twentieth-century backlash threatened to create a counter-mythology as powerful as the one it sought to overturn. In the words of Jacques Le Goff, she is as much a figure of romance as of history, and 'has been both the victim of a black legend and the beneficiary of an embellished [or golden] myth.'<sup>8</sup>

A central element of the myth of Eleanor is that of her exceptionalism. Historians and Eleanor biographers have tended to take literally Richard of Devizes's conventional panegyric of her as 'an incomparable woman.'<sup>9</sup> She is assumed to be a woman out of her time – unique among women in an age which is assumed to be benighted and misogynistic. Among popular writers on Eleanor, a fascination with her seems to reflect an amazement at discovering that the Middle Ages could be anything more than (in the words of children's fiction author E. L. Konigsburg) a 'thousand years without a bath', and furthermore that a woman – '[w]hat a woman!' – could play a powerful and independent role in such an age.<sup>10</sup> Even the more sceptical academic historians such as Jean Flori declare her to have possessed an 'exceptional character'.<sup>11</sup> Amazement at Eleanor's power and independence is born from a presentism that assumes generally that the Middle Ages were a backward age, and specifically that medieval women were all downtrodden and marginalized. Eleanor's career can, from such a perspective, only be explained by assuming that she was an exception who rose by sheer force of personality above the restrictions placed upon twelfth-century women. Viewed through this perspective, a pseudo-Eleanor of historiography has been created, owing little to the historical record, as writers have felt free to 'pile conjecture upon conjecture'<sup>12</sup>:

Eleanor ... has inspired some of the very worst historical writing devoted to the European Middle Ages ... The Eleanor of history has been overshadowed by an Eleanor of wishful thinking and make-believe.<sup>13</sup>

This has often led to a focus on Eleanor's personality and psychology. Martin Aurell criticizes such 'Freudian' approaches,<sup>14</sup> which are impossible to prove one way or the other, based as they are on medieval chronicles that aimed to illustrate not the interior motives of individuals but the unfolding of divine providence 'so that the invisible things of God may be clearly seen by the things that are done, and men may by examples of reward or punishment be made more zealous ...'<sup>15</sup>

The idea of Eleanor's exceptionalism runs through the popular image of her like letters through a stick of rock. Douglas Boyd, in his popular biography of 2004, calls Eleanor '[c]harismatic, beautiful, highly intelligent and literate, but also impulsive and proud'. She 'did not conform to preconceptions of

medieval European womanhood',<sup>16</sup> and was an 'extraordinary woman' who 'lived a remarkable life'.<sup>17</sup> For Alison Weir (writing in 1999), Eleanor was 'remarkable in a period when females were invariably relegated to a servile role ... an incomparable woman'.<sup>18</sup> The 1993 work *Queen Consorts of England* by Petronelle Cook states that '[i]f a prize were given for England's liveliest queen, Eleanor of Aquitaine would undoubtedly win'.<sup>19</sup> Marion Meade, writing in 1977, asserts that 'although Eleanor of Aquitaine ... lived at a time when women as individuals had few significant rights, she was nevertheless *the* [my emphasis] key political figure of the twelfth century'.<sup>20</sup> Amy Kelly's 1950 biography was 'offered as a study of individuals who set their stamp on events of their time, rather than as a study of developing systems of politics, economics, or jurisprudence'.<sup>21</sup>

## The context of medieval queenship

From Boyd to the more sober reflections of Kelly, there is a consensus that Eleanor was a remarkable individual, who shone despite the limits placed on women of her time. As such, she has become for many 'the first heroine of the feminist movement or even of Occitanian independence' in the words of Georges Duby.<sup>22</sup> Yet the idea of Eleanor's exceptionalism rests on an assumption that women of her age were powerless. On the contrary, in Western Europe before the twelfth century there were 'no really effective barriers to the capacity of women to exercise power; they appear as military leaders, judges, castellans, controllers of property'.<sup>23</sup> There is a danger that focusing on (supposedly) exceptional women, especially those from the elites, can distort our view of medieval women as a whole. In the words of Janna Bianchini, writing about Eleanor's granddaughter Berenguela of Castile:

