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Eleanor of Aquitaine

Fearless Queen

by Sara Holdren

illustrated by Kailien Singson

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Eleanor of Aquitaine

Fearless Queen

by

Sara Holdren

illustrated by *Kailien Singson*

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FOREWORD

Medieval Europe and the Feudal System

The book you are about to read tells the story of a great medieval queen, Eleanor of Aquitaine. In order to follow Eleanor on her journey, we need to understand certain things about the world in which she lived—most importantly, the way in which medieval Europe was divided into different political regions and how these regions were ruled.

The Europe of Eleanor's lifetime did not look at all like the collection of nations that exists today. In the Middle Ages, Europe was made up of hundreds of small, independent territories, all struggling for power under the system known as feudalism.

In a feudal society, land is divided into regions called fiefs. Wealthy, powerful lords each controlled a territory made up of many fiefs, which they would distribute to their vassals. Vassals were lesser lords who paid rent to

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medieval: relating to the Middle Ages
feudalism: the main political and social system of Europe in the Middle Ages, in which people served local lords in exchange for land and protection
fiefs: feudal estates
vassals: people who serve a feudal lord in exchange for land and protection

their overlord for the right to live on, govern, and farm these pieces of land. In exchange, the overlord provided protection for his vassals in times of war. Vassals had to pledge their loyalty to their overlord and fight for him in battle if he should need them.

For example, in Eleanor's time, the kingdom of France was a very large fiefdom, and its overlord was the king of France, who ruled from the city of Paris within a region known as the royal domain. The phrase "royal domain" referred to all lands and property owned by the king. The kingdom of France was made up of various kinds of fiefs: bigger, more powerful ones called duchies, ruled over by dukes, and smaller fiefs called counties and viscounties, ruled over by counts and viscounts. These dukes, counts, and viscounts were all overlords of their own fiefs and vassals, but they themselves were also vassals to the king of France and were expected to support and protect the kingdom of France when called upon.

However, things didn't always work out this way. The more powerful a lord became, the more power he sought. Rather than coming to the aid of the king of France, the dukes of many of the regions in the French kingdom

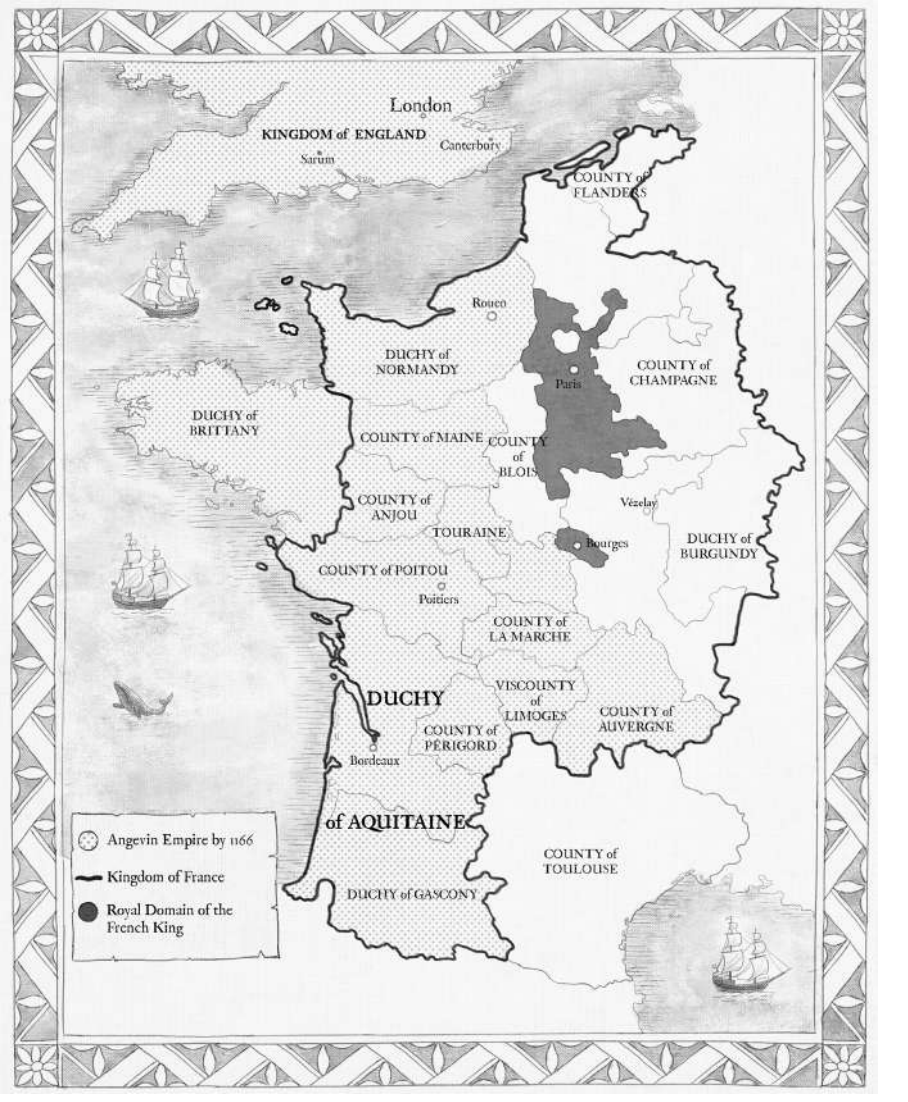
overlord: a lord who rules over other lords
duchies: territories ruled over by a duke or duchess
counts: high-ranking European noblemen (female form: countesses)
viscounts: European noblemen ranked immediately below counts (female form: viscountesses)

were often in conflict—sometimes even open war—with their king. They wanted their own authority, and by the time of Eleanor's birth in the 1100s, the rulers of France's western duchies had become so powerful that they were practically politically independent. In principle, mighty dukes like Eleanor's father owed their allegiance to the kingdom of France, but in reality, the king in Paris had very little control over these domains.

Because there were so many different, independently governed fiefs and so many lords always looking to expand their territories, war was almost constant during the Middle Ages. Take a look at the map on page 4. You will see how the kingdom of France was broken up into smaller provinces, with the powerful lords of the period competing to command as many as possible. Not only might a king face rebellions from his vassals, but any lord might wage war on his neighbor, out of a personal quarrel or to try to gain more land. The king of France lived in fear that the mightiest lords within his kingdom would conquer so many fiefs of their own that they could establish a rival empire—and, as you will see, that's exactly what one of them did.

empire: a large, independent state made up of many countries or cultures—or, in feudal Europe, many powerful territories—that are ruled by a single individual

As you read Eleanor's story, you can look back at this map to see some of the many places her remarkable life took her. Now, let's begin . . .



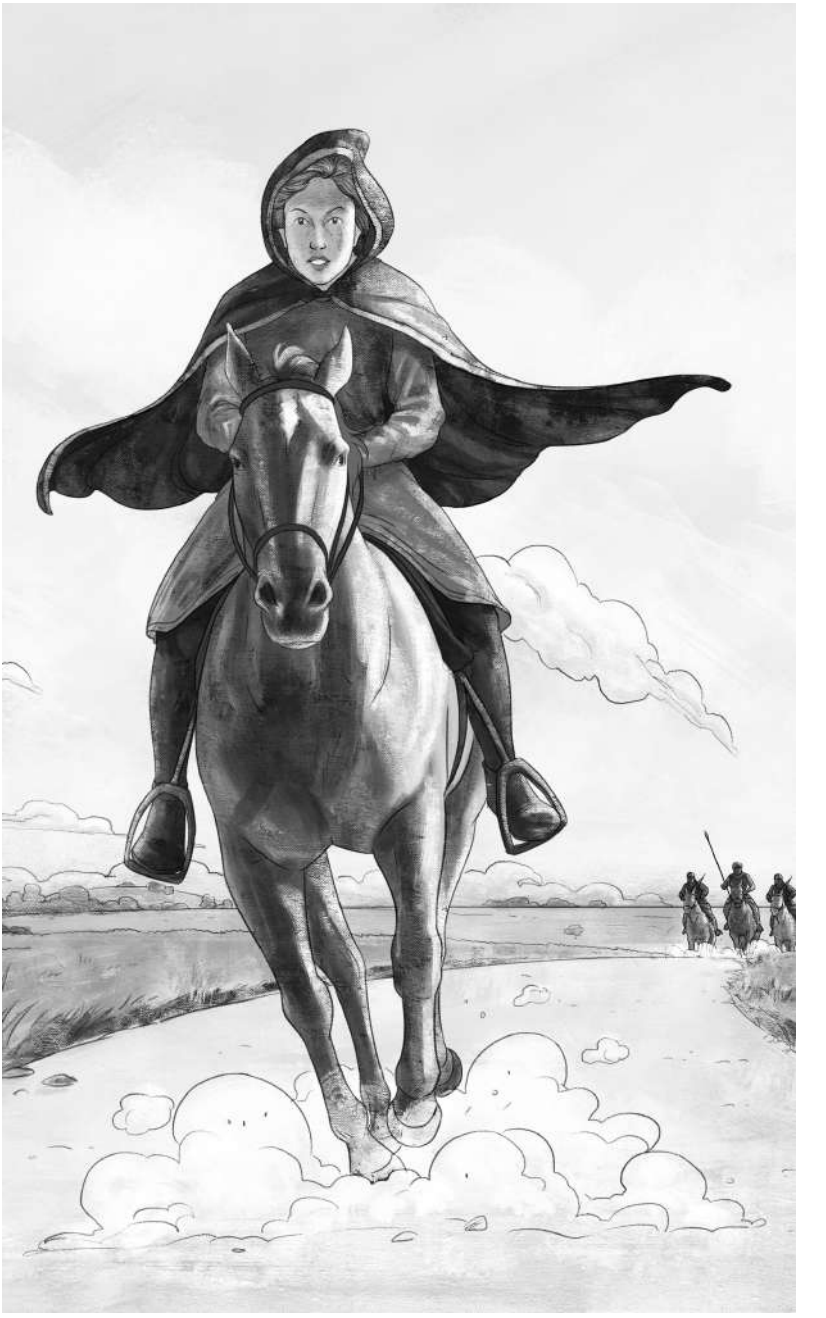
PROLOGUE
Captured!

It was spring in the year 1173, and a figure on horseback was racing along the dusty road from Poitiers to Paris.

The man—for it looked like a man—galloped hard and fast. He was tall and lean and an excellent rider. He crouched low in the saddle as the horse flew across fields and farmlands. His dark cloak streamed in the wind. How many miles until Paris? Would the horse make it there alive? Would he?

