Eleanor of Aquitaine

The Troubadour's Daughter

Eleanor of Aquitaine was born around 1122. Her grandfather, William IX, was the wealthy and powerful duke of Aquitaine. He was also a musician and poet, acknowledged as history's first troubadour.

William IX didn't just sing about love. By the time he was twenty he had married and divorced his first wife, Ermengarde. His second wife was Philippa (or Maud) of Toulouse, the widowed queen of Aragon. They had two sons, William and Raymond, and five daughters. When the Troubadour tired of Philippa, she moved to the same nunnery where Ermengard lived. After Philippa's death, Ermengarde tried to force William to take her back, but the duke had other ideas. He had abducted a married woman called Dangereuse ("dangerous" in French), and she was now his mistress.

In time the Troubadour decided that his elder son, William, should marry Dangereuse's daughter Aenor. (Dangereuse's husband was Aenor's father.) The younger William didn't want to marry Aenor, but he had no choice. The marriage took place in 1121, and a year or so later Eleanor of Aquitaine was born. She was followed by a daughter, Aelith (or Petronella) and a son, William Aigret.

When Eleanor was about five years old, William the Troubadour died and her father became Duke William X. A few years later, Eleanor's mother and brother died. Now Eleanor was heir to the vast realm of Aquitaine.

Like his father, William X was a patron of the troubadours and storytellers, and growing up in his court Eleanor developed a lifelong love of music and literature. Proud of his lively, intelligent daughter, William gave her an excellent education. She travelled through Aquitaine with him, preparing for her future role of duchess. Father and daughter were close, and it must have been a harsh blow for Eleanor when William, while making a religious pilgrimage, died suddenly of food poisoning.

Eleanor was just fifteen, and her life was about to change forever. On his deathbed William had asked his men to commend Eleanor to the care of Louis the Fat, king of France. Louis was no fool. He knew just what to do with his young, very beautiful, extremely wealthy ward - marry her off to his own son and heir. And so on August 1, 1137, Eleanor of Aquitaine married the future King Louis VII.

Queen of France

Both Eleanor and her husband were in their teens, but they had little else in common. Eleanor was high-spirited and strong-willed; Louis was a quiet, religious young man, regarded by some as a saint. No one ever mistook Eleanor of Aquitaine for a saint.

A few days after the wedding, Eleanor's father-in-law died and her husband became King Louis VII. Eleanor, who was not one to stay at home making tapestries, threw herself enthusiastically into the role of queen. To the dismay of many observers, the new king respected his wife's intelligence and consulted her frequently on matters of state. Queen Eleanor frequently visited Aquitaine, where she was well-regarded by her father's former vassals.

Eleanor's sister, Petronella, was also keeping busy. With Eleanor's encouragement, a nobleman divorced his wife to marry Petronella, which didn't make the family of Wife Number One very happy. War broke out, and Louis led his troops against a town called Vitry, setting it on fire. The townspeople sought refuge in a church, which burned down. More than one thousand people perished. Louis was wracked by guilt.

During the first years of her marriage Eleanor had just one child, who was stillborn. An influential miracle-working abbot, Bernard of Clairvaux, told her that she was childless because God disapproved of her wicked ways. Either Eleanor temporarily mended her ways or God relented, because in 1145 she gave birth to her first child, a daughter named Marie. But Eleanor wasn't ready to settle down and be a typical medieval mommy.

The Second Crusade

In 1144 the city of Edessa (located in modern-day Turkey), which had been in Christian hands for almost fifty years, was captured by Muslims. Most of its citizens were massacred or sold into slavery. Inspired by this event and the preaching of St. Bernard of Clairvaux, Louis VII and German emperor Conrad III organized their own separate military expeditions to the Middle East. The French and Germans had little interest in cooperating with each other; still, their dual effort is known as The Second Crusade.

Eleanor had no intention of sitting quietly at home while her husband went off on his adventure. The king's advisors may have been opposed to taking Eleanor and her company of 300 women along on the Crusade, but Eleanor was also offering the services of a thousand men from Aquitaine, and the king accepted. When they reached Antioch they were greeted by Eleanor's uncle, Raymond of Poitiers, who had become ruler of the city by marrying its young princess. Raymond entertained the crusaders in grand style, paying special attention to his flirtatious niece.

Although Raymond had a reputation for being a faithful husband, Eleanor's reputation was less spotless, and gossip about their relationship soon began to fly. The rumors followed Eleanor for the rest of her life. Many years later an English chronicler wrote sneeringly, "How Eleanor, queen of France, behaved when she was across the sea in Palestine... all these things are well enough known."

Whether or not Eleanor had an affair with her uncle, she was certainly influenced by him. When Raymond pleaded for Louis's help in defending Antioch, Eleanor took his side. When Louis refused to assist Raymond, Eleanor declared that she wanted a divorce. Louis, who adored his wife, was angry and hurt. He left Antioch and forced Eleanor to go with him. She never saw Raymond again. In 1149 he was killed in a battle against the Muslims. His severed head was sent to the caliph in Baghdad.

