
This valuable and interesting collection of essays aims to enhance current understanding of the “world of Eleanor of Aquitaine” and, more specifically, to challenge “the received view of the ‘South’” (10). The essays are the fine results of a 2003 conference held at the University of Bristol with the goal of exploring and reviewing “certain ideas about the regions and times [Eleanor] inhabited [...]” (1). The handsome jacket illustration of Eleanor and Henry’s donor window at Saint-Pierre cathedral in Poitiers will attract readers who may expect a study of Eleanor and her patronage. However, the essays address neither Eleanor’s unique place in medieval society nor the broader concerns of women’s history, let alone feminist studies. In general, the essays are uninformed by feminist theory or scholarship on women; the world described is not in any particular way a woman’s world.1 Some will be disappointed, but many will be delighted with this varied, interdisciplinary, well-written collection. They will learn not only about Eleanor and her wider world, but also a bit about how to think about regionalism, patronage, literary history, and historiography.

Readers of *Medieval Feminist Forum* will be drawn to the essays about Eleanor, and so this review focuses on those essays, summarizing them separately from those which are less relevant—though, it must be stressed, no less interesting. The essays about Eleanor largely attend to what Richard Barber calls “the media” of her day, the perennially irritating question of Eleanor’s patronage, and Eleanor’s reputation, both medieval and modern.

In “Eleanor of Aquitaine and the Media,” Richard Barber imaginatively considers the role of rumor and hearsay in assessing the chroniclers whose views and information about
Eleanor form the basis of our own knowledge and perspective. How did they get their information, especially without the advantages of close contact at court or personal observation? Barber explores the kinds of material that might have been available to chroniclers and may have informed their views of Eleanor. He argues that the chroniclers saw Eleanor as part of the royal genealogy (whether French or English); unsurprisingly, as a focal point of intrigues and gossip at court; and above all as an astute, patient politician.

Daniel F. Callahan discusses the development of a coronation ritual for the dukes of Aquitaine by the Limousin clergy in “Eleanor of Aquitaine, the Coronation Rite of the Duke of Aquitaine, and the Cult of Saint Martial of Limoges.” Callahan explicates the evolution of the cult of St. Martial and the establishment of Limoges as an important liturgical center, perhaps deliberately paralleling the cult practices of the Capetian kings vis-à-vis St-Denis. This, despite the historically fraught relations of the Limousin nobility with the Dukes of Aquitaine. The churchmen of Limoges needed the patronage and protection of the Poitevin rulers. It is uncertain what benefit the Plantagenets might have received, but Callahan convincingly proposes that a saint-cult linked to the region would have served to elevate their lineage and enhance their status there and suggests that Eleanor herself promoted this development.

John Gillingham’s “Events and Opinions: Norman and English Views of Aquitaine, c. 1152–1240” seeks to understand what nine English and Norman historians knew about Aquitaine during Eleanor’s tenure as queen of England. These writers, important sources regarding Eleanor and Aquitaine, often treated the duchy as a “moveable province” sometimes including Gascony (thereby absorbing Gascon traits of “perfidy”) and which might extend to Toulouse (thereby characterized by heresy). Complementing Barber, Gillingham also asks how the chroniclers came by their information. He demonstrates the influence of the Norman Robert of
Torigni upon English authors and suggests that Torigni got his information from Eleanor herself. Other knowledge may have been acquired first hand, for example by Roger of Howden, whose position as a clerk at court and possible participant in Plantagenet campaigns against Toulouse gave him first-hand knowledge of the region and helped establish “the stereotypical view of Eleanor’s duchy” (79). How is the way her duchy is understood relevant to the way she is understood? If it was not unstable, unfaithful, pernicious, and heretical, it was at the least unruly. By extension, Eleanor, who was not perhaps called all of these things, was also seen to be unruly. While Gillingham does not consider this sort of impact on the historiography of Eleanor, the link between regional and personal reputation surely ought to be considered, not only for Eleanor, but for all ruling women.

Ruth Harvey, in “Eleanor and the Troubadours,” tackles the persistent association of Eleanor with the troubadours, an association which has undoubtedly fed the image of the queen as a romantic figure. She flatly asks, “If her entourage was so influential and teamed with troubadours, where is the evidence?” (109). Harvey also wonders whether the troubadours were “thoroughly ‘Poitevin,’” suggesting instead that Eleanor’s relationship with the troubadours was localized to their regions and that she did not attract the poets to her courts elsewhere—not even in Poitou (p. 113). Harvey raises a number of serious questions about the logic of such relationships and demands evidence to confirm inclinations otherwise based on an essentially romantic view of twelfth-century women.3

Daniel Power situates his analysis of Eleanor in a more northern context. “The Stripping of a Queen: Eleanor of Aquitaine in Thirteenth-Century Norman Tradition” examines a little-studied story about Eleanor and her divorce which appears in two Norman manuscripts. While not well known in regard to Eleanor, the story itself is a cliché: the queen, accused, publicly undresses in order to refute scandal. In this instance, having been accused by Louis VII of
herself [se defubla] before her Poitevin nobles to prove that she is not. Power connects this story with others of “serpentine noblewomen who prefigure Jean d’Arras’s *Melusine*” and concludes that “the Normans preserved a distinctive tale about Eleanor, one which to a modern audience appears as racy as any told about this much discussed queen” (133).4

Four essays are not about Eleanor at all, though they amplify her world. These essays focus on ‘the South,’ whereas the others largely emphasize northern perspectives and sources. The essays by Malcom Barber (“The Templar Preceptory of Douzens (Aude) in the Twelfth Century”), Linda M. Paterson, (“Occitan Literature and the Holy Land”), Laurent Macé (“Raymond VII of Toulouse: The Son of Queen Joanna, ‘Young Count’ and Light of the World” (translated by Catherine Léglu), and William D. Paden, (“Troubadours and History”) all beg the question for this reviewer of how we construct the world of any medieval woman.

In sum, the editors and contributors to this volume engage with, to varying degrees, the continual fascination with Eleanor of Aquitaine. For medievalist feminists, these essays provide good examples of history and literary history; challenging us to think about regionalism, the interplay of rumor and record, and, especially, the arbiters of art and ritual so important in our study of all women’s worlds.

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END NOTES

2. Gillingham includes an appendix, “Roger of Howden on 1183,” explaining the details and omissions of Howden’s chronicle as a result of “a journal of his travels” (80).
3. Harvey makes one factual error I could note, which was to assume (excusably, with countless others) that Gascony was given as a dowry for young Eleanor Plantagenet when she married Alfonso VIII of Castile (p. 112), but this does not affect her larger mission, which is the pursuit of evidence.
4. This essay also has an appendix of relevant passages from the Norman manuscripts, now in the Cambridge University Library and the Bibliotheque de l’Arsenal in Paris, as well as from Philippe Mouskès *Chronique rimée*.