Suddenly, the rider pulled up short. The horse reared back, but the rider held on. They had entered a low woodland. Up ahead, at a crossroads in the path, two men on dark horses blocked the way. They loomed between the trees, their faces shadowed. The rider wrenched at his reins and wheeled around, only to see three more armed men on the path behind him. Trapped! The rider drew himself up in his saddle. If this was to be his fate, he would meet it without fear.

The men came forward and slowly circled the rider. The horses snorted and quivered. Then, before any of the men could speak, the rider raised a hand and threw back his hood.



It was not a man who sat astride the horse. There, proud and upright in the saddle, her eyes blazing, sat a woman.

The closest man looked at the ground. He could not meet those eyes.

"My lady," he said gruffly, "we are commanded to bring you to the king at Rouen. We pray you go peacefully."

The woman laughed, but she did not resist. So her dear husband commanded her presence, did he? Well then, so be it.

She urged her horse forward to fall in step with theirs. The group of riders moved off at a trot, away from Paris, toward Rouen. Anyone who saw them on the road might have imagined that the tall, proud lady was in command, and the men who trailed behind her were her servants—and that *they* were afraid of *her*.

Perhaps they *were* afraid, though the lady was their captive. For there beside them rode Eleanor of Aquitaine, duchess of the largest and most powerful empire in Europe and queen of England.

And she was under arrest for treason.

1

An Adventure Begins

The prologue you just read is an imagined version of how, at the age of fifty-one, Eleanor of Aquitaine was captured on the road between Poitiers and Paris. We may not know all the details, but we know that she was captured and that she was dressed like a man and on the run when it happened. But let's begin at the beginning.

Eleanor of Aquitaine was born in the year 1122, in the very middle of the Middle Ages. The exact location of her birth is not known, though it most likely took place in either Poitiers or Bordeaux, both great cities within her noble parents' domains. Historians have pieced together a picture of the times in which Eleanor lived from the handful of sources that exist: ancient letters and royal decrees, financial records, poems, songs, and the few surviving chronicles by writers of the time. There is much we don't know and much we have had to guess.

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decrees: laws or official orders issued by a ruler or other authority
chronicles: accounts of historical events in the order in which they happened

In the Middle Ages, most people could neither read nor write. Those who could were either monks, who needed to know Latin in order to read and copy out religious texts, or members of the nobility. Among the very small literate population were the chroniclers. They were writers who created chronicles, or historical records of their own day. Often, they were men who had been educated in the Church. Year by year, they documented both important events—past and present—and daily life. Without the works of chroniclers like Gervase of Canterbury, Gerald of Wales, Richard of Poitiers, John of Salisbury, and Peter of Blois, we would know almost nothing about the world in which Eleanor lived. And what else do all these writers have in common? They all wrote about Eleanor herself.

Because illiteracy was so common in twelfth-century Europe, hundreds of thousands of lives left no trace whatsoever. But the little girl born in 1122 to William X, Duke of Aquitaine, and his wife, Aenor de Châtellerault, was destined to leave a lasting mark on history. Eleanor was no ordinary child, and she would grow up to be an entirely extraordinary woman.

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monks: religious men who live in monasteries
Latin: the language of ancient Rome
nobility: a privileged social class whose members usually have titles
illiteracy: the inability to read or write

Like almost everyone in the medieval French kingdom, young Eleanor was taught to be a devout Christian. The Catholic Church, led by the pope in Rome, was the most powerful force in Europe. Even kings had to bow to its authority.

In feudal times, for the people who lived in villages or worked on farms, life was dangerous. There was always the possibility that some neighboring lord would launch an attack and their town or fields would be destroyed by invading armies.

And for a woman—even a woman of nobility like Eleanor—life could be still more unpredictable. Women in the Middle Ages had very little independence. They could inherit land, but for the most part, they could not govern it. They were valued for their dowries, and girls from noble families were often married by the age of fourteen or even younger. When a woman married, her property became her husband's, and she became her husband's property. Like a vassal to a lord, she was expected to be loyal and obedient to her husband.

Eleanor would learn what it was like to be a wealthy, sought-after heiress. But she would never be a meek and obedient wife. Determined, courageous, and intelligent, she was destined to carve her own path. Her life wouldn't be an easy one, but it would be an incredible adventure.

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devout: extremely dedicated and faithful; showing deep religious feeling or commitment

dowries: the possessions or money brought by brides to their husbands upon marriage

2

A Childhood of All Delights

Eleanor came from a long line of powerful dukes and duchesses. Her ancestors had ruled over the wealthy duchy of Aquitaine and the vast county of Poitou for more than two hundred years. By the time of Eleanor's birth, her inheritance stretched over most of what is now the southwest of France.

Aquitaine was a fertile region of farmlands and vineyards, crisscrossed by the many rivers that gave the duchy its name, which means land of waters. Its courts were famous for their support of music, poetry, and art. Eleanor's grandfather William IX, Duke of Aquitaine, who was also a poet, is considered the first troubadour, a medieval writer and singer of ballads. The court at Poitiers in which Eleanor grew up was the most important center for the arts in medieval Europe. There, she was raised surrounded by singers and entertainers and, as one

fertile: good for the growing of crops
courts: royal households
troubadour: a medieval performer who wrote poems and sang them as songs
ballads: poems that tell stories and are suitable for singing

chronicler wrote, "with abundance of all delights, living in the bosom of wealth."

William X, Eleanor's father, continued to welcome artists to his court. Moreover, he made sure that Eleanor received much more education than was usual for girls of her time. Eleanor was taught to read and write both in her native language, the *langue d'oc*, and in Latin. She learned arithmetic, the constellations, history, dancing, singing, chess, and how to play the harp. Her father even gave her some training in politics. Of course, she knew the domestic skills of needlework and embroidery, but she much preferred riding and hunting. As she grew older, she would come to love hawking most of all. She kept gyrfalcons at one of her family's hunting lodges, and she adored the company of these fierce, beautiful birds.

When Eleanor was about three years old, her mother gave birth to another girl, Petronilla. A year or two later, a baby brother was born. As the first male child, this little boy, William Aigret, was destined to be the next duke. But in 1130, when Eleanor was only eight, her mother

langue d'oc: the French name for Occitan, a language spoken in southern France

constellations: groups of stars that appear to form patterns in the night sky

hawking: a popular sport among medieval nobles in which hawks are trained to hunt and to return to their owners' arms

gyrfalcons: birds of prey that breed in or near the Arctic; the largest falcon species

and brother both became very ill. They died within months of each other. Suddenly, in the saddest moment of her young life, Eleanor became her father's heir. There was no doubt now that she would inherit the richest and most important realm in all of Europe.

William X loved his oldest daughter deeply. He couldn't help spoiling her. Young Eleanor soon developed a taste for fine clothes and jewels. She wore dresses embroidered with gold and, when she got older, makeup and perfume. Noblewomen in Aquitaine were known for their elegant fashions, the rouge on their cheeks, and the charcoal with which they lined their eyes. Unlike women in the northern regions, they were not kept apart from men and were allowed to mingle in society. Aquitanian laws gave more freedoms to women, including the ability to inherit and manage property.

Eleanor was growing up among women who expressed themselves, in a court where learning was valued, with a father who trusted her as his heir. She was intelligent, ambitious, and strong-willed—"exceedingly shrewd and clever," wrote one chronicler. She could also be stubborn and impulsive. By the time she reached her teenage years, it was clear that this bold young woman had a taste not only for luxury but also for power and adventure.

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heir: someone who will inherit property or a title
shrewd: sharp-witted, intelligent, and alert

In 1136, when Eleanor was almost fourteen, her father decided to make a pilgrimage to a holy shrine in Spain. William knew that he might not return from the difficult and dangerous journey. He wanted to ensure his daughter's safe succession. So, on Eleanor's fourteenth birthday, William summoned all his vassals to his court and ordered them to swear their loyalty to Eleanor as rightful heiress to Poitou, Aquitaine, and Gascony.

A crowd of grown men knelt to young Eleanor in the ceremony of homage, in which a vassal placed his hands between those of his lord and swore obedience. But William knew that even with this done, there was still something else that needed to happen. Eleanor had to marry.

In those days, it was not unusual for a power-hungry lord to kidnap a wealthy young woman and lay claim to her land. William feared for his daughter's safety, but he had a plan. There was only one man to whom the Duke of Aquitaine owed his feudal loyalty: the king of France, Louis VI—and he had a son. William wrote to Louis VI and named him as Eleanor's guardian. His hope was that

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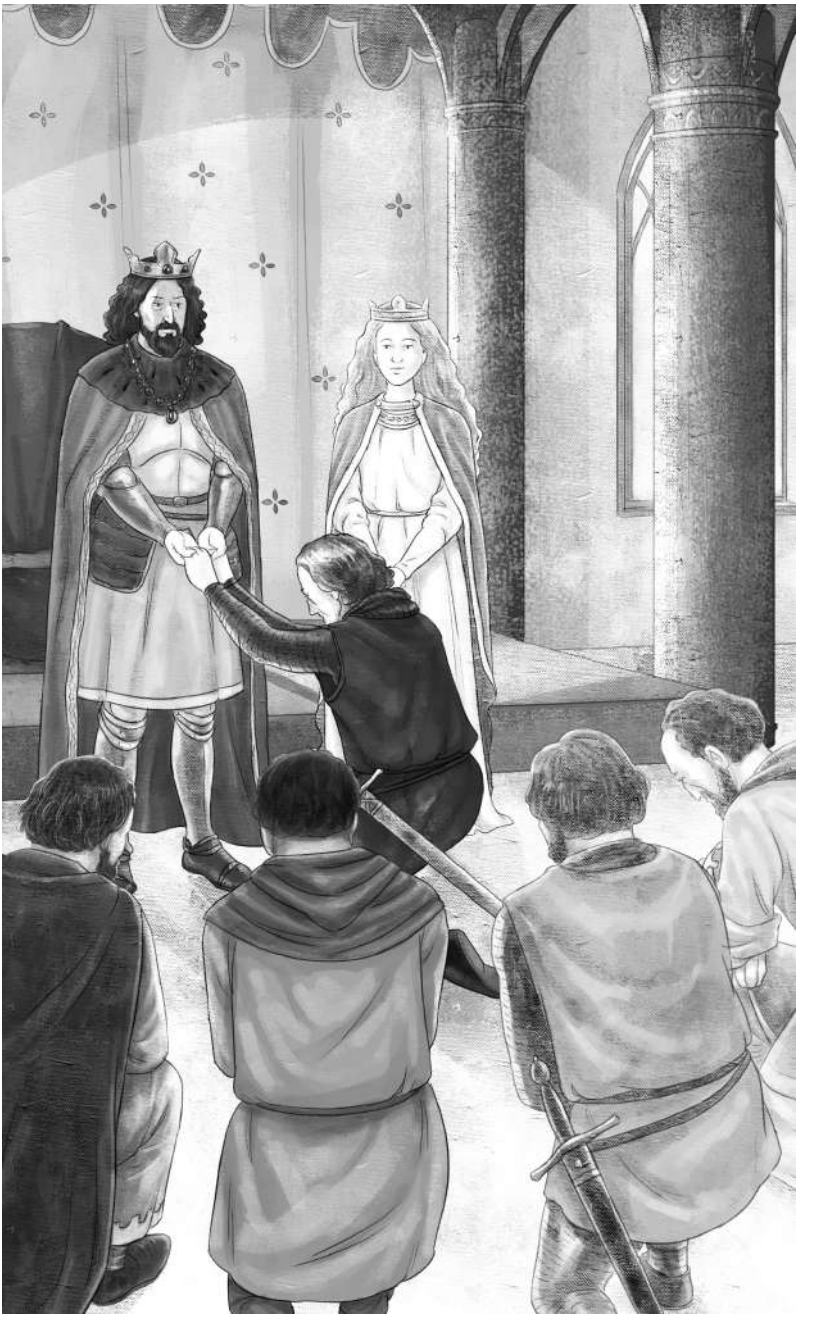
pilgrimage: a religious journey to a holy place, usually taken in order to receive forgiveness for one's sins

