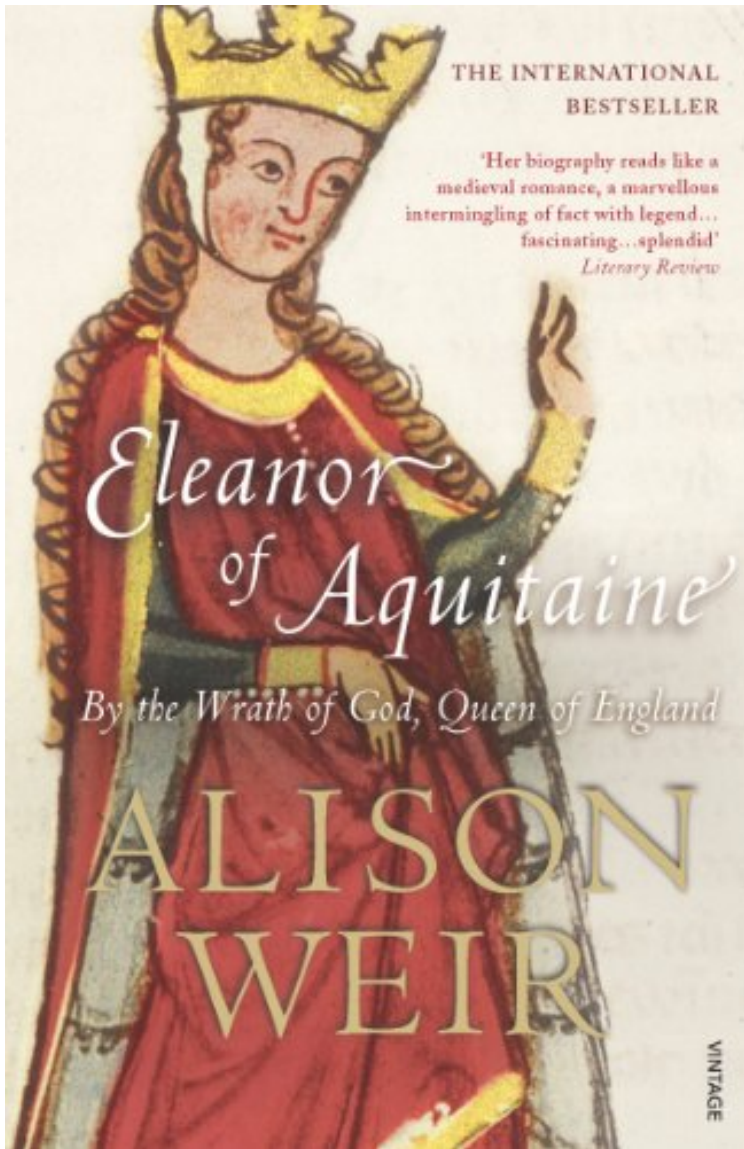


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Eleanor Of Aquitaine: By the Wrath of God, Queen of England



Par Alison Weir

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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurEleanor, Duchess of Aquitaine was one of the leading personalities of the Middle Ages and also one of the most controversial. She was beautiful, intelligent and wilful, and in her lifetime there were rumours about her that were not without substance. She had been reared in a relaxed and licentious court where the arts of the troubadours flourished, and was even said to have presided over the fabled Courts of Love. Eleanor married in turn Louis VII of France and Henry II of England, and was the mother of Richard the Lionheart and King John. She lived to be 82, but it was only in old age that she triumphed over

the adversities and tragedies of her earlier years and became virtual ruler of England. Eleanor has exerted a fascination over writers and biographers for 800 years, but the prevailing myths and legends that attach to her name still tend to obscure the truth. By careful research, Alison Weir has produced a vivid biography with a fresh and provocative perspective on this extraordinary woman.

Chapter 1 Opulent Aquitaine
Eleanor of Aquitaine was born into a Europe dominated by feudalism. In the twelfth century there was no concept of nationhood or patriotism, and subjects owed loyalty to their ruler, rather than the state.

