

GEORGES DUBY

WOMEN
OF THE
TWELFTH
CENTURY



VOLUME ONE: ELEANOR OF AQUITAINE & SIX OTHERS

Women of the Twelfth Century

Volume One:
Eleanor of Aquitaine and Six Others

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Translated by Jean Birrell

The University of Chicago Press

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This English translation © Polity Press and The University of Chicago 1997.

First published in French as *Dames du XIIe Siècle, I: Héloïse, Aliénor, Iseut et quelques autres* © Éditions Gallimard, 1995.

First published in English in 1997 by the University of Chicago Press and by Polity Press in association with Blackwell Publishers Ltd.

Published with the assistance of the French Ministry of Culture.

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Printed in Great Britain

06 05 04 03 02 01 00 99 98 97 1 2 3 4 5 6

ISBN 0-226-16776-3 (cloth)

ISBN 0-226-16780-1 (paper)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Duby, Georges.

[*Dames du XIIème siècle*. English]

Women of the twelfth century / Georges

Duby : translated by Jean Birrell.

p. cm.

Contents: v. 1. Eleanor of Aquitaine and six others

ISBN 0-226-16776-3 (cloth : v.1 : alk. paper), —

ISBN 0-226-16780-1 (pbk. : v.1 : alk. paper)

1. Women—France—History—Middle Ages, 500–1500. 2.

Women—France—Biography. I. Title.

HQ1147.F7D813 1997

305.4'0944'0902—DC21

97-14198

CIP

This book is printed on acid-free paper.

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Introduction

These reflections are the first fruits of a long, risky and as yet incomplete enquiry. I have persevered because I wanted to know more about those women who, in twelfth-century France, were married to a lord, and to discover what sort of life they could lead in their world, the fashionable world, at the upper levels of that brutal yet refined society we call feudal. I have chosen to remain on these heights because only they are sufficiently well lit. But even here, much remains obscure. Historians have to struggle to make progress over a difficult terrain whose boundaries constantly recede before their eyes.

For us, the women of that distant period have neither faces nor bodies. We may imagine them, on great court occasions, dressed in gowns and mantles like those that drape the virgins and the female saints on the doorways and stained-glass windows of churches. But the actual bodies that the gowns and mantles both left exposed and swathed will always remain invisible to us. Artists, then, were no more concerned with realism than were poets. They depicted symbols and kept to conventional formulas. We cannot hope to discover the individual physiognomy of the women in the very rare portraits which have survived, though they are of the most powerful of them. No less rare are objects that they held in their hands that we can still touch. Apart from a few

jewels, and those scraps of sumptuous Oriental fabrics in which we may imagine them arrayed before, given in alms, they were used to wrap the sacred relics in reliquaries, we have none of the finery they wore. We have, consequently, almost no concrete images. All our information comes from the written word.

I have started, therefore, from texts – from the few that survive from this period – and tried, at the beginning of my investigation, to piece together portraits of a few female figures. I have no illusions; it is difficult enough to form an impression of men, even the most famous of them, those who changed the world. What do we really know of the personality of Francis of Assisi, or of Philip Augustus, or even, despite Joinville, of St Louis? How much more are the women, who were spoken of far less, doomed to remain only shadowy figures, without shape, without depth and without individuality.

I should declare at the outset that what I am trying to show is not the lived reality, which is inaccessible. These are reflections, what written texts reflect. I trust what they say. Whether they tell the truth or whether they lie is not what matters to me. What matters is the image that they provide of a woman and, through her, of women in general, the image that the author of the text had formed and that he wanted to convey to his audience. In this reflection, however, the living reality is inevitably distorted, and for two reasons; first, the texts dating from this period – and this did not change in France before the end of the thirteenth century – are all official, intended for an audience, never inward looking, and second, they were written by men.