holy shrine: a sacred place that is associated with a holy person or object

succession: the handing down of power from one ruler to the next, usually related to family inheritance

homage: the act of honoring or acknowledging a vassal's duty to their lord



the king would arrange Eleanor's engagement to his own son, also named Louis, the heir to the French throne. If the duke's plan worked, his daughter would be not only a duchess but also a queen.

William set off on his pilgrimage, but by the time he reached Spain, his fears had come true: he was deathly ill from drinking polluted water. The duke had to be carried into the holy shrine, but first, he quickly made his will. He left all his lands to Eleanor and requested that she be married to young Louis as soon as possible. Even in death, the duke was clever; in his will, he made it clear that although Eleanor's husband would be able to rule over her lands, the lands themselves would never be the property of the French crown. Aquitaine would always belong to Eleanor and her descendants.

On April 9, 1137, William X, Duke of Aquitaine, died at the shrine in Spain. In late July, Eleanor and young Louis were married in a huge ceremony in the city of Bordeaux. Eleanor was fifteen, Louis was sixteen, and the eyes of all Europe were upon them.

King Louis VI was overjoyed. His daughter-in-law, the new princess, was rich beyond even a king's dreams! But within days of the wedding, as Eleanor and her new husband were making a tour of her lands, news arrived

from Paris. King Louis VI had died of dysentery. The teenage newlyweds were no longer prince and princess. They were the king and queen of France.

dysentery: an infection of the intestines that causes severe diarrhea and dehydration

3

Life with Louis

In 1137, Eleanor and Louis were crowned on Christmas Day in the city of Bourges. They had moved into the Cité Palace in Paris soon after their wedding, and Eleanor now set about improving her new home. She missed the spacious, elegant palaces of Aquitaine and Poitou, especially the beautiful palace at Poitiers. Its great hall was known as "the hall of lost footsteps" because it was so vast that the sound of a footfall disappeared within its enormous space.

The Cité Palace was cramped and cold, with blank stone walls and skinny arrow slits for windows. Eleanor had a fireplace and chimney installed, along with enlarged window openings with wooden shutters, and beautiful tapestries for the walls. She invited troubadours, jugglers, and entertainers to court, as she'd been used to growing up. She introduced tablecloths and napkins, and under her influence, the manners of the court improved.

Louis happily gave his new wife everything she wanted.

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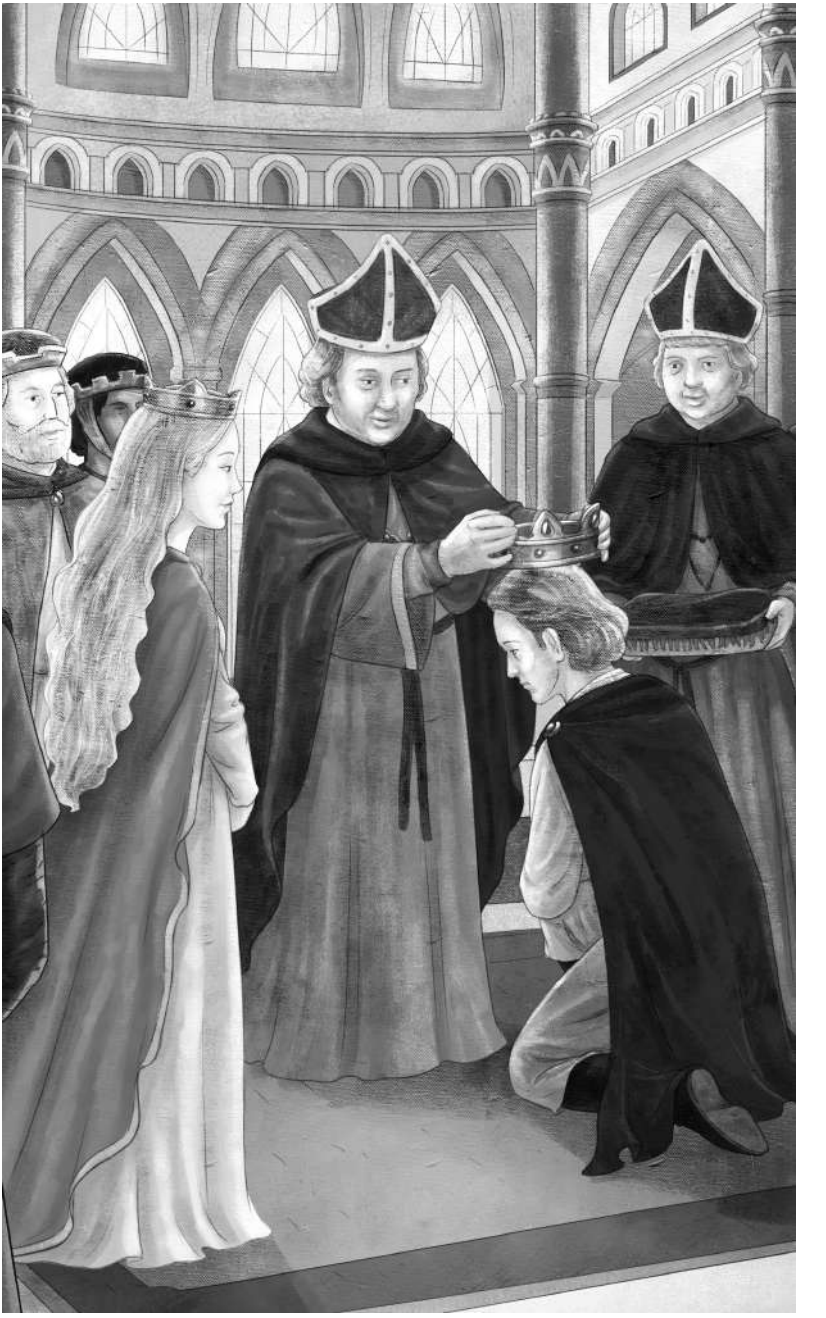
arrow slits: narrow vertical openings in castle walls from which arrows can be fired

tapestries: heavy cloths with pictures or designs woven into them



Eleanor was forceful by nature and, by all accounts, extremely beautiful. The young king was dazzled by her. One chronicler wrote that Louis "loved the Queen almost beyond reason." He was a sensitive, devout, rather innocent young man; the truth was, he was never meant for the throne. Louis was his father's second son, and he had spent most of his childhood in a monastery, preparing to become a monk. But when he was eleven years old, his older brother, Philip, died in a riding accident. Suddenly, Louis was heir to the throne of France, whether he was ready or not.

The young king's advisers tended to think he was not. They worried that he was inexperienced and foolish, too easily swayed by bad advice. And they believed they knew exactly where that bad advice was coming from: Queen Eleanor.

Eleanor was high-spirited and used to her own way, and the French court distrusted her. Louis's nobles thought Eleanor was immodest, flirtatious, and far too free with the king's money. Louis's mother left court to avoid her. His chief advisors disliked her, and the famous Bernard of Clairvaux—a powerful and influential abbot—downright despised her. "Fie on a beauty that is put on in the morning and laid aside at night!" wrote Bernard, shocked by Eleanor's clothes and her makeup.

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monastery: an abbey or religious building that is home to monks living under religious vows
immodest: overly bold and shameless; lacking meekness and humility
abbot: the head of a monastery (or abbey) of monks

Perhaps Louis's nobles wouldn't have minded Eleanor so much if she had been easier to ignore. But Eleanor wanted to be by Louis's side, advising him and ruling with him as queen. She was supposed to spend her days praying, or sitting in the palace gardens, or playing chess, or simply shut up in her rooms gossiping with her ladies. She wanted more.

And she was anxious about Louis. Though he showered her with gifts, he didn't spend much time with her. As queen, Eleanor knew that she was expected to have children. The kingdom of France needed an heir. But four years had passed, and still they remained childless.

As it turned out, Louis and Eleanor's troubles were only just beginning. The young king could be reckless and stubborn, and early in his reign, he got into trouble with the Church. Louis disagreed with Pope Innocent II over who should be appointed to fill the important position of archbishop in the city of Bourges. The argument got so bad that eventually the pope punished Louis by putting his household under an interdict.

archbishop: a bishop of the highest rank who is in charge of the churches and other bishops in a particular area

The Power of the Church

One way the Church could punish rulers who challenged its authority was with an interdict. An interdict is an official decree that bars a particular place, person, or group of people from certain rights of church membership, such as receiving the holy sacraments—the sacred rituals that are central to the Catholic faith, including baptism, communion, confession, and marriage—and from church burial, including funeral services. When applied to a place rather than a person or group, an interdict meant that an entire population was cut off from practicing its faith.

Another penalty the Church could impose was excommunication. Excommunication also means being denied the sacraments and other rights of church membership, but it can only be passed on an individual, not a whole population. It is also considered a more severe punishment. Unlike an interdict, which only bars participation in religious practice, excommunication means being cut off spiritually from God and from the possibility of salvation. In the Middle Ages, when the Church dominated everyday life, it also meant being cut off from one's community as a whole.