Her exceptionalism threatens to relegate her to the dustbin of 'women worthies', those exemplars whose enormous distance from the experience of most women makes them seem, at best, irrelevant to history. At worst, they can be seen as falsifications of women's lived experience – their success seems to elide the misogyny or oppression suffered by their contemporaries.<sup>24</sup>

This is certainly true of Eleanor, as she overshadows even her fellow queens, to the extent that Berenguela '[c]ompared to her grandmother Eleanor of Aquitaine or her sister Blanche of Castile ... is at best an obscure figure in the already shadowy ranks of medieval queens'.<sup>25</sup>

Until relatively recently, the academic study of queens was neglected, for reasons which will be outlined in Chapter 2. Between 1900 and 1990, only three scholars in the academy devoted full-length biographies to Eleanor – Amy Kelly and Curtis Walker in 1950, and Régine Pernoud in 1965.<sup>26</sup> These biographies did little to challenge the myth-making process; indeed, Kelly was the chief popularizer of the modern concept of Eleanor as patron of the Courts of Love, which has subsequently come under sustained assault by literary scholars and historians alike.<sup>27</sup> Since 1990, however, there has been something of a turn towards Eleanor among scholars, marked by the appearance of D. D. R. Owen's work in 1993, which was in any case not a true biography.<sup>28</sup> Owen, a literary scholar, focused on the literary and legendary accounts of Eleanor, tracing the development of her image through these texts.

The last two decades have seen the rise, particularly among US historians, of the serious study of queenship; of the role not merely of individual, exceptional queens, but of the function of queenship as an office, of queens both as rulers (in their own right and as regents) and as co-rulers with their husbands or sons.<sup>29</sup> The old view of the queen as a passive victim of diplomatic marriages and brood-mare of future kings has been replaced by a view of her as an active partner in royal authority. Recent historians have come to argue that 'monarchy (despite its name) was a collaborative and potentially multigendered phenomenon, not an institution that depended on the single, male, person of the king. In doing so, they have called into question the idea that powerful queens were exceptions to a strictly masculine norm'.<sup>30</sup>

As well as providing a more rounded view of medieval queenship, recent scholarship has also challenged the idea that female power was in decline during Eleanor's twelfth century. Georges Duby regarded the rise of a new territorially based aristocracy and patrilineal inheritance in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, alongside church reform that tended to reinforce patriarchal marriage practices, as marking an eclipse of female aristocratic power. The rise of bureaucratic administrations staffed by educated male clerks also tended to exclude women from the public world of politics and restrict them to the domestic sphere.<sup>31</sup> Marion Facingier, in an important 1968 study of Capetian queens, including Eleanor, detected a rise and subsequent decline in the power of French queens, peaking with Adelaide of Maurienne, Eleanor's mother-in-law.<sup>32</sup>

The charter evidence supports the picture of female marginalization to some extent; for example, the term *domina* – which could be translated as 'lady' but has a more specific meaning of a woman with authority, a female

'lord' – occurs less frequently in charters from the period 1120–1220 than previously. In Poitiers in the thirteenth century, the percentage of women named in charters as donors to the Abbey of St-Hilaire was half of what it had been in the tenth.<sup>33</sup> However, it is difficult to make any generalizations, and the careers of Eleanor and her contemporaries should warn us against assuming that female authority was in decline. Recent research has pushed the life-span of the age of female administrators and war-leaders well into the twelfth century and beyond, and challenged Facinger's pessimistic verdict on twelfth-century queenship,<sup>34</sup> emphasizing that, even though the formal, public role of queens may have declined, their private, familial role as wife and consort of the King made them 'often their husbands' equals in a wide range of issues that span the public-private continuum that encompasses governance, religion, art, culture and family'.<sup>35</sup> Seen through this perspective, Eleanor, far from being Amy Kelly's proto-modern, proto-feminist figure, represents a medieval world of powerful royal and aristocratic women.

