

Queen Eleanor

*Independent Spirit
of the Medieval World*

A biography of Eleanor of Aquitaine

Polly Schoyer Brooks

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The Duchess and the Prince

The French King, Louis the Fat, lay dying in his hunting lodge where he had been taken to escape the summer heat, the flies, and the stench of Paris. His hands shook with palsy, and his bleary eyes could hardly see. Recently he had grown so fat that he could no longer mount a horse or bend over to tie his shoes.

In spite of these physical handicaps and the fact that he had not long to live, Louis' mind was as sharp as ever. He deserved a better nickname, for he had been a hardworking monarch, riding throughout his royal domain, seeing that justice was done, asserting his and his people's rights against unruly barons. He had earned the respect and gained

the support of his subjects within his little kingdom, a small area surrounding the city of Paris. But the lands beyond his borders—today the rest of France—were a constant threat and worry to the King. Many of the huge states like Aquitaine were bigger and richer than his own kingdom. Though the lords of these lands were his vassals and owed him allegiance, many had grown independent and dared defy him. Louis dreamed of a time when a French king would be the one and only ruler over all these lands, united into one nation. And Louis had one source of power that his vassals did not have—he had the backing of the church and the Pope, who had crowned and anointed him. He was King by divine right, and he owed allegiance to no man.

Louis worried nonetheless. His eldest son, trained to be the next king, had been killed in a riding accident, and his younger son had been snatched from a cathedral school to fill the role of prince. Trained to be a monk, the frail young Louis hardly seemed to fit the role of a future king. His early religious training was so deeply ingrained that he did not take easily to the necessary instruction in knighthood and statesmanship. The King wondered if his son would be able to cope with the rough world beyond his borders.

While Louis' great hulk tossed and sweated uncomfortably on his sickbed, messengers arrived with startling, urgent news: His wealthiest vassal, the Duke of Aquitaine, had suddenly died, leaving his vast estates to his teenage daughter, Eleanor. This

seemed the very answer to Louis' prayer. As king he had the right to dispose of his vassal's daughter in marriage. If he could marry her to his son, the Prince, in one swift stroke he would attach the great Duchy of Aquitaine securely to the crown. The richest and fairest lands of western Europe would at last be under royal power.

There was no time to lose, for when news of the Duke's death leaked out—it was still a secret even in Aquitaine—it was likely that some bold and grasping knight would kidnap the young Duchess and bear her off to his high-walled castle and claim her land for himself. Louis immediately made arrangements for the Prince to gather a large body of knights and, with all speed, ride south to claim his prize.

The prize of Aquitaine was a lovely high-spirited girl of fifteen. Her long braids fell below her waist, and her deep-set eyes sparkled with mischief and gaiety. She knew how to please and was well aware of her beauty, charm, and wit. Scarcely had the news of her father's death come to her when messengers galloped into her courtyard to tell her that Prince Louis was on his way to claim her as a bride.

Prince Louis knew little about Duchess Eleanor herself except her fame for beauty and intelligence. It was her land, more than twice the size of the French kingdom, that interested the royal family. The fair land of Aquitaine stretched from the Loire River in the north to the borders of Spain, from the limestone heights of central France to the Atlantic

Accused of being a demon by those who could not tolerate her female independence, Eleanor of Aquitaine made her mark as one of the most dynamic and extraordinary figures of the Middle Ages. Born in 1122, Eleanor refused to be confined by the traditional gender roles of the time. She became a well-educated woman, gaining political and governing savvy by observing her father, William X, Duke of Aquitaine, and by acquiring the skills to become an influential queen of France, and later, queen of England.

With an impact that reached beyond politics, Eleanor shaped the future for the arts and humanities. And in a time when women were viewed as inferior to men, the virtues of chivalry and courtly love were born.

Once described by a contemporary as “a woman beyond compare,” Eleanor of Aquitaine is a figure who will remain controversial, powerful, and enchanting well into the twenty-first century.

An ALA Notable Book

An SLJ Best Book

“A narrative as elegant and vivacious as Eleanor herself.”

—*Horn Book*

“Excellent and accurate.” —*School Library Journal*

“A first-rate starting point for getting to know this formidable regent.” —*Booklist*

Polly Schoyer Brooks is the author of the acclaimed *Beyond the Myth: The Story of Joan of Arc*. She lives in New Canaan, Connecticut, where she enjoys her four children, ten grandchildren, and eight great-grandchildren.

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