Worse, Louis soon found himself entangled in a violent conflict with one of his vassals, Count Theobald II of Champagne. The count was furious over the treatment of his sister, who was married to another powerful count, Raoul of Vermandois. But Count Raoul had cast her aside for someone else: Eleanor's younger sister, Petronilla.

Divorce was not permitted by the medieval Church. Nevertheless, the nobility had ways of bending the rules. Under Church law, marriages could be annulled, or declared unlawful, for a few specific reasons. The most common of these was the law of consanguinity. Under this law, it was illegal for two people who were too closely related by blood to marry.

But the truth was, almost all the royalty of Europe was related to each other in some degree. Noble families intermarried constantly to maintain power. Eleanor and Louis were themselves third cousins once removed—a fact that, for the time, they were happy to overlook. When a marriage brought political advantages, the law of consanguinity was usually ignored. But it was quickly called upon whenever someone, like Count Raoul, wanted out of a marriage.

Count Raoul claimed that his first marriage was a false one. He asked King Louis's permission to have the marriage annulled so that he and Petronilla could marry.

Eleanor wanted her sister to be happy, and she supported Raoul's request. Louis, who could refuse her nothing, agreed. But when Raoul and Petronilla were married, the enraged Count Theobald appealed to the pope. Already angry with Louis, the pope was happy to excommunicate the king's newlywed relatives and put their

lands under an interdict. Louis was once again humiliated and furious. The rash young king declared war on Count Theobald. He marched his armies into the count's lands, beginning a brutal war that lasted for two years.

From 1142 to 1144, Louis and Count Theobald laid waste to each other's lands. Though Louis wasn't a very skilled commander, he had the more powerful army. His soldiers burned their way through Champagne, destroying towns and killing scores of innocent civilians.

But Louis's conscience didn't survive his war. In 1143, the king was involved in an attack on the town of Vitry-sur-Marne. He watched from a hillside as his soldiers set fire to the town, including its church, where the villagers were seeking sanctuary. The burning roof of the church caved in. Everyone inside was killed—at least 1,500 people. The king was horrified. He began to weep and shake violently. He seemed to be in a trance. His soldiers had to carry him to his tent, where he lay for two days without speaking.

The attack on Vitry-sur-Marne changed Louis forever. He was overcome with shame and guilt. He shaved his long hair and began to dress as a monk. He spent hours at prayer and would often lie awake at night, weeping. Louis was afraid that his soul would never enter heaven.

sanctuary: shelter or protection from danger, especially inside a church

Eleanor anxiously watched her husband's transformation. She was also worried for her sister, Petronilla, who was suffering under excommunication. So, in the summer of 1144, she took a great risk. Alone, she visited the powerful abbot Bernard of Clairvaux. She begged him to ask the new pope, Celestine II, to end the Church's punishment of Petronilla and Raoul. In return, she promised that she would convince Louis to make peace with Theobald.

Bernard was appalled. How dare this young woman come to him and strike political bargains? Bernard believed

appalled: shocked and offended

Eleanor was behind every bad decision Louis made. "From whom but the Devil did this advice come under which you are acting?" he had written to the king. Now, that "Devil" stood before him, a confident young woman.

Bernard commanded the queen to stop interfering in politics. Eleanor begged his forgiveness. She told him how heartbroken she was that she and Louis still had no children. In the end, she went away with Bernard's blessing. "My child . . . cease to stir up the King against the Church and urge him to a better course of action," the abbot told her. "If you will promise to do this, I in my turn promise to entreat the merciful Lord to grant you offspring."

Though it would take four more long years before the pope agreed to lift Petronilla and Count Raoul's excommunication, it seems likely that Eleanor was able to convince her husband to end his bloody war. Within weeks, Louis returned all the lands he had claimed in Champagne and made peace with Count Theobald. Eleanor may even have believed that Bernard's prayer for her had been answered, for later that year, she discovered she was pregnant. In 1145, she gave birth to her first child, a daughter named Marie.

4

A Queen on Crusade

Despite the birth of a healthy child, the mood remained grim at the French court. Louis was still haunted by his actions at Vitry-sur-Marne. He believed that he could never make up for his sins unless he went on a crusade to the Holy Land.

The Crusades and the Holy Land

The Crusades were a series of bloody wars between European Christians and Turkish Muslims over control of the Holy Land, which Christians revered as Jesus's homeland in the Middle East. This area is made up of present-day Israel and Palestine, and in the Middle Ages, these lands had been under Muslim control for centuries. They were sacred to both Muslims and Christians, and many Christian pilgrims traveled to the holy city of Jerusalem despite the difficulty of the journey.

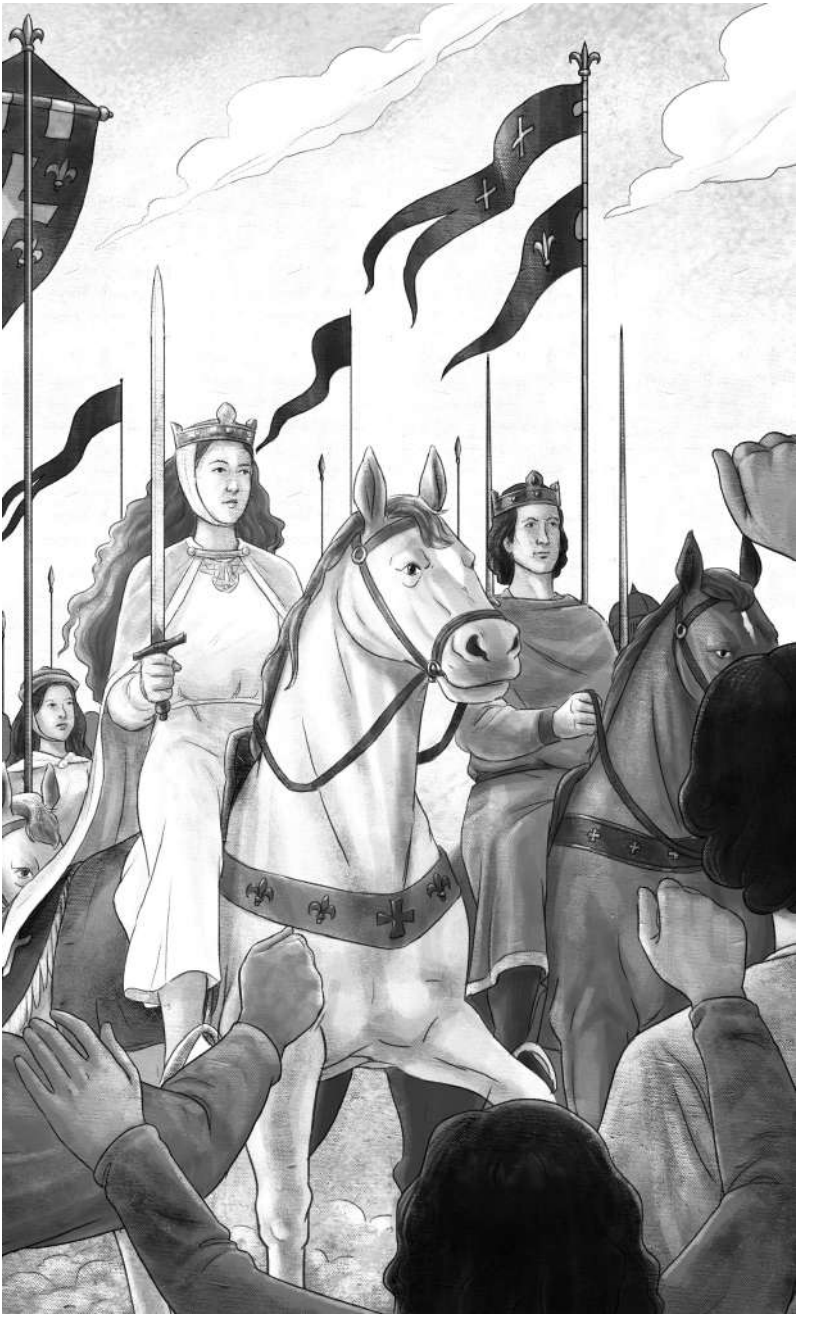
The word crusade *comes from the Latin word* crux, *meaning* cross. *The Muslims called these wars "the Frankish invasions." (*Franks *was a general term that Muslims and Eastern Orthodox Christians commonly used to refer to most Europeans.) The Crusades began in the late 1000s, when the pope called for all Christians to unite against Muslims in order to conquer the Holy Land. Eight brutal crusades took place between 1095 and 1270. The European armies believed that*

all non-Catholics were heretics, and they attacked not only Muslims but also Jews and Eastern Orthodox Christians. More than a million lives were lost. In the end, despite a few early European victories, the Holy Land remained the territory of the Muslims who had lived there for more than four hundred years.

It might seem strange that Louis, tormented as he was by his experience of war, wanted to go on a crusade. But the Church promised that all Christians who dedicated themselves to conquering the Holy Land would receive forgiveness for their sins. On December 1, 1145, the pope declared the need for a new crusade. Louis immediately pledged to go. His advisers weren't pleased, but they weren't surprised. What was surprising was this: Eleanor announced that she was going too!

It was highly unusual for women to accompany the crusader armies. Even without the threat of battle, the long journey to the Holy Land was itself extremely dangerous. But Eleanor refused to be left behind. As the duchess of mighty Aquitaine, she was determined to lead the soldiers from her own lands. She and Louis set about recruiting a vast army of their vassals, and during Easter 1146, they announced their commitment to the crusade in a huge ceremony in the city of Vézelay.

heretics: people who do not accept or follow the ideas of a particular religion



In later years, chroniclers would write that Eleanor and her ladies-in-waiting dazzled the crowds. Dressed in white and galloping on white horses, they brandished swords and banners, their long hair streaming behind them. Eleanor was compared to the legendary queen Penthesilea, who led a tribe of fierce woman warriors called the Amazons.

It took another year for Louis to finish making preparations and gathering his massive army. At last, in the late spring of 1147, the crusaders marched for the Holy Land. About a hundred thousand people set off with Louis and Eleanor, including more than three hundred women. Eleanor traveled in style, and with an astonishing amount of baggage. Numerous carts were loaded down with clothes, furs, jewelry, goblets, plates, bedding, washbasins, soap, and food. The French courtiers muttered criticisms of the queen and her ladies, but Eleanor was determined to live in sophistication and comfort, even on the road to war.