### Eleanor in the roles of queenship

'A queen was more than just a ruler or a mother, so much so that she needed an adjective to clarify precisely who she was and what she did.' A regnant queen might govern in her own right, but '[s]he was a queen-consort when she married a king, a queen-mother when she bore his children, a queen-regent when she governed for or with her husband and possessed female sovereignty. When her husband died she was queen-dowager'.<sup>36</sup> Eleanor fulfilled most of these roles in her lifetime. She was never a queen regnant, but she did hold Aquitaine in her own right, and governed it even during her marriage to Henry II between 1168 and 1173, and Henry's later attempts to endow his sons with her duchy required Eleanor's nominal approval.<sup>37</sup> She was queen-consort twice, alongside Louis VII of France from 1137 to 1152, and Henry II of England from 1154 to 1189. Eleanor was effectively regent during some of Henry's absences in the 1150s and '60s, and again during the absence of her son Richard I, and while he was held captive in Germany.<sup>38</sup> As queen mother, she played a crucial role in political life during the reigns of her sons Richard I and John, including securing the succession for the latter in 1199. A brief overview of Eleanor in the various roles of a twelfth-century queen can give a sense of whether she was remarkable or typical in relation to the office of queenship.



## Eleanor as queen of France

Marion Facinger, in an article on Capetian queenship originally published in 1968, did much to shape the idea that the power of queens was in decline in the twelfth century. When it came to Eleanor:

A dispassionate examination of the documentation for the first ten years of Eleanor's career as queen of France ... reveals almost no information about either her activities or her influence. Her presence in the royal *curia* is unnoted, her name rarely appears on Louis's charters, and no sources support the historical view of Eleanor as bold, precocious, and responsible for Louis VII's behavior.<sup>39</sup>

As discussed elsewhere, more recent scholarship has tended to challenge the idea of the decline of queenship,<sup>40</sup> but even some more recent scholars agree in seeing Eleanor as a minor player in the politics of Louis VII's France. Theresa Earenfight argues that '[i]n terms of queenship, Eleanor was a very conventional queen during the fifteen years she was married to Louis, doing everything that was expected of a queen'.<sup>41</sup> Marie Hivergneaux's study of Eleanor's charters shows that only three of Eleanor's twenty charters from the time of her marriage to Louis were issued in her capacity as queen of France, with the remaining seventeen relating to her role as Duchess of Aquitaine. Even here, she played a secondary role to Louis, who took the title 'Dux Aquitanorum' (Duke of Aquitainians) and appointed his own officials to the government of the duchy. Of Eleanor's seventeen 'Aquitanian' charters, only four appear to have been initiated by the duchess herself. In Hivergneaux's words 'she is therefore far from acting alone even in this duchy to which she is the heiress'.<sup>42</sup> After her divorce from Louis, she on occasion reissued deeds from her time as queen of France, as if her authority in the duchy had been compromised by having been subsumed into that of her royal husband.<sup>43</sup> This has not prevented historians from speculating on Eleanor's role. Ralph Turner claims – referring to the work of Marcel Pacaut, but without citing a primary source – that Louis 'readily allowed her to take a part in political decision-making', despite the fact that the charters suggest otherwise, and discusses Eleanor's role in the sidelining of her mother-in-law, Adelaide of Maurienne, without citing any sources at all.<sup>44</sup> Jean Flori is among historians who suggest a rivalry between Eleanor and Suger, abbot of Saint Denis, who had been Louis VI's chief minister and advisor, but admits that '[t]here is nothing to prove it, but it is not impossible ...'.<sup>45</sup> This period in her life, about which we know comparatively little, offers perhaps the most fertile ground for conjecture and myth-making. There is a tendency

to assume that because Eleanor was 'remarkable', her personality must have manifested itself in her early years. To cite Facinger again, 'because her later career was extraordinary, there has been a tendency to fabricate an early queen consonant with the later one'.<sup>46</sup>