Writing, fine writing, that which has stood the test of time and that I read here, sets down only important words, and in artificial forms, either Latin or else the sophisticated language spoken at fashionable gatherings. Certainly, it was sometimes read in private – but always aloud, chewing over the words – on the benches lining a cloister, or in the chamber set aside for ladies, or in those book-lined cubbyholes where a handful of men applied themselves to copying out old sentences or composing new ones. All these texts, however, were written

to be declaimed, often sung, in front of an audience. All, even those that aimed primarily to entertain – the romances, the songs and the comic tales – were intended to instruct. They did not set out to describe what was, but drew from everyday experience, freely amended, whatever could deliver a moral lesson. Affirming what ought to be known or believed, they aimed to impose a set of exemplary images. In the last analysis, the literature of the twelfth century is no more realistic than the sculpture or the painting. It describes what society wished and what it ought to be. All I can do on the basis of these words, spoken, I repeat, loudly and clearly, is to reconstruct a value system and identify within this system the place assigned to women by male power.

In this society, everything official, everything in the public domain, beginning with writing, was masculine. Historians acknowledge this in the titles they give to their books: *Mâle Moyen Age*, *Homo Ludens*, *Man and Society*. Only the men of this period are to a degree visible and they conceal the rest, especially the women. A few women are there, but represented, and symbolically, by men, most of whom were churchmen, and therefore forbidden to approach them too closely. Twelfth-century women knew how to write, and probably better than their knightly husbands and brothers. Some of them did so, and a few perhaps wrote what they thought about men, but almost no female writing survives. We have to accept that nothing of women appears except through male eyes. Yet, in essence, have things so radically changed? Yesterday, as today, society only reveals of itself what it thinks prudent to reveal. What it says, nevertheless, and perhaps, above all, what it does not say, allows us a glimpse of its structures.

I have therefore re-read texts, endeavouring to identify with those who wrote them in order to dispel the mistaken notions that have since distorted their meaning. I have attempted to forget, since I too am a man, my own idea of women, and I may not always have succeeded. To clarify the field of my research, I present here six female figures, chosen from among the least indistinct. It is a beginning and, I hope, a useful one. Another book will deal with the memory of

their female forebears as it was preserved in the great noble houses; other images will then appear, hazier, but nevertheless clarifying the image of women present in the minds of the knights of that period. I propose, lastly, in a third book, to look more closely at the judgement passed on these women by the men of the Church who directed their conscience and endeavoured to rescue them from their native perversity.

Eleanor

Beneath the central dome of the church at Fontevraud – in the twelfth century, one of the largest and most prestigious abbeys for women in France – one sees today four recumbent statues, the remains of old funerary monuments. Three of them are carved from soft limestone: that of Henry Plantagenet, count of Anjou and Maine through his father, duke of Normandy and king of England through his mother; that of his son and successor, Richard Coeur de Lion; and that of Isabella of Angoulême, second wife of John Lackland, Richard's brother, who became king in his turn in 1199. The fourth effigy, of painted wood, represents Eleanor, heiress to the duchy of Aquitaine, wife of Henry and mother of Richard and John; she died at Fontevraud, where she had finally taken the veil, on 31 March 1204.

The body of this woman lies full length on the slab, as it had lain exposed on the bed of state during the funeral ceremony. It is wholly concealed within the folds of the gown. A wimple fits tightly round the face. The features are of a perfect purity. The eyes are closed. The hands hold an open book. Before this body and this face, the imagination is given free rein. But the effigy, admirable though it is, tells us nothing of them as they were when Eleanor was alive. She had been dead for many years when it was carved. The sculptor may never have seen the queen with his own eyes.

In fact, it hardly matters; the funerary art of this period was not concerned with likenesses. In its perfect serenity, this figure makes no pretence of reproducing what had been visible on the catafalque: the body and the face of a woman of eighty who had struggled hard against life. The artist had been instructed to show what would become of this body and face in their perfect state, on the day of resurrection. No one will ever know, consequently, how powerful were the charms with which the heiress to the duchy of Aquitaine was endowed when, in 1137, she was handed over to her first husband, Louis VII, king of France.