Despite this grand sendoff, Louis's crusade was doomed from the start. The king was no brilliant military leader, and as a result, his soldiers showed little interest in respecting or obeying him. His army had hardly gone a hundred miles before soldiers began to desert the ranks or to attack or steal from villagers along their route.

By the winter, food was running low. Louis decided to take a dangerous shortcut through the Turkish mountains to reach the Holy Land. He sent a large force along with Eleanor and one of her vassals to make camp up ahead at an agreed-upon spot. Meanwhile, he traveled at the rear of the army with the enormous baggage train.

But Eleanor and her vassal, a lord named Geoffrey, pushed ahead past the place where the army had planned to camp; they thought they spotted a better, more comfortable site up ahead. Little did they know that far behind them, the Turks had ambushed the rear half of the army. Louis's soldiers were set upon from all sides, and when he sent messengers to plead for reinforcements from Eleanor and Geoffrey, their party was nowhere to be found.

Seven thousand soldiers were killed in the mountain pass that day. The army's huge baggage train was ransacked. Louis himself only escaped death by climbing up a rock wall, clinging to tree roots. Finally, the king and his party of wounded men found the site where Eleanor and Geoffrey had made camp. The soldiers were furious—they felt that the queen had betrayed them. But Louis refused to blame his wife. Instead, he punished Geoffrey and sent him home in disgrace.

ransacked: searched through carelessly in order to rob

No one knew exactly who gave the fatal order to change campsites that day. But the army blamed Eleanor. Hatred and distrust of her rippled through the ranks, and Louis felt further from his wife than ever.

At last, in a battered and miserable state, Louis's army reached the kingdom of Antioch, one of four small Christian kingdoms carved out by the First Crusade on the eastern side of the Mediterranean Sea. Arriving in Antioch should have been an opportunity for the army to rest and heal. And it was—at first.

But soon, Louis and Eleanor's relationship became more strained than ever. Raymond, the prince of Antioch, was an uncle of Eleanor's, and the two became very close. He was a striking man—"taller, better built and more handsome than any man of his time," wrote one chronicler. It was said he could bend an iron bar with his bare hands. Louis grew jealous of Raymond. He announced his intention to move on to Jerusalem, but Eleanor refused. She told Louis that she had had enough of his crusade; she and her vassals would remain in Antioch. A fierce argument began, and Eleanor dared to remind Louis of the fact of their consanguinity—in short, she was threatening him with divorce.

Antioch: in the medieval period, a kingdom located on the eastern coast of the Mediterranean Sea, north of Jerusalem; today, a city in the south-central region of the country of Turkey

Louis was furious. That night, he had his soldiers kidnap Eleanor from her room. Under lock and key, he packed her off to Jerusalem with him. The whole army stole out of the city in the middle of the night. Eleanor had long been frustrated with her husband, but now he had gone too far. She would never forgive him.

Louis's crusade ended in disarray and disgrace. Though he managed to reach Jerusalem, his army was already in tatters. Worse still, the leaders of Jerusalem didn't want his help. They had made their own political bargains with the neighboring Turks, and they didn't need an army of outsiders upsetting this delicate balance. By the time Louis gathered what was left of his forces—a mere three hundred people—and began the journey homeward, it was spring in the year 1149. The failed crusade had lasted two years.

Louis and Eleanor were hardly speaking. She was enraged with him, and he was bewildered and frustrated by her. But at the encouragement of the pope, they attempted to patch things up. After their arrival home in Paris in November 1149, it looked as if their marriage might still be mended. Eleanor was expecting another child, and the king hoped he would finally have an heir.

Then another baby girl arrived. Poor Alix was the death sentence for Eleanor and Louis's marriage. Louis,

nearly thirty and desperate for a male heir, began to think Eleanor was right: perhaps an annulment would be best for everyone. His advisers were pressuring him to let the queen go and to marry someone more obedient this time.

In March 1152, Eleanor and Louis were granted an annulment on the grounds of consanguinity. The royal marriage was over. Eleanor was free.

5

Henry

In the Cathedral of Saint-Pierre in Poitiers, a wedding was taking place—a quiet affair, almost secretive. Few witnesses were present. The bride was strikingly beautiful, thirty years old and radiant with confidence. The groom was only nineteen, but he was a match for his partner: broad shouldered and red haired, with a face like a lion and blue-gray eyes fierce with ambition—the eyes of a warrior, and of a future king.

The man was Henry of Anjou, Duke of Normandy. The woman was Eleanor of Aquitaine. It was May 18, 1152. Eleanor's marriage to Louis had ended barely eight weeks earlier.

Eleanor and Henry knew they were taking a big risk. Strictly speaking, they should have asked Louis's permission to marry, as he was overlord to both of them. But they knew Louis would be furious. As third cousins, they were even more closely related than Louis and Eleanor.

By marrying, Eleanor and Henry were combining their lands to create the largest, most powerful empire

in Europe. Not only was Henry the duke of Normandy, he was also heir to both the mighty county of Anjou and, through his mother, the crown of England. The royal domain of France would be isolated. Henry would be the greatest ruler on the continent.

And Eleanor wanted the greatest. After the annulment with Louis, she knew she was not safe. She was once again a single woman who held important territory in Europe. Power-hungry men would be after her lands, and after her. Indeed, after she left Louis, while on her journey from Paris back home to Poitiers, two different lords attempted to kidnap her! She managed to avoid capture, but she knew she needed to marry again. And this time, she would choose her husband.

Henry and Eleanor had met during the previous year in Paris. They liked each other right away. It seems likely that they came to some secret understanding, for when Eleanor at last made it safely back to Poitiers, the first thing she did was send messengers to Henry, telling him to come as quickly as possible and marry her.

They were certainly better matched than Eleanor and Louis. They were both strong-willed, tenacious, intelligent, energetic, and confident. They both loved riding and hunting. They were both natural leaders. Eventually, theirs would become one of the most famously

tenacious: fiercely determined; unwilling to give up

turbulent marriages in history. But in the beginning, their fiery natures brought them together. They were ready to take on the world.

Henry's ancestors, the dukes of Anjou, were extremely powerful. Known as the Angevins, they were cunning and ferocious. Eventually, the many mighty fiefdoms they ruled in Europe would become known by historians as the Angevin empire. One of these wily rulers, Henry's father Geoffrey IV, Count of Anjou, earned the nickname "Plantagenet" because of his habit of wearing a sprig of broom flower—which, in Latin, is called *planta genista*—in his hat. This playful nickname later became the surname of one of the greatest royal dynasties in history; starting with Henry, the Plantagenet line would rule England for more than three hundred years. But first, Henry had to win England back.

Henry's mother, Empress Matilda, had spent many years fighting to regain the throne of England from her cousin, King Stephen. Matilda was the rightful heir of her father, King Henry I of England, but when the old king died, Stephen usurped the throne. The years of civil war that followed were known in England as the Anarchy. Now that her son was grown—and an enthusiastic warrior—Matilda was ready to let him take

turbulent: stormy, wild, or explosive; full of trouble and discord
usurped: seized or took over unlawfully
anarchy: disorder and chaos; the lack of government

over the battle. And the nobles of England, tired of the chaos of Stephen's reign, were ready for a new and more dependable king.

During the first year of their marriage, Eleanor and Henry were often apart. She stayed in Poitiers and ran her own domains while he went to England to fight for the throne. In early 1153, she realized she was expecting a child. That year was destined to bring about two happy events. The exhausted Stephen surrendered to Henry and agreed to make the young duke his heir, and Eleanor delivered a healthy baby boy, William. "So God granted a happy issue and peace shone forth," wrote one chronicler.

A year later, Stephen died, and Henry, the twenty-one-year-old duke of Normandy, became Henry II, king of England. He and Eleanor prepared to travel to London. Eleanor would be setting foot in England for the first time—and as its queen.

Eleanor and Henry were crowned on December 19, 1154, in Westminster Abbey. A massive crowd gathered to cheer for "Henry the Peacemaker." And there was another reason to celebrate: Eleanor was expecting another child. Two months later, she gave birth to a second son, named Henry, for his father.

6

Ruling Together, Living Apart

In the mid-1100s, England was undergoing a long transformation, brought about by the Norman Conquest of 1066. Not quite a century after this momentous event, Henry and Eleanor were king and queen over a people of mixed identity. Most of the English peasants were Anglo-Saxons, but the nobles were still largely of Norman descent. Norman French was the language of the court, the law, and the upper classes until the late fourteenth century. Eleanor and Henry were rulers of England who never spoke English! In fact, the language we know today as English was still coming into being.

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momentous: of huge importance

Anglo-Saxons: the cultural group that inhabited much of England in the early Middle Ages, who were descended from indigenous Britons, conquering Romans, and Germanic settlers and spoke a largely Germanic language now known as Old English

The Norman Conquest

Normandy was a large and powerful duchy on the northern coast of the kingdom of France. Its name comes from the fact that in the year 911 CE, the French king made a deal with an army of invading Vikings, or Northmen: in exchange for stopping their attacks on his kingdom, he gave them this province. The word Northman *became* Norman*, and the land inhabited by these Normans—the descendants of the Vikings, mixed with the local French population—became Normandy. Because of the influence of the Vikings' language, Old Norse, Norman French was very different from other French variants spoken in medieval Europe, including the southern* langue d'oc*, Eleanor's native language.*

In 1066, a man named William was the duke of Normandy. William believed he had a claim to the throne of England, so he launched a massive invasion. He sailed with his armies across the English Channel—the thin arm of sea that separates England and Normandy—and he successfully occupied England. He took the title William the Conqueror, and from then on, for almost two hundred years, the dukes of Normandy were usually also the kings of England. King Henry II was directly descended from this famous conqueror—William was his great-grandfather.

To rule over this changing nation, along with his domains in Europe, Henry was constantly on the move. His royal court was not located in a single castle or city. Instead, it was itinerant. As king, Henry traveled with a huge retinue of more than 250 people, including

itinerant: always traveling from place to place
retinue: a group of followers, such as make up a royal court

advisers, clerks, knights, chaplains, cooks, bakers, butlers, huntsmen, keepers of the royal hawks, launderers, tailors, clowns, singers, jesters, jugglers, and personal servants. This enormous assembly moved from town to town as Henry oversaw the business of the kingdom.

This itinerant life was rough: dusty, muddy, smelly, and chaotic. But Henry thrived in the hustle and bustle. He could ride for hours at a time, and he preferred dirty hunting clothes to royal garments. He often changed his travel plans at the last minute, throwing the court into even greater disarray. "I hardly dare say it," wrote one chronicler, "but I believe he took a delight in seeing what a fix he put us in."