## Eleanor as queen of England

What role did Eleanor play in her northern kingdom? Eleanor is often associated with the south of France, and this identification has been used to portray her as an exotic alien in England, or to romanticize her as an exile in a cold, uncultured north. Yet Eleanor lived for fifty-two years after her marriage to Henry II; she spent half of these in England.<sup>47</sup> It was in England that she gave birth to two future kings of that land (Richard and John), and a king who might have been (Henry, the Young King). Events such as her support for the Young King's revolt in 1173–4, and her subsequent imprisonment in Salisbury, have been portrayed as examples of her political alienation from Henry II. Amy Kelly saw Eleanor's imprisonment as an act of oppression by a patriarchal feudal order against the enlightened, feminine, culture of the future:

For the moment the feudal system triumphed. Sedition looked out from barred windows upon a world of havoc. But ideas had gone forth from the high place in Poitiers which survived to shed a brightness in the world when rods had fallen from the hands of feudal kings and bolts had rusted in the Tower of Salisbury.<sup>48</sup>

Eleanor's role in England has been marginalized not only by those who portray her as a victim, but by historians who view her as largely irrelevant to its government. This reflects the heavy reliance made by Eleanor's biographers until recently upon narrative chronicle sources. W. L. Warren, biographer of Henry II, asserts that 'to judge from the chroniclers, the most striking fact about Eleanor is her utter insignificance in Henry II's reign'.<sup>49</sup> Referring to Roger of Howden's chronicles, Richard Barber writes that 'Eleanor, as far as they are concerned, is merely part of the king's entourage... From her marriage until 1173, Eleanor barely figures in Howden's chronicles'.<sup>50</sup> Chronicles of course do not tell the full story, and recent work on charters corrects the perspective of Eleanor as an inactive queen a little, but Eleanor's near absence from the narrative record is significant nonetheless. Popular historians such as Kelly and Pernoud have read into this a marginalization of Eleanor during the years in which Becket was in favour, but there is no evidence to support this assumption.

Recently, however, a turn towards the study of charters and rolls has gone some way towards correcting the image of Eleanor as a brood-mare for the Plantagenet dynasty or as a neglected wife. The use of charters by Nicholas Vincent and Marie Hivergneaux is helping to shape a new picture of Eleanor, replacing previous historians' over-reliance on colourful and tendentious chronicle accounts.<sup>51</sup> Ralph Turner sees the period 1154–70 as one in which Eleanor and Henry 'worked harmoniously together as a team'.<sup>52</sup> Historians with a romantic imagination have detected a breach between Henry and Eleanor in 1168 following the rise to favour of Henry's most famous mistress, Rosamond Clifford.<sup>53</sup> However, Eleanor continued to act as Henry's partner and representative, as can be seen in her actions in Normandy in June 1170, when she attempted to block the path of papal envoys travelling to England to prevent the coronation of the Young King in Becket's absence. Eleanor attended Henry's Christmas court in 1170 and 1171, again suggesting that an estrangement between the two at this point is unlikely.<sup>54</sup> Even during her imprisonment following the Young King's rebellion of 1173–4, she continued to enjoy a large income and to issue charters.<sup>55</sup>