The Second Crusade was a failure, partly because of the quarreling among its leaders. Eventually Louis abandoned the cause and returned to France. Eleanor went with him -- on a separate ship. On their way home they stopped in Rome, where the pope persuaded them to go to bed together. The result of this papal intercession was a second daughter, Alix, born in 1150.

But the marriage of Eleanor of Aquitaine and Louis VII never truly recovered from Eleanor's scandalous behavior in Antioch, and in 1152 Louis granted Eleanor the divorce she desired. Eleanor was not destined to remain single for long.

Queen of England

In 1152, less than two months after her divorce from King Louis VII of France, Eleanor married Henry Plantagenet, the grandson of England's King Henry I. He was eighteen, eleven years younger than Eleanor. Their marriage scandalized observers. Eleanor, it was rumored, had previously had an affair with Henry's father.

In the words of a contemporary writer, Gerald of Wales, "Count Geoffrey of Anjou when he was seneschal of France took advantage of Queen Eleanor; for which reason he often warned his son Henry, telling him above all not to touch her, they say, both because she was his lord's wife, and because he had known her himself." But, ignoring his father's advice, Henry "presumed to sleep adulterously with the said queen of France, taking her from his own lord and marrying her himself. How could anything fortunate, I ask, emerge from these copulations?"

The first thing to emerge -- just five months after Eleanor and Henry's hasty marriage -- was a son, William. The child died a few years later. By then Henry had claimed the English throne. Eleanor, formerly queen of France, was now the queen of England.

Eleanor and Henry had seven surviving children: Henry, Matilda, Richard, Geoffrey, Eleanor, Joan, and John. As the children grew up, Eleanor and her husband grew apart. At first Henry conducted secret love affairs. Then he began a public relationship with a knight's daughter, Rosamond Clifford, "the Fair Rosamond." Legend has it that the jealous Queen Eleanor confronted Rosamond with a dagger in one hand and a cup of poison in the other and forced her to choose which way she would die. (Rosamond did die in 1177, but probably of natural causes.)

King Henry later became involved with his son Richard's fiancee, a French princess who also happened to be the daughter of Eleanor's first husband, Louis VII. Not surprisingly, Richard never married the girl.

In 1168 Eleanor returned to France to rule her restless subjects. Her court quickly became a center of culture. She was reunited with her eldest daughter from her first marriage, Marie, who shared her interests. But Eleanor wasn't content to spend the rest of her life patronizing troubadours and presiding over courts of love. She wanted more power than Henry was willing to give her, and she began plotting against him. Henry summoned her back to England, where she continued to scheme.

Eleanor the Eagle

In 1173, Eleanor's three eldest sons - Henry, Richard, and Geoffrey - rebelled against their father, Henry II, with Eleanor's support. They were forced to flee to France. Eleanor tried to follow, disguised as a man, but she was captured by Henry's forces.

King Henry kept Eleanor more or less imprisoned for sixteen long years. His sons continued to war against him; in the end even his favorite son, John, turned against him. Finally, in 1189, Henry II died. Eleanor and Henry's eldest son, Henry, was already dead, so Eleanor's favorite, Richard the Lionheart, became king. Richard soon went away on a crusade, leaving his mother as regent. "He issued instructions to the princes of the realm, almost in the style of a general edict, that the queen's word should be law in all matters," wrote a contemporary chronicler, Ralph of Diceto.

She proved to be a shrewd ruler. When Richard was taken hostage, Eleanor helped to raise his ransom money. She also stood up to Richard's brother John, who plotted to seize the throne. She even managed to get Richard and John to reconcile after Richard's return to England.

Eventually Richard died and John became king. Like Richard, King John respected his mother and heeded her advice. She, in return, supported him against his enemies. Eleanor was now quite elderly by the standards of her time, but she continued to lead an active life, travelling through Europe and arranging marriages for her grandchildren. In 1202 the ailing Eleanor was trapped in a castle by the army of the French king, with whom John was at war, but John freed her.

Eleanor of Aquitaine died in 1204 at the abbey of Fontevrault, which she had long patronized. She is buried there, as are Henry II and Richard the Lionheart.

According to Ralph of Diceto, Eleanor's life "revealed the truth of a prophecy which had puzzled all by its obscurity: 'The eagle of the broken bond shall rejoice in the third nestling.' They called the queen the eagle because she stretched out her wings, as it were, over two kingdoms - France and England. She had been separated from her French relatives through divorce, while the English had separated her from her marriage bed by confining her to prison . . . Richard, her third son - and thus the third nestling - was the one who would raise his mother's name to great glory."

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Eleanor of Aquitaine