Despite the chaos of his court, the king was bringing order to the nation. Henry was a strong and able ruler, seemingly inexhaustible. One chronicler reported that he would wear out his advisers by remaining on his feet all night, talking, planning, and working. Even his rival, Eleanor's first husband King Louis, was amazed by his energy. "Now in Ireland, now in England, now in Normandy, he must fly rather than travel by horse or ship!" Louis marveled.

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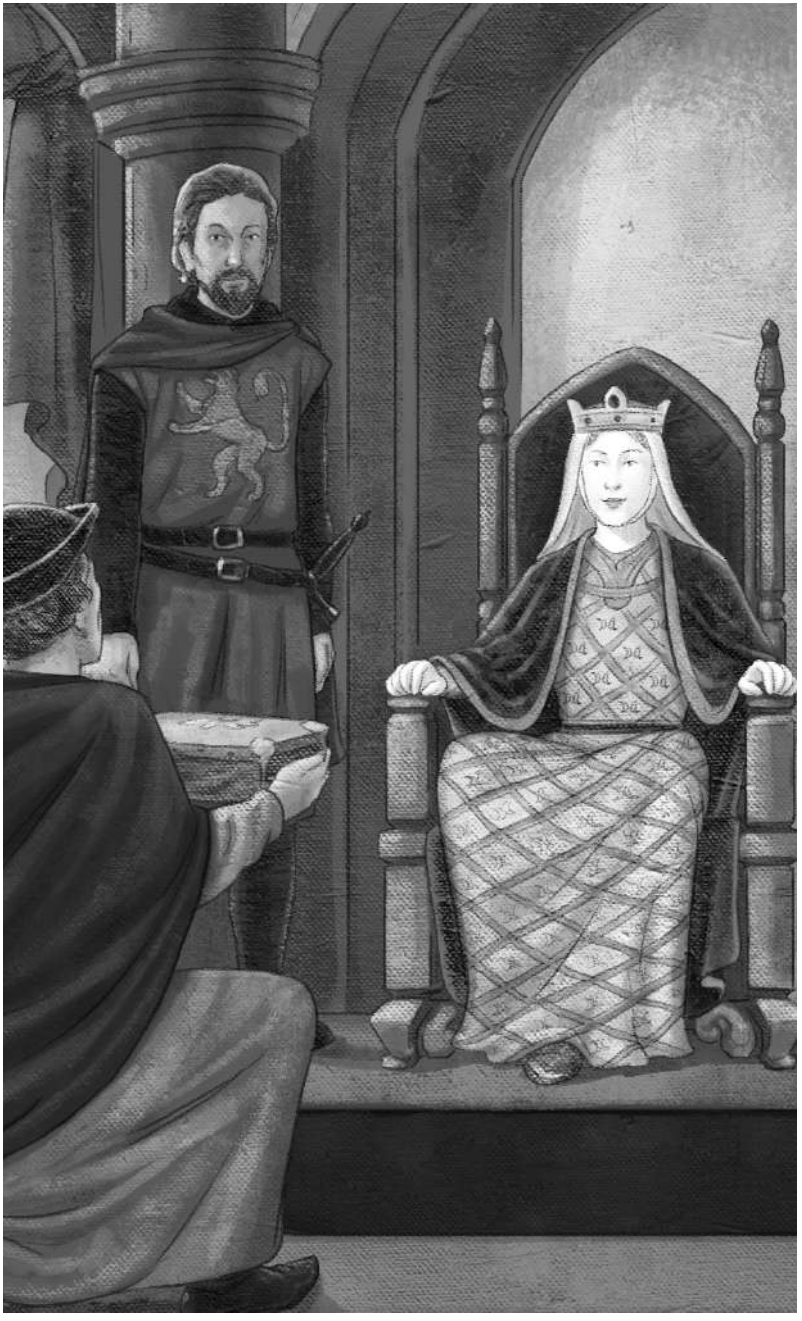
jesters: members of royal or noble households who told jokes and entertained people
fix: a mess or muddle; a difficult or frustrating situation
inexhaustible: impossible to tire out

Eleanor sometimes traveled with her husband, but they quickly decided on a division of labor. In the early years of their marriage, with Henry always on the road—and often away in Europe—Eleanor acted as regent of England. She signed decrees and ruled on legal matters with just as much energy and dedication as Henry. She learned the language of her new country, and she threw herself into her own travels, getting to know the land and its people. She did *not* share her husband's taste for rough living. In her personal palace apartments, she enjoyed her favorite wine, spices, perfumes, gold plates, and goblets, and whenever the queen traveled, plenty of luxurious cushions and tapestries went with her.

The peace that Henry and Eleanor established in England would last for almost twenty years. But even as they worked for peace, their marriage was experiencing difficulties.

First came an early tragedy: in 1156, Eleanor's firstborn son, William, died before his third birthday. She could hardly take time to mourn for him, for she was again about to give birth. Eleanor and Henry's first daughter, Matilda, arrived in June. In September of the next year, another son, Richard, was born. And the September after that, another—Geoffrey. By the fall of

regent: a person officially appointed to govern a kingdom in the absence of its ruler



1158, Eleanor had been almost constantly with child for five years.

But the challenges of governing meant that Eleanor and Henry were not often together. They would meet every year at Christmas to hold a festive court, but the task of governing the whole of England and the vast Angevin empire meant that they spent many months apart. From 1158 to 1163, Henry was stuck in Europe, fighting battle after battle with Eleanor's rebellious vassals. For nearly five years, the king of England did not set foot in his kingdom.

The distance in the royal marriage was not just a matter of miles. Henry was not a faithful husband. In fact, Eleanor was raising a son of Henry's—another Geoffrey—alongside her own children.

However, Eleanor remained coolheaded and focused, even though she and Henry were growing apart. Eleanor's priorities were her realm and her children. She still considered herself the ruler of Aquitaine. Her vassals there were constantly giving Henry trouble. They would accept no authority but that of their duchess, and Eleanor longed to be back home, governing her people. Eventually, she got her wish.

In the years after the arrival of her fourth son, Geoffrey, Eleanor did give birth to three more children:

two daughters, Eleanor and Joan, and a son, John. John was born in 1166, when his mother was forty-four years old. Around this same year, Henry fell in love with a beautiful young woman named Rosamund de Clifford.

Henry and Rosamund's relationship lasted almost ten years. Though the king tried to keep it a secret, his court—and his queen—knew the truth. Eleanor, who had borne Henry eight children, could see that his attention lay elsewhere, and so she made her mind up. Now was her opportunity to go her own way.

In 1167, Eleanor met her husband for their traditional Christmas court in Normandy. But she came prepared: she had sailed from England with seven ships, carrying all her possessions. That Christmas, though they would remain legally married, Eleanor and Henry agreed to a separation. When she left Normandy, it was for her beloved Poitiers. Henry did not stop her. He even sent part of his army to accompany her on the journey. Eleanor was going home.

7

Trouble on the Way

Eleanor's return to her homeland was both a personal victory and a wise political move. Henry had never really been able to subdue the fierce Aquitanian lords. Thirteen years into his marriage to Eleanor, he had to admit that no one knew her own people like she did.

For the next five years, Eleanor presided over a court of her own making at Poitiers. In England, she had missed the music, poetry, and culture of her upbringing. Like her grandfather and father before her, she filled her court with troubadours and artists. It was a center of culture and fashion. Centuries later, people told tales of how Eleanor of Aquitaine ruled over a grand court populated entirely by women. Here, they said, young knights came and tested themselves in trials of courtly love.

Courtly Love

The poetic idea called courtly love *was a kind of social game for the nobility, based on ideals of honor, courtesy, and chivalry, the code by which knights conducted themselves. According to the rules of courtly love, a knight would dedicate himself to a noble lady and would perform acts of bravery and devotion to prove his faith. This idealized, often intentionally unrequited love provided the romantic material for many of the songs and poems of the Middle Ages. If you have ever seen a movie or read a story in which a knight wears a lady's handkerchief as he fights in a tournament, then you have seen one of the rituals of courtly love.*

idealized: romanticized; represented as better than reality
unrequited: not returned

Despite her famous court's reputation for romance and leisure, Queen Eleanor was not fully shielded from the troubles of the outside world. Dark clouds were gathering on the horizon, and the first took the shape of a man named Thomas Becket.

When Eleanor established her own court at Poitiers, Thomas Becket was the archbishop of Canterbury, the most powerful position in the English Church. He was also, at that time, engaged in an ongoing feud with King Henry.

The intelligent, ambitious Becket had once been Henry's closest friend. From 1155 to 1162, he served as Henry's chancellor, the king's closest and highest-ranking adviser. The pair were inseparable. They played practical jokes, went hunting and hawking together, and threw huge parties, at times behaving more like wild schoolboys than heads of state.

It's likely that Queen Eleanor wasn't particularly fond of Becket. When he became chancellor, she was just about to give birth to her second son. Henry, who now had Becket to go to for advice and company, consulted his wife less and less on matters of government.

But after those early days of friendship, Becket and the king had a terrible falling-out. When Henry appointed

feud: a long and bitter argument or dispute

Becket as archbishop of Canterbury in 1162, he thought he was electing a trustworthy ally. Henry wanted to make changes to the laws and customs of the English Church, and with Becket as archbishop, the king thought he'd have no trouble doing exactly as he wished. But Becket shocked everybody: when he became archbishop, he changed completely. Chroniclers of the time wrote that the proud courtier suddenly transformed into a humble man of God. Becket now dedicated himself wholly to the pope, and he began to oppose King Henry at every turn.

By the time Eleanor left England for Poitiers, Becket and the king had been fierce rivals for five years. It seemed as if their feud would last forever. Then, at Christmastime in 1170, something terrible happened.

Eleanor was visiting Henry in Normandy for their traditional Christmas court. There, Henry received news of Becket's latest act of defiance. The king exploded with frustration. Legend has it that he shouted in rage, "Will no one rid me of this turbulent priest?"

Four of his knights overheard him. They took the king's words seriously and raced back to England. Inside the great cathedral at Canterbury, they murdered Thomas Becket.

It was a brutal crime, and it shocked the whole of Europe. Becket was instantly honored as a martyr. Kings and bishops called for vengeance for his death. Henry was horrified by the result of his angry words, but it didn't matter—everyone believed him guilty. Becket was seen as a hero, and Henry as a monster. The king would never fully recover from his former friend's death, and his people would never fully respect him again.