Eleanor also acted as effective regent on occasions. Ralph Turner argues for two regencies in 1156 and 1157,<sup>56</sup> citing John of Salisbury's complaints about Eleanor using her power to appoint bishops, and the chronicler's reference to the power of 'king or queen' to argue that these were periods when Eleanor wielded effective power, and not token or 'formal' regencies, as Warren has argued.<sup>57</sup> She also exerted quasi-monarchical power during Henry's absence on the Toulouse campaign in 1158–60.<sup>58</sup> Although not technically a regency (as she was duchess in her own right), her governance of Aquitaine from Poitiers, where she remained 'more or less permanently'<sup>59</sup> from 1168 to 1173, also attests to her sharing with Henry the governance of the 'empire'. Eleanor's power in this period appears complementary to, but autonomous from, that of Henry; she issued writs under her own seal, and did not have access to the income from her English estates.<sup>60</sup> While Poitevins were 'practically excluded'<sup>61</sup> from Henry's entourage, 'they were patronised by both Eleanor and Richard at a time when Henry II appears to have extended very little patronage to the men of Poitou and to have maintained virtually no Poitevins at his court'.<sup>62</sup> However, Eleanor seems to have continued to enjoy the support of Henry, and ruled Poitou and Anjou in alliance with her husband. '[A]t least until her disgrace after 1173, Eleanor and her household represented one of the more important points of contact between Plantagenet England and the Plantagenets' land and subjects south of the Loire'.<sup>63</sup>

## Eleanor as queen mother

It was only after the death of Henry II in 1189 that Eleanor truly came into her own. Not only was she free from the restrictions placed on her after 1174, but she played a major political role in the successions of Richard I in 1189 and John in 1199. She was also able to command vast resources in England; her income from her dower lands by 1189 'must have been as high as that of most of the greater barons of England or the Angevin lands in France', quite apart from her lands in Aquitaine and the annual 'Queen's Gold' payment to which she was entitled.<sup>64</sup> From this point onwards, Eleanor seems to have enjoyed full authority in England for perhaps the first time in her life. She was described as 'regent' in 1199 by Ralph of Diss, and Roger of Howden describes her holding 'queenly courts'.<sup>65</sup>

During Richard's reign, she acted as a diplomat – for example, travelling to Navarre to fetch Richard's betrothed, Berengaria of Navarre, and to Germany to deliver the ransom to free Richard from his captivity by Henry VI.<sup>66</sup> During his absence on crusade and in Germany, Eleanor defended his interests against John and Philip of France: she organized the collection of his ransom and she (or, more probably, her secretary Peter of Blois in her name) wrote impassioned letters calling upon Pope Celestine III to intervene on Richard's behalf. The chests containing the ransom funds carried her seal alongside that of the archbishop of Rouen, Walter of Coutances. Upon Richard's return, Eleanor – not her daughter-in-law, Berengaria – took the place of precedence at Richard's crown-wearing.<sup>67</sup> She was present when Richard died of his wounds at Châlus.<sup>68</sup>

After Richard's death, Eleanor strove with equal determination to secure John's succession against the claims of his nephew, Arthur of Brittany. She fought for his cause in Anjou and was besieged by Arthur's forces at Mirebeau in 1202. She issued over sixty charters during John's reign (a period of only five years, for a part of which she was politically inactive, having retired to the abbey of Fontevraud). The charter evidence shows her striving to win the support of the nobles and towns of Poitou for John and suggest a 'condominium' between her and John in Poitou, for which she paid homage personally to Philip II.<sup>69</sup>

## Eleanor as intercessor

We see Eleanor as queen-mother playing another of the traditional roles of a medieval queen, that of intercessor. 'Intercession was a key element of queenship

and accounts of a queen's intercession dominate many sources on queenship.' It was a means by which a queen could, either pre-emptively or retroactively, temper royal power by requesting an act of mercy. In some ways it reflects the limitations on queenly authority as she sought to mitigate royal power, but also reflects the queen's positive authority, as it 'was accepted as part of queenship as office'. Her role as intercessor mirrored biblical models such as the Virgin Mary (Queen of the Heavens) and Esther (Queen of the Persians).<sup>70</sup>

