

Jean Flori. *Eleanor of Aquitaine: Queen and Rebel.* Translated by Olive Casse. Edinburgh University Press, 2007. Pp. 397; ill.

IN THE WORDS of John Carmi Parsons and Bonnie Wheeler, “[r]arely in the course of historical endeavor has so much been written, over so many centuries, about one woman of whom we know so little.”¹ That woman is Eleanor of Aquitaine, and the lack of firm knowledge of her life has not prevented a succession of historians (academic and popular alike), novelists, and playwrights from speculating at great length about her life. Some of her more obviously mythical exploits—such as her affair with Saladin, or her poisoning “Fair Rosamund” de Clifford—may have long been refuted, but there are still many areas of debate and controversy surrounding her.

For feminists and for scholars of women’s and gender history, it is especially important to arrive at a balanced assessment of Eleanor’s life, as she has so often been held up as an archetype of woman, for good or ill. For moralizing contemporary clerical writers, she represented sinful womankind, an image largely accepted by historians of the nineteenth century. A twentieth-century feminist backlash against this “black legend” of Eleanor arguably only served to create a counter-myth of Eleanor as an exceptional woman fighting not only for womankind against the patriarchal mores of her day, but also to promote the enlightened culture of the south in the dour Franco-Norman north. This view was most notably promoted by Amy Kelly in the mid-twentieth century, and, while Kelly’s idea of Eleanor presiding over Courts of Love has largely been refuted, her Eleanor still casts a long shadow over subsequent portrayals.²

In this work, first published in French in 2004³ and now available in Olive Casse’s extremely readable English translation, Jean Flori seeks to create a balanced portrait of Eleanor. He approaches this exacting task by dividing the book into two unequal halves: the first, comprising a little under two-thirds of the text, is a critical biography of Eleanor; the remainder of the work addresses in detail particular controversies, namely her alleged adultery with Raymond of Antioch, her role as a patron of the troubadours, her political power and artistic patronage, and the relationship between Arthurian literature and the court of Henry II and Eleanor. The author pays close attention throughout to the arguments and interpretations of other scholars, making this a book worth acquiring for its study of the historiography alone.

Flori adopts a judicious approach, attempting to steer a course between the Scylla of over-skepticism and the Charybdis of credulity. While applying appropriate skepticism (and, on occasions, scorn) toward the more speculative approaches to the subject, the author warns against jettisoning literature and

contemporary rumor entirely as evidence. He convincingly argues that such sources can be extremely useful in reflecting contemporary ideas, even if they may not provide reliable evidence of events.

Some examples will serve to illustrate Flori's commendably skeptical approach to some historians of Eleanor. In a line that should be a motto for would-be Eleanor biographers, he argues that "[i]t may be all right for the general public to like historical novels, but it is not all right for historians to novelise history[...]" (p. 12). He is positively scathing about some authors' speculations: Flori writes that D. D. R. Owen "seems to me to combine the disadvantages of gratuitous conjecture and cut-price psychology" (p. 79). Even the pioneer of the movement to establish "une image véridique" of Eleanor comes in for criticism: "[i]t is surprising to see a scrupulous scholar like Edmond-René Labande echoing Amy Kelly's bold calculations about Eleanor's resentment of Becket's growing influence over her husband" (p. 80).

In the second half, Flori skillfully integrates history, literature, and legend. Without giving too much credence to the myths that grew up about Eleanor, he uses them to illustrate how ideas about her, and about women, were evolving in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. So, for example, he examines how the claim that she had an adulterous affair with her uncle Raymond of Antioch while on crusade reflected unease among male (and usually clerical) writers at the exertion of independent authority by a woman. Likewise, Flori's examination of the *courtois* [courtly] literature that was evolving during Eleanor's lifetime dispels the myth of Eleanor's "Courts of Love," but he argues nonetheless that *amour courtois* [courtly love] reflected (and even influenced) ideas of female authority. Disagreeing with Duby's notion that courtly love was a cipher for the relationship between male vassals and lords, Flori helps redirect our focus to the role of women in twelfth-century courts.

Occasionally, however, Flori falls back on the speculative and psychological interpretations that he denounces in others. Referring to Louis VII's opposition to Henry and Eleanor's campaign against Toulouse, he asks "[w]as this due to the rancour of an ex-husband?" (p. 78). Maybe it was; but more likely it was due to the king of France's unwillingness to enable an over-mighty vassal to further extend his power, or to his desire to secure the Toulousain inheritance for his nephew, the future Raymond VI. Flori describes Eleanor, without evidence, as "probably beautiful" (p. 4). He continues the tradition of viewing her as remarkable, as an exception to the rule of a patriarchal society, concluding that she was "a woman out of the common run in her own day and perhaps still in ours" (p. 313). This idea of Eleanor's exceptionalism arises, I believe, from a failure to sufficiently locate Eleanor in the context of twelfth-century

queenship. Flori refers in his chapter on power and patronage to recent studies of Anglo-Norman queens by Lois Huneycutt and Heather Tanner, but does not integrate the example of powerful queens such as Matilda of Scotland, Matilda of Boulogne, and Adeliza of Louvain into his study of Eleanor. The latter appears less remarkable or exceptional when placed alongside these predecessors, or contemporaries such as Ermengarde of Narbonne.

These caveats should not, however, detract from the real achievement of this work in offering—arguably for the first time—a balanced and critical biography of Eleanor. It is to be hoped that the availability of this work in English will banish some of the myths that have been perpetuated about Eleanor, although it is unfortunate that the book is not available in a more affordable format. Had Edinburgh University Press gone ahead with the planned paperback edition, Flori's work would be all the better placed to challenge the ubiquitous popular biographies of Eleanor. Nevertheless, scholars at least will benefit from this incisive and closely-argued work.

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NOTES

1. Bonnie Wheeler and John Carmi Parsons, "Introduction," in *Eleanor of Aquitaine: Lord and Lady*, ed. Bonnie Wheeler and John Carmi Parsons (New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002), pp. xiii-xxix; p. xxix.
2. Amy R. Kelly, *Eleanor of Aquitaine and the Four Kings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1950).
3. Jean Flori, *Aliénor d'Aquitaine: La reine insoumise* (Paris: Payot, 2004).



Linda Maria Koldau. *Frauen-Musik-Kultur. Ein Handbuch zum deutschen Sprachgebiet der Frühen Neuzeit.* Böhlau Verlag, 2005. Pp. xii + 1188; ill.

LINDA KOLDAU'S *Habilitationsschrift* is the result of years of research aimed at rectifying the omission of women from studies of the musical culture of the predominantly German-speaking regions of pre-modern Europe. It is impressive: almost a thousand pages with roughly equal attention to women at aristocratic courts, bourgeois women, and women in convents or other single-gender religious communities. Most of Koldau's evidence comes from