She was then about thirteen years old; he was sixteen. 'He burned with an ardent passion for the maid'; or so at least it was said, half a century later, by William of Newburgh, one of those English monks who were then so skilfully retelling the story of past events. 'The desire of the young Capetian', he added, 'was trapped in a fine net'; 'this was hardly surprising, so strong were the physical charms with which Eleanor was blessed'. The chronicler Lambert of Wattrelos also rated them highly. But what are these eulogies actually worth? Convention required the writers of that age to celebrate the beauty of all princesses, even the least attractive. Furthermore, Eleanor was already, in 1190, the heroine of a scandalous story which was circulating round all the courts. It was inevitable that anyone speaking of her would attribute exceptional power to the charms she had once displayed.

This is a legend that dies hard. It still today delights some authors of historical novels, and there are even serious historians whose imagination it continues to inflame and lead into error. Since the Romantic Movement, Eleanor has been by turns presented as an innocent victim of the calculating cruelty of a first husband who was inadequate and limited and of a second who was brutal and unfaithful, or as a free woman, mistress of her own body, standing up to the clergy, defying the morality of sanctimonious hypocrites and standard-bearer of a brilliant, joyful and unjustly suppressed culture, that of Occitania, against gloomy savagery and northern oppression; but, free and easy, voluptuous and a deceiver, she is always presented as driving men wild. In even

the most austere works, she appears as 'queen of the troubadours' and their accommodating inspiration. Author after author takes at face value what the mocking Andrew the Chaplain said of her in his *Treatise on Love*, and the absurd sentences he concocted and ascribed to her, not least one whose savage irony would be appreciated by every contemporary reader: 'No one can legitimately give the married state as a reason for shirking love.' As for the games of courtly love, Eleanor might almost have invented them. At the very least, it was through her intermediary that these chivalrous manners spread throughout Europe from her native Aquitaine.

There is, in fact, some excuse for the erroneous judgements of modern scholars. Memories of Eleanor were distorted at a very early stage. Within fifty years of her death, the imaginary biography of that great poet Bernard of Ventadour had made her his mistress, and the preacher Stephen of Bourbon, fulminating against the guilty pleasures of touch, had quoted the perverse Eleanor as example: one day, supposedly, taking a fancy to the hands of the elderly scholar Gilbert of la Porrée, she had invited him to run his fingers over her thighs. And though the tendency of that amiable storyteller, the Minstrel of Reims, to make things up to please his audience is well known, he was only echoing the claims of an increasing number of people who said that the queen of France, during the crusade, had gone so far as to give her body to Saracens, when he ascribed to her a romance with the most illustrious of those miscreants, Saladin. She was on the point, he says, of going off with him, one foot already on the boat, when her husband, Louis VII, managed to catch up with her. So she was not only fickle, but gave her baptized body to the infidel, betraying not only her husband, but her God, the ultimate in debauchery.

Such fantasies were constructed in the thirteenth century on the basis of the malicious gossip which had circulated in her lifetime about the ageing queen. Some of it was collected in nine of the works of history composed between 1180 and the 1200s that have survived, and which provide almost all we know about her. Five had English authors, since it was

then in England that good history was written. All were the work of ecclesiastics, of monks or canons, and all present Eleanor in an unfavourable light. For this, there were four reasons. The first, which was fundamental, was that she was a woman; for these men, woman was an essentially evil creature, through whom sin had entered the world, with all the confusion that was apparent. Second, the duchess of Aquitaine's grandfather was the famous William IX, traditionally regarded as the first of the troubadours, a prince who had also, in his day, titillated the imagination of the chroniclers. They had denounced the scorn he displayed for ecclesiastical morality, the laxity of his morals and his obsessive womanizing, quoting the kind of harem where, as if in parody of a nunnery, he had kept a company of beautiful girls for his pleasure. Eleanor was condemned, last and above all, for two further reasons. Twice, disregarding the submission imposed on wives by the hierarchies instituted by divine will, she had gravely sinned: first, by requesting and obtaining a divorce; second, by shaking off the tutelage of her husband and turning his sons against him.