The most celebrated instance of queenly intercession was the case of Philippa of Hainault (Edward III's queen) intervening on behalf of the Burghers of Calais in 1347, when she successfully had Edward's death sentence upon the unfortunate *bourgeois* rescinded. Philippa's role as intercessor has been seen as symbolic of the decline of queenly authority in the later Middle Ages: 'checked in the exercise of power, queens were showered with symbolic recognition ... queenly influence was *petitionary*, in the sense that it cast the queen as one seeking redress rather than one able to institute redress in her own right, and *intercessory*, in that it limited its objectives to the modification of a previously determined male resolve'.<sup>71</sup> Yet we see Eleanor displaying a similar intercessory role 200 years previously; given the argument that the twelfth century marks a turning-point towards the decline of female authority, can we see in Eleanor's intercession the actions of an authoritative early-medieval queen, or of a late-medieval queen whose authority has become subsumed into that of a male sovereign?

Philippa appealed to Edward as a wife heavily pregnant with a future royal child (although her advanced pregnancy as described in the chronicles does not match the chronology of her children's births, and was clearly exaggerated to play up the pathos of her maternal role).<sup>72</sup> Eleanor's position was, however, very different. In 1192, while visiting some of her dower lands in the Cambridgeshire, she was accosted by villagers who complained of the effects of an interdict upon the diocese of Ely:

Human bodies lay unburied here and there in the fields, because their bishop had deprived them of burial. When she learned of the cause of such suffering, the queen took pity on the misery of the living because of the dead, for she was very merciful. Immediately dropping her own affairs and looking after the concerns of others, she went to London. She requested, indeed commanded, the archbishop of Rouen [Walter of Coutances] that the confiscated revenues of the bishop [of Ely, William Longchamp] be repaid to the bishop, and that the same bishop ... be proclaimed as freed from the excommunication that had been pronounced upon him ... Thus through the queen's mediation the open enmity between the two parties was laid to rest ...<sup>73</sup>

We may note the differences between Philippa's and Eleanor's intercessions. Philippa was a pregnant woman married to the king; Eleanor a widow long past child-bearing age, a queen-mother, and playing a quasi-monarchical role in her son's absence on crusade. Philippa sought mercy from her husband the king; Eleanor, acting in Richard's absence, had no king to whom she need appeal, enacting mercy under her own authority when she 'requested, indeed commanded' Walter of Coutances to reverse the excommunication of Longchamp. Richard of Devizes may present her as mediating a dispute,<sup>74</sup> but Eleanor does so under her vice-regal authority. Her attempt to settle a conflict between two leading clerics (and rivals for power within the administration established in Richard's absence) was a highly political one, not a symbolic display of womanly mercy. In Jane Martindale's words, her action was 'entirely typical of Angevin methods of government: it might have been employed by Henry or Richard.'<sup>75</sup>

### How exceptional was Eleanor?

In an important article published in 1992, Jane Martindale sought to locate Eleanor in context, stripping away much of the conjecture that had grown up around her, and returning to primary sources, including her charters.<sup>76</sup> Martindale also demonstrated how Eleanor was not out of the ordinary for a twelfth-century queen either in the extent of her power or in the criticisms levelled against her. Even she, however, concluded that 'it is Richard of Devizes' phrase which stays in the memory: Eleanor of Aquitaine was the *femina incomparabilis* – "a woman without compare".<sup>77</sup> In Theresa Earenfight's words, however, Eleanor 'sits in the middle of the spectrum of queenship ... [f]or all her fame, she had less official political authority than her mother-in-law, Matilda'.<sup>78</sup> Her role in Henry's government in the late 1150s and early 1160s was limited, probably due to her frequent pregnancies (eight in thirteen years).<sup>79</sup>

A brief survey of royal or aristocratic women of Eleanor's world shows that powerful women were far from unusual. We can point to a number of examples of regnant queens in Western Europe in the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, including Mélisende of Jerusalem, Urraca of León and Berenguela of Castile (Eleanor's granddaughter).<sup>80</sup> Medieval Spain alone, where there was a tradition of female co-rulership, has become a focus for recent scholarship by authors such as Theresa Earenfight, Miriam Shadis and Janna Bianchini, which has helped to redefine our understanding of the important and active office of queenship.<sup>81</sup>