Neither would his wife.

It seems that the murder of Thomas Becket caused a grievous shift in Eleanor's feelings for Henry. Up until the end of 1170, though they were separated, they had remained friendly. From her court at Poitiers, Eleanor supported her husband's policies and calmly endured—or ignored—his romantic affairs. But after Becket's death, something changed. Perhaps she was disgusted with the role he had played in Becket's murder. Perhaps she thought that her own sons, now entering their teenage years and restless with ambition, were more fit to rule than their father. They were certainly easier for her to control.

Whatever the case, Eleanor was about to embark on the most dangerous venture of her life. She was about to commit treason.

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martyr: a person who is killed because of their religious beliefs

8

A Royal Rebellion

"All hail the Young King!"

The shouts went up from the crowd as Eleanor's oldest surviving son, fifteen-year-old Henry, left Westminster Abbey. There, in the summer of 1170, his father had just had him crowned king of England.

But wait—wasn't Henry II still the king? He certainly was. King Henry II was still in control, but performing the public ceremony of crowning his son would ensure that no one would try to steal the throne from his descendants. And he may have thought that being "king," even in name only, would make his son less sulky and impatient for power.

How wrong he was! Young Henry—now known as the Young King—was a firecracker waiting to explode. At fifteen, he was handsome, popular, and a skilled competitor in the knightly tournaments of the time. He was also vain, reckless, and furious with his father.

The Young King felt that his father had given him titles but no real power. His parents had promised his

younger brother Geoffrey the duchy of Brittany, and Richard, their mother's favorite, was count of Poitou *and* duke of Aquitaine. Richard was even living with Eleanor in Europe and learning to govern by her side. The Young King was embarrassed and jealous. Richard was only thirteen—Geoffrey was twelve! How dare their father trust *children* with these important realms and give *him*, the eldest son, nothing but words?

Eleanor, ferocious as a mother tiger, was determined to see her children succeed. She could see young Henry's rage, and she was also especially eager to advance the fortunes of her favorite, her second son, Richard. Tall and auburn-haired, with his father's sharp blue-gray eyes and his own remarkable skills with the sword, Richard was a force to be reckoned with, even as a teenager. Eleanor knew that her subjects hated their king, her husband, more than ever. The cloud of Thomas Becket's murder still hung over him, and he was becoming ever more tyrannical as he aged. His vassals were sick of him.

She also knew that if her sons were in power, they would need her advice. They were fierce, yes, but they were still young. They loved and trusted her, especially Richard. With Richard as the duke of Aquitaine and the Young King in command of England, Eleanor would

tyrannical: oppressive, controlling; using power in a cruel and unjust way

have more influence than she had ever had with Henry. From behind the thrones of her sons, she would rule, as she had always been capable of doing.

For a few years, she bided her time. If she tried to organize a rebellion against Henry herself, she might well be found out and even executed for treason. She was patient. She waited for the Young King to make the first move. And in 1172, he did.

That summer, King Henry announced that he was going to give three castles, which had been part of the Young King's inheritance, to his and Eleanor's youngest son, John, who was only nine years old. This was too much for young Henry to bear. He began plotting to overthrow his father. Soon enough, his brothers Richard and Geoffrey were in league with him. All three were hungry for power and ready to see their father step aside. It's possible that Eleanor had already been whispering the idea of rebellion in their ears.

Before the end of the year, the Young King's plots were in motion. Many of his father's vassals secretly pledged him their loyalty and began preparing to fight against King Henry. In November, the Young King rode to Paris to meet with a surprising ally—his mother's first husband, King Louis.

After the annulment with Eleanor, Louis had married again. With his second wife, Constance, he had a daughter named Margaret. And Margaret had recently married none other than young Henry, the Young King of England.

Now, the Young King arrived on his father-in-law's doorstep in need of the old king's help. Louis was thrilled—at last, a chance to get back at his old rival and to strike a blow against the mighty Angevin empire! Eleanor and Louis put the past behind them and agreed to become allies once again. Now they had a common enemy: Henry.

9

The Long Imprisonment

Queen Eleanor awoke to a sunless dawn. She opened her eyes in the cold half-dark. Through the thin arrow slit in the gray stone wall, all she could see was more gray. Gray hills, gray trees, gray sky.

The year was 1180. Eleanor had been in prison for seven years.

How did this happen? And how much more would she have to endure?

Eleanor's last day of freedom had been in April 1173, when her sons had gathered in Paris with Louis. Their armies were prepared. They would launch the attack on their father any day now. With a trustworthy group of followers, Eleanor left her court at Poitiers and set off on horseback toward Paris. But then came the warnings from her scouts—she was being pursued! She wasted no time. She took off her queen's garments and disguised herself as a man; she would be safer, and she could ride faster. Leaping back on her horse, she set off toward Paris, riding as fast as she could, alone.

But it was too late. Henry's spies had laid a trap for her. The days and months that followed were an awful blur. She stood before Henry at Rouen and was declared a traitor. For more than a year she remained a prisoner in France. Then she was on a ship, watched every minute of every day by Henry and his soldiers on the long passage back to England. Henry had the right to have her executed, but it seemed he had chosen a different fate for her.

Stripped of her servants and possessions and

surrounded by armed men, she rode through the bleak English spring weather. They came to the town of Sarum. It was a dismal place, with winds so terrible that people said the clerks in the cathedral could barely hear each other sing. Above it, on a barren hilltop, towered an ugly, hulking stone fort. Sarum Castle. Her prison.

For the next six years, Eleanor was moved from one castle to another, always under guard. She knew she ought to count herself lucky—after all, she wasn't locked up in some dark, wet, horrible dungeon. She had rooms to herself, clothes that were still appropriate for a lady of her rank, enough to eat, and a bed to sleep on. Moreover, she had her life! Henry could have ordered her execution, but he had spared her.

But Eleanor knew that Henry wasn't being merciful, but practical. The will that her father had made so many years ago meant that if Henry were to have Eleanor killed, he would lose control of Aquitaine, Poitou, and all her vast domains. They would pass to her sons, not to him. Henry hadn't spared her for love—he'd done it for land.

Eleanor spent her long days in thought and in prayer. She had been patient before, and she could do it again. Her life would not end in captivity.

Every so often, news came from the outside world.

The Young King's rebellion lasted little more than a year before it ended in failure. The guards whispered that young Henry had thrown himself at his father's feet, weeping and begging for forgiveness. And of course, Henry forgave him. He forgave them all—all except Eleanor. Meanwhile, when Eleanor's vassals in Aquitaine and Poitou tried to protest her imprisonment, it was her own beloved son Richard who violently crushed their uprising.

Long days became long years. The guards brought news that King Louis VII was dead. France had a new king—Louis's son, Philip.

For the first time, Eleanor's world was tiny, quiet, and still. But outside the walls of her prison, there was no peace. Her sons were up in arms again—this time, against each other. Geoffrey and young Henry were in league against Richard, and rumor had it that the Young King was once again plotting to overthrow his father. Aquitaine, the home that Eleanor loved, was torn by war at the hands of her own children.

Then, one night, she awoke from a haunting dream. In it, she had seen her eldest son, young Henry. He was wearing a precious sapphire ring that belonged to his father. He lay peacefully on his back, his hands folded upon his chest. It seemed as if he slept. Above his head

hovered two crowns, one earthly and one radiant, as if made of pure light. He was smiling. He looked so young.

Soon after, as Eleanor sat by the window one morning, a guard brought a man to her door. He wore the robes of the church. He was Thomas Agnell, archdeacon of Wells, and his face was grave.

"My lady," he said hesitantly, "I am sorry, but I bring terrible news—"

Eleanor held up her hand to silence him. "I know," she said. "You have come to tell me that Henry, my son, is dead."

10

By the Grace of God, Queen of England

Thomas Agnell would later tell the story of Queen Eleanor's dream, and of her strength and composure in the face of her son's death. Inside, however, she would carry her grief for the Young King with her for the rest of her life.

And there was much more life in store for her.

In 1183, the same year the Young King fell ill and died, Henry began to soften toward his wife. At fifty, after a life of constant battle and travel, he looked and felt much older than his years. He was fretful and lonely. And so, for the first time in ten years, he summoned his queen to his side in Normandy.

For ten years she had known nothing but gray. Now, standing on the deck of a ship, there was blue all around. Despite her sorrow, Eleanor's heart danced. There was so much still to do!

Henry was very clear: his wife was still, by law, his prisoner, but she would no longer be shut up in a castle. For the next six years, Eleanor made the most of her

increased freedom. She resumed her public role as queen. She visited Henry's court in Normandy, sometimes for months at a time, and she reacquainted herself with the affairs of the kingdom.

She found them in sad disarray. Henry's power was dwindling. He was sick and angry. The young King Philip II of France was growing more powerful by the day. Richard was now the heir to England and the whole Angevin empire, but he didn't want to wait for his crown. He and Geoffrey were constantly fighting, and both were hatching their own plots against their father—though Geoffrey's schemes were cut short when he died suddenly in 1186, leaving his parents to mourn yet another child.

By 1188, things looked dark indeed. Back in England, Eleanor heard the news: King Henry and King Philip were at war, and Richard was fighting on Philip's side. Like the Young King before him, Richard thought that allying himself with the king of France would give him the military might he needed to defeat his own father—and Philip knew that if he helped Richard gain the throne of England, he could gain valuable territory in Europe in return.

That summer, Henry visited Eleanor. She was again at Sarum, but it was July, and the world did not seem so gray. Eleanor met her husband as he rode into the courtyard.

Who was this old man, sick and slow and struggling to get down from his horse, so unlike the stormy-eyed, lion-haired boy she had married in the cathedral?

In July, he left her, riding slowly out of the courtyard, back toward his ships and toward Europe—toward war. She would never see him again.

King Henry II died one year later, in July 1189. Philip had beaten him on the battlefield, forcing the ailing king to call for a truce. When the two kings met to discuss terms, Henry was so ill that his men had to hold him upright on his horse. He had to be carried back to his camp, and there, he learned that John, his favorite child, had backed Richard in the rebellion against him. Utterly betrayed, he lost the will to live. His last words were "Shame, shame on a conquered king!"

Richard was now king of England and of all his father's and mother's realms. The first thing he did was send messengers back to England with orders to release Eleanor immediately. Richard wanted to go on a crusade, and he decreed that Eleanor should act as ruler of England until he was ready to return and take up the throne.