The divorce, and immediate remarriage, scandalized the Europe of 1152. Reaching this year in his chronicle, the Cistercian monk Aubrey of Trois Fontaines recorded only the one event. Laconically, and all the more forcefully as a result, he wrote: 'Henry of England took as wife the woman whom the king of France had just got rid of . . . Louis had let her go on account of the lasciviousness of this woman, who behaved not like a queen, but more like a harlot.' Such transfers of wives from the bed of one husband to another were by no means uncommon among the high aristocracy. That this one caused such a sensation is understandable. The unity of Europe was then identified with that of Latin Christendom; the pope, who was hoping to direct and mobilize it in a crusade, was therefore anxious to keep the peace by preserving the equilibrium between states. At a time when the West was experiencing rapid growth, these states were beginning to grow in strength. This was the case with the two great rival principalities of which the king of France and the king of England were rulers. But with political

structures that were still very crude, the fate of these political formations was largely dependent on successions and alliances, hence the marriage of the heir. Eleanor was heiress to a third state, smaller in scale, admittedly, but still considerable: Aquitaine, a province extending from Poitiers to Bordeaux, with designs on Toulouse. When she changed her husband, she took her rights to the duchy with her. Further, by the mid-twelfth century, the Church had completed the process of making marriage one of the seven sacraments so as to ensure it could control it. It laid down both that the conjugal tie should never be broken and, contradictorily, that it should at once be broken in case of incest, that is if it transpired that the couple were related within the seventh degree; which, among the aristocracy, they all were. This allowed the ecclesiastical authorities – in practice the pope, if the marriage involved kings – to intervene at will to bind or to loose, and so dominate the political scene.

Long after the event, the Minstrel of Reims described what determined the divorce as follows: Louis VII ‘consulted all his barons as to what he should do about the queen and revealed to them how she had behaved. By our faith, said the barons, the best advice we can give you is that you let her go, because she’s a devil, and if you keep her any longer, we believe she’ll be the death of you. And, above all, you have no child by her’; he alleges devilry and sterility, two grave failings, and the initiative is taken by the husband.

John of Salisbury, however, eminent representative of the humanist renaissance of the twelfth century, clear-sighted and well informed, is a better witness. He wrote much earlier, in 1160, only eight years after the event. He had been with Pope Eugenius III in 1149 when the latter had received Louis VII and his wife at Frascati, Rome then being in the hands of Arnold of Brescia, another intellectual of the first rank, but an anti-establishment figure. The couple were returning from the East. The king of France, leading the second crusade, had taken Eleanor with him. After the failure of the expedition and the difficulties that ensued for the Latin states in the Holy Land, the churchmen who pondered the reasons for these reverses claimed that they resulted from

this very fact. 'Prisoner of a violent passion for his wife', said William of Newburgh (and it was to explain this that he stressed the queen's physical attractions), the jealous Louis VII 'decided he ought not to leave her behind but that the queen should accompany him to the wars'. This set a bad example. 'Many nobles imitated him, and since the ladies could not manage without chambermaids', the army of Christ, which ought to have been a picture of virile chastity, was encumbered with women, hence riddled with depravity. This had made God angry.

In fact, everything went wrong on this journey. At Antioch, in March 1148, Eleanor had met Raymond, her father's brother and master of the town. Uncle and niece got on well, even too well in the eyes of her husband, who became uneasy and hastened the departure for Jerusalem. Eleanor refused to follow him. He resorted to force. William, archbishop of Tyre, though he wrote his history thirty years later, when the legend was at its height, had known the queen personally, and was also ideally placed to hear all the gossip circulating about this affair. If we are to believe his account, relations between Raymond and Eleanor had been extremely close. In order to detain the king and use his army to his own ends, the prince of Antioch had planned to deprive him of his wife 'by force or by intrigue'. She, according to William, was willing. In fact, she was 'a loose woman, who behaved imprudently, as had already been observed and as her later behaviour would confirm; contrary to royal dignity, she mocked the laws of marriage and did not respect the marriage bed'. Less bluntly expressed, this is already the accusation made by Aubrey of Trois Fontaines: Eleanor was lacking in the discretion that was proper in wives, especially the wives of kings, and which countered their natural tendency to lust.