Berenguela of Castile acted as consort of her husband (the king of León) and as co-ruler with her son (Fernando III of Aragon), while her sister Blanche (also, of course, a granddaughter of Eleanor) was regent of France during the minority of her son, Louis IX. While Norman-Angevin England did not see a regnant queen, Eleanor's mother-in-law, the Empress Matilda, was engaged in a long and bitter struggle for the English crown, and was briefly *de facto* queen bearing the title 'lady [*domina*] of the English'.<sup>82</sup>

If we look at Eleanor's predecessors as Anglo-Norman queens of England, we find many examples of women wielding political power.<sup>83</sup> Matilda of Flanders (wife of William the Conqueror) acted as regent in Normandy during his frequent absences in England following the Conquest,<sup>84</sup> and the two wives of Henry I (Matilda of Scotland<sup>85</sup> and Adeliza of Louvain) all played some role in governing England during their husbands' absences, while during the civil war of Stephen's reign Matilda of Boulogne led the fight for a time on behalf of her royal husband, who had been captured by the forces of the empress.<sup>86</sup> And if we wish to seek a rebel woman, we need look no further than Juliana, illegitimate daughter of Henry I, who attempted to assassinate him with a crossbow,<sup>87</sup> or Adèle of Champagne, the third wife of Louis VII, who '[a]t the moment when Henry II held Eleanor of Aquitaine in jail for her revolt ... led a revolt with her brothers against her son, Philip II'.<sup>88</sup>

Eleanor is, therefore, less the exception than the rule – albeit an extreme example of that rule. This can be illustrated by comparing her with a twelfth-century woman who has attracted less literary and historical attention. Adela of Blois died in 1137, the year of Eleanor's marriage to Louis VII. Her career and that of Eleanor touch, albeit indirectly; she was the mother of King Stephen, who contested the crown of England with Henry II's mother, Empress Matilda; mother of Count Thibaud IV, against whom Louis VII fought a war while married to Eleanor; and grandmother of Count Thibaud IV and of Count Henry I of Champagne, who each married one of Eleanor's daughters by Louis.

The chronicle and charter evidence reveals Adela to have 'legitimately exercised the powers of comital lordship' in the domains of Blois-Champagne, both in consort with her husband and alone during his absence on crusade and after his death.<sup>89</sup> Before Stephen of Blois' departure on the First Crusade, he and Adela witnessed charters jointly, with Adela 'an active and acknowledged participant in comital lordship'.<sup>90</sup> After her husband's death, Adela retained that authority even after their sons attained adulthood.<sup>91</sup> There was, however, nothing atypical about the nature of Adela's power. In the words of her biographer Kimberley LoPrete, 'while the extent of Adela's powers and the political impact of her actions were

exceptional for a woman of her day (and indeed for most men), the sources of her powers and the activities she engaged in were not fundamentally different from those of other women of lordly rank. These words could equally apply to Eleanor; the extent of her power, as heiress to the richest lordship in France, wife of two kings and mother of two or three more, was remarkable, but the nature of her power was not exceptional. Other noble or royal women governed, arranged marriages and alliances, and were patrons of the church. Eleanor represents one end of a continuum, not an isolated outlier.