At sixty-seven years old, Eleanor of Aquitaine was once again a free woman and a queen. She was calmer than she had been—more composed, more patient, and

much wiser. And she was more powerful than ever.

Richard trusted her. Though he was king, he invested her with all his authority. And it was a good thing, too. As it turned out, a hard fate awaited him on his way home from his crusade: in late 1192 he was captured and held for ransom by Duke Leopold of Austria. For almost four years, from the summer of 1190 to early 1194, Eleanor ruled England alone. She worked tirelessly. She founded a hospital for the poor. She reformed England's system of weights and measurements and issued a new, standardized coinage. She pardoned many whom Henry had imprisoned, signing her decrees "Eleanor, by the grace of God, Queen of England." And, when she learned of Richard's capture, she worked ceaselessly for the release of her son.

Eleanor ruled England with such a steady, compassionate hand that many chroniclers of the time wrote of her generosity, her piety, and her "great wisdom and popularity." One called her "exceedingly respected and beloved." Another marveled at her energy and grace. She was, he wrote, "an incomparable woman."

Even after Richard's release, Eleanor remained as powerful a figure as England's king—perhaps even more so. Richard, like his father before him, was often

standardized: consistent or the same
piety: sincere religious devotion

away in his European domains, dealing with various rebellions by his vassals. It was Eleanor who provided England with a consistent, attentive, generous ruler. Despite the nickname he earned while away on crusade—Richard the Lionheart—Richard was not a very good king. His people liked the idea of him as a great warrior, and he was brave in battle—but he was also proud, hotheaded, greedy, and even cruel.

Still, Eleanor loved him. When Richard died of an infected arrow wound in 1199, she was at his bedside. She had traveled as fast as she could across the hundred miles between them when she learned of his condition. His death left her heartbroken. At seventy-seven years old, she had outlived eight of her ten children. Only the daughter who was named for her—Eleanor, queen of Castile—and her youngest son, John, remained.

And John was now king of England. Though his reign was a turbulent one, Queen Eleanor stood beside his throne just as she had stood by Richard's—and by Henry's, and by Louis's. She worked to maintain peace in the face of constant squabbles for power. She even traveled all the way to the kingdom of Castile to arrange a marriage between one of her granddaughters and King Philip's heir, young Louis. The eventual union of this

Castile: a kingdom in what is now northeastern Spain

Louis and Lady Blanche of Castile meant that Eleanor's descendants were once again destined to wear the crowns of both England and France.

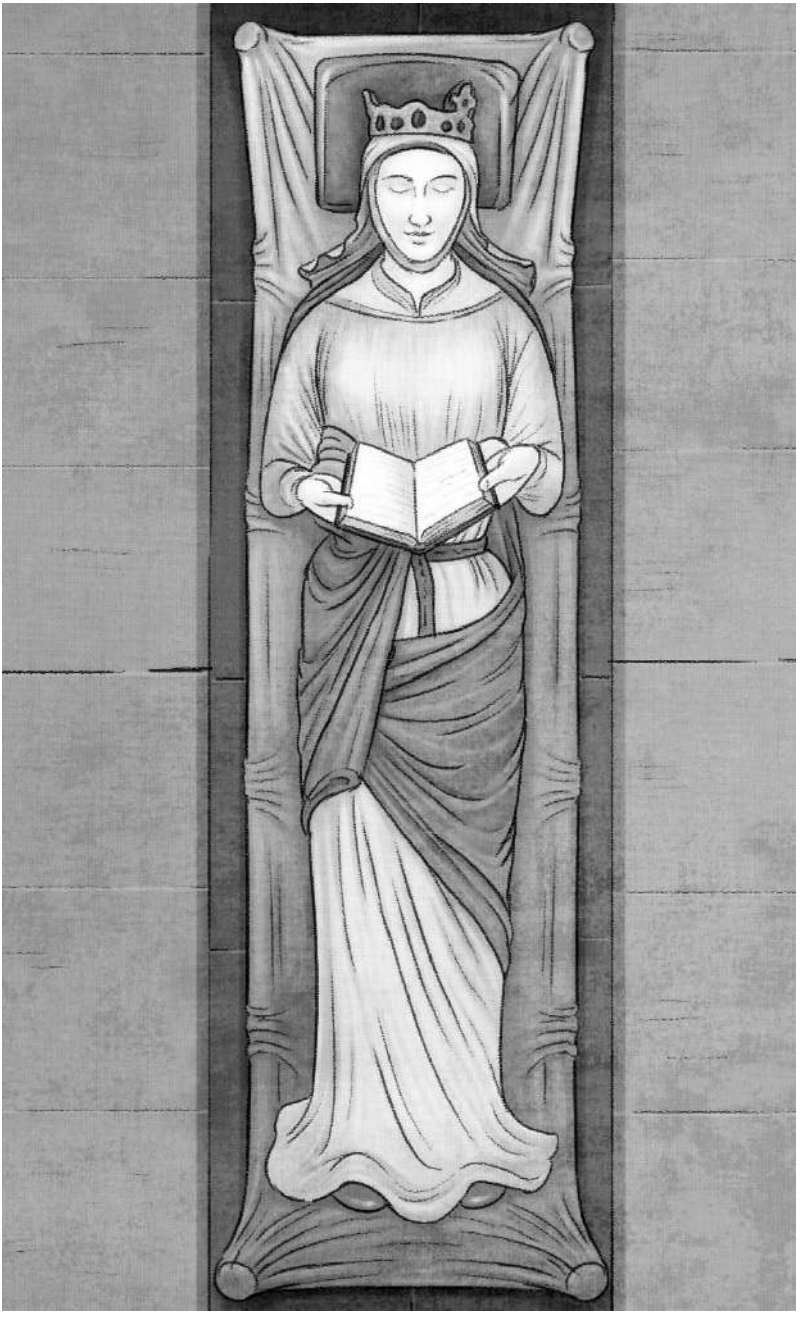
In 1200, when Eleanor was seventy-eight, she journeyed to the abbey of Fontevrault, a beautiful monastery in the duchy of Anjou. Her son Richard was buried there, as was her husband, Henry. Eleanor was happy to be joining them. She had always loved the peacefulness of Fontevrault. The world was so loud, so full of greed and strife; she had worked so hard for so long, and she was tired. She was ready to rest.

Two years after she arrived, she took the veil. The queen had become a nun. Perhaps, as she lived quietly at Fontevrault, she thought of the jewels and furs she once wore, of her beautiful falcons, of the day she had galloped on a white horse waving a banner in the wind, of the day she had disguised herself as a man—riding, riding hard, down the long dirt road. . . .

Eleanor of Aquitaine died on April 1, 1204. She was eighty-two years old. She was buried at Fontevrault between the tombs of her husband and her son. Atop her tomb lies a stone statue of her, royally dressed, a crown upon her head and an open book in her hands. Her eyes are closed. She is composed, at peace.

And she is smiling.

took the veil: became a nun



EPILOGUE
An Incomparable Woman

No medieval queen has captured our imaginations like Eleanor. To this day, she is the only woman ever to have ruled both England and France. She remains one of the most legendary figures of her time—endlessly fascinating and deeply admired. Her remarkable life has inspired many authors and artists. Shakespeare wrote a part for her in *The Life and Death of King John*. The playwright James Goldman wrote about the later years of her tempestuous marriage to Henry in *The Lion in Winter*, which was later made into an Oscar-winning movie. E. L. Konigsburg's *A Proud Taste for Scarlet and Miniver* is a wonderful novel in which Queen Eleanor, newly arrived in heaven, looks back on her long and adventurous life.

Eleanor has appeared as a character in poems, paintings, plays, operas, movies, radio dramas, TV series, multiple novels—even a video game. Why do we remember her so many centuries later?

If Eleanor of Aquitaine inspires us toward anything, it is toward thinking for ourselves, being brave, and setting out on our own path. In a rough and dangerous time—a time when women had very little power over

their lives—Eleanor took her fate in her own hands. She was intelligent, courageous, and full of an immense curiosity. Even in the darkest of times, she never gave up. She had strength, patience, and hope. In her long life, she was many things—a duchess, a queen, a mother, a rebel, a warrior, a prisoner, a nun—but she was also, always, the hero of her own story.

Discussion Questions

1. What are some words you might use to describe Eleanor? What personal qualities of hers do you most admire? Are there any you don't admire? Why or why not?
2. Think back to Eleanor's childhood. How was it similar to your own life? How was it different?
3. How did the way Eleanor was raised—the things she experienced and learned—prepare her to be a leader?
4. What was it about Eleanor that shocked the French court? Why did Louis's advisors wish he had married somebody different?
5. Why do you think Eleanor wanted to go with Louis on his crusade? What do you think the journey was like?
6. Describe Eleanor's marriage with Henry. Were they a good match? Why or why not? What do you think drove them apart?
7. After her separation from Henry, what was Eleanor's court in Poitiers like? What do her choices in designing her own court reveal about her and what she valued?

8. When Eleanor finally got to rule England on her own, what made her a good queen?
9. What surprised you most about Eleanor?
10. If you could ask Eleanor one question, what would it be?

Meet the Author

Sara Holdren directs plays, writes about theater, and loves to bike, bake, garden, and spoil her two beloved cats. She first learned about Eleanor of Aquitaine when she was in fourth grade and discovered a book by E. L. Konigsburg called *A Proud Taste for Scarlet and Miniver*. She was immediately fascinated by this smart, courageous queen and still is to this day. Sara grew up in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains in Virginia, where she loved reading fantastical adventure stories and making up some of her own to act out with help from her sister and the dress-up box. She still loves telling stories—she's

especially fond of Shakespeare's plays, and she and her partner, a fiction writer, are currently co-writing a fantasy trilogy about the teenage daughter of Macbeth.

Sara lives just outside of New York City, where she works as a director and the theater critic for *New York* Magazine. She has a four-year-old sourdough starter named Serafina, and she once rode her bike 3,865 miles across the country, from Virginia Beach all the way to Florence, Oregon. She has no idea how many jars of peanut butter she consumed during that time. Many.

Meet the Illustrator

Kailien Singson. A born artist, Kailien hails from the northeastern region of India known for its rich natural beauty that serves as a constant inspiration in his work. His passion for art began at a young age with artistic scribbles in notebooks at school, and gradually developed into a serious career that led him to pursue a degree in Arts. Having explored several techniques in art through his education and professional years in publishing, Kailien specializes in using striking colors and depicting realistic forms in his work. He is equally adept at traditional art styles, taking inspiration from everyday life.

Credits

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