John of Salisbury, on the other hand, highlighted only one fault, though a grave one: rebellion. Defying her husband – her master – Eleanor, at Antioch, had demanded a separation. This was obviously intolerable; it was accepted that a man might repudiate his wife, just as he got rid of an unsatisfactory servant, but the opposite was regarded as scandalous. In favour of divorce, the queen invoked the best

of pretexts, consanguinity. She declared that she and her husband were related within the fourth degree, which was true, and that, steeped in sin, they could clearly no longer live together. This was a strange revelation, since this relationship, though clear as day, had never been mentioned in the eleven years they had been married. Louis, a pious man, was worried, and, 'though he loved the queen immoderately', prepared to let her go. One of his counsellors, a man Eleanor disliked and who had no love for her, persuaded him not to agree, arguing as follows: 'How shameful for the kingdom of France were it to be known that the king had let himself be deprived of his wife or that she had left him!' From Paris, Abbot Suger, Louis VII's mentor, gave the same advice: swallow your resentment, hold out and wait for the end of the journey.

The couple were still at loggerheads on their return from the Jerusalem pilgrimage, when they were received by the pope. He did his utmost to reconcile them, which was in his interests. On the one hand, he very publicly demonstrated his power to control the institution of marriage; on the other, he feared the political troubles that were likely to follow a divorce. The spouses appeared before him, and here we may follow John of Salisbury, who was present. The pope listened to their recriminations, and made peace between them. The king was delighted, still ruled by a passion that John called 'puerile', by the desire that it was one's duty to master if one was a man, a real man, and especially a king. Pope Eugenius III even went to the length of remarrying the couple, scrupulously respecting the conventions, renewing all the requisite rites, first the mutual commitment, spoken aloud and put into writing, then the solemn progress to the sumptuously appointed marriage bed, the pope here performing the role of father and ensuring that everything happened as it should. Lastly, he solemnly prohibited any future dissolution of the union or any further talk of consanguinity.

Less than three years later, it was being talked about once more, and again to justify a divorce. This was at Beaugency, near Orleans, before a large gathering of prelates. Witnesses appeared and swore, which was not in doubt, that Louis and

Eleanor were of the same blood. The marriage was therefore incestuous. Consequently, it was not a marriage. The tie did not even have to be broken, since it did not exist. No one bothered about the papal prohibition. The king had resigned himself, on the advice of his vassals, as recorded by the Minstrel of Reims, who, on this point, we may probably trust. Had Eleanor, in the meantime, gone too far? Had she behaved in a wanton manner during the visit to Paris, the previous year, of the Plantagenets, father and son? The chief reason, I believe, was that she was barren. But she was not, in fact, completely barren, and inasmuch as there was sterility, it was not on her side, as the exuberant fertility of which she gave proof in the arms of a new husband made plain. In fifteen years of marriage, however, she had produced only two daughters and then in an almost miraculous fashion. The first had been born, after a miscarriage and seven years of trying in vain, following a conversation in the basilica of St Denis. Eleanor had complained to Bernard of Clairvaux of the harshness of God, who was preventing her from giving birth. The saint had promised that she would at last become fertile if she persuaded King Louis to make peace with the count of Champagne, so ending a war which, incidentally, she herself may have instigated. The second daughter had arrived, only eighteen months before the council of Beaugency, as a result of the reconciliation at Frascati, the new wedding night and copious papal blessings. There was a pressing need, however, for the king of France to have a male heir, and Eleanor seemed hardly likely to provide him with one. She was rejected, in spite of her attractions, and in spite of Aquitaine, the rich province she had brought with her on her marriage, and which, leaving the court immediately after the annulment, she took away.

In 1152, Eleanor was once again what she had been at the age of thirteen, a magnificent catch, a great prize for whoever could win her. There was no shortage of candidates. Two were very nearly successful during the short journey which took her from Orleans to Poitiers. She managed to flee from Blois, at night, before the lord of the town, Count Thibault, could make her his wife by force; then, warned by her