Eleanor of Aquitaine was the only twelfth-century queen of England or France to take part in a crusade. However, the exceptionalism of her role as a crusader queen can be overplayed. She was neither the only English queen to go on crusade (her great-granddaughter Eleanor of Castile accompanied the future Edward I on crusade in 1270–2),<sup>92</sup> nor was she unusual as a royal woman crusader; the Provençal sisters Marguerite (queen of Louis IX of France) and Béatrice (wife of Louis' brother Charles of Anjou, future king of Sicily) both accompanied their husbands on crusade in the 1250s, and both gave birth while on the expedition.<sup>93</sup> Louis IX's mother, Blanche of Castile, even went through the same experience as Eleanor of having to deal with the problem of an absent royal son taken captive on crusade. Nor was Eleanor alone in being a warrior woman (and there is no evidence of her playing a role in any fighting in the crusade or during the revolt of the Young King). One of Eleanor's ancestors, Agnes of Burgundy, wife of Duke William V, was the effective ruler of Aquitaine after her husband's death and led the duchy's forces against rebellious vassals in 1044–5.<sup>94</sup>

Another attribute that is offered as proof of Eleanor's exceptionalism is her position as a uniquely educated woman, and as an outstanding patron of literature and the arts. Brought up at the cultured court of the Dukes of Aquitaine, a granddaughter of William IX 'the First Troubadour', Eleanor is supposed to be remarkable in having been an educated woman. One obvious objection to this alleged uniqueness is that Eleanor was a younger contemporary of Héloïse of the Paraclete and Hildegard of Bingen, two of the most celebrated educated women of the Middle Ages, whose reputations are known to popular as well as academic readers. Popular historians have tended to exaggerate the extent of Eleanor's learning; Amy Kelly has her 'using dialectic' in her arguments with figures such as Bernard of Clairvaux. 'It seems certain that she mastered the rudiments of dialectic and examined the structure of the syllogism, for she was able later on her own behalf to cite Scripture, chapter and verse, even to popes and cardinals, and to employ the syllogism with good effect in Rome and Tusculum.'<sup>95</sup> This



ignores the fact that Eleanor's letters would have been composed by learned amanuenses such as Peter of Blois.

Even those cultural historians who have developed a scepticism about the extent of Eleanor's patronage tend to accept the idea of her exceptionalism. For example, June Hall McCash accepts the assumption that 'Eleanor was certainly extraordinary in many respects, and ... she spawned an entire generation of literary patrons', before citing, approvingly, Margaret Schauss and Susan Mosher Stuard's view that 'powerful women like Eleanor of Aquitaine ... were often treated as anomalies whose achievements could reveal nothing about female agency and influence in general ...'.<sup>96</sup>

Eleanor was far from unique as an educated woman from the secular nobility. Referring to Adela of Blois, LoPrete writes about the typical education of a twelfth-century French woman from the upper aristocracy:

Her education would have included elementary training in the liberal arts based on standard textbooks and both poetical and historical works commonly used when teaching those disciplines in her day. Adela's mother [Matilda of Flanders] came from a family with a generations-old tradition of Latin literacy and several of Adela's siblings are known to have received at least the rudiments of a literary education.<sup>97</sup>

It is often assumed that Eleanor was especially well educated, or spoke many languages, but evidence for either is lacking. It seems reasonable to assume that she received an education at her father's court. There is an intriguing story from St Albans Abbey, recorded by Matthew Paris, that Eleanor had given a ring to one Richard Animal, a companion and fellow-scholar from her childhood, which Richard had in turn given to the abbey.<sup>98</sup> She almost certainly did not speak English; when, as described by Richard of Devizes, the people of the diocese of Ely appealed to Eleanor against the interdict, '[t]here was no need for an interpreter ... they spoke through their tears',<sup>99</sup> implying of course that an interpreter would have been required for Eleanor to converse with her English subjects. This may be contrasted with Henry II's reputation for being able to speak every language as far as the Jordan.<sup>100</sup>

The questions of Eleanor's role as a patron will be discussed in detail in Chapter 3, but again, we cannot view her cultural patronage as out of the ordinary for a high-status woman of her era. Her contemporary Ermengarde, viscountess of Narbonne,<sup>101</sup> was named alongside Eleanor and Marie de Champagne as holding court by Andreas Capellanus, but until recently had received considerably less attention than the other two ladies. Whereas Eleanor was only referred to