Europe was split into principalities called feudatories, each under the rule of a king, duke, or count, and personal allegiance, or fealty, was what counted. This was expressed in the ceremony of homage, in which a kneeling vassal would place his hands between those of his overlord and swear to render him service and obedience. The most powerful kings and lords could command obedience and aid from lesser rulers; a breach of fealty was generally held to be dishonourable, and although some paid mere lip service to the ideal, the threat of intervention in a dispute by ones overlord often remained an effective restraint. On the other hand, an overlord was bound to offer protection, friendship, and aid to a vassal beset by enemies, so the system had its advantages. Feudal Europe was essentially a military society. Warfare was the business of kings and noblemen, and to many it was an elaborate game played by the rules of chivalry, a knightly code embodying ideals of courage, loyalty, honesty, courtesy, and charity. These rules were often strictly observed, and any breach of them was regarded with opprobrium. Kings and lords might engage in the most bloody conflicts, but once sieges were broken, castles and territory taken, and a truce signed, it was agreed to be in everyones

best interests for good relations to be restored-until the next conflict broke out. Thus, rulers could be enemies one month, yet swear undying friendship the next; such was the shifting scene of twelfth-century politics. The real victims of war were, of course, the peasants and townsfolk, who served as foot soldiers or were innocent victims of the sacking of towns and villages by mercenaries or the notoriously violent routiers, ruthless desperadoes whose lives were dedicated to fighting and plunder. Humble noncombatants often perished in vast numbers at the whim of their rulers-even that of Eleanor herself. Christianity governed the lives of everyone in feudal Europe. Belief in the Holy Trinity was universal, and any deviation from the accepted doctrines of the Catholic Church-such as the heresies of the Cathars in southern France-was ruthlessly suppressed. Holy Church, presided over by the Pope in Rome, was the ultimate authority for all spiritual and moral matters, and even kings were bound by her decrees. In this martial world dominated by men, women had little place. The Churchs teachings might underpin feudal morality, yet when it came to the practicalities of life, a ruthless pragmatism often came into play. Kings and noblemen married for political advantage, and women rarely had any say in how they or their wealth were to be disposed in marriage. Kings would sell off heiresses or rich widows to the highest bidder, for political or territorial advantage, and those

who resisted were heavily fined. Young girls of good birth were strictly reared, often in convents, and married off at fourteen or even earlier to suit their parents or over-lords purposes. The betrothal of infants was not uncommon, despite the Churchs disapproval. It was a fathers duty to bestow his daughters in marriage; if he was dead, his overlord or the King himself would act for him. Personal choice was rarely an issue. Upon marriage, a girls property and rights became invested in her husband, to whom she owed absolute obedience. Every husband had the right to enforce this duty in whichever way he thought fit-as Eleanor was to find out to her cost. Wife-beating was common, although the Church did at this time attempt to restrict the length of the rod that a husband might use. It is fair to say, however, that there were women who transcended the mores of society and got away with it: the evidence suggests that Eleanor of Aquitaine was one such. There were then, as now, women of strong character who ruled feudal states and kingdoms, as

Eleanor did; who made decisions, ran farms and businesses, fought lawsuits, and even, by sheer force of personality, dominated their husbands. It was rare, however, for a woman to exercise political power. Eleanor of Aquitaine and her mother-in-law the Empress Matilda were among the few notable exceptions, unique in their time. The fact remained that the social constraints upon women were so rigidly enforced by both Church and state that few women ever thought to question them. Eleanor herself caused ripples in twelfth-century society because she was a spirited woman who was determined to do as she pleased. Eleanor

of Aquitaine was heiress to one of the richest domains in mediaeval Europe. In the twelfth century, the county of Poitou and the duchies of Aquitaine and Gascony covered a vast region in the south-west of what is now France, encompassing all the land between the River Loire in the north and the Pyrenees in the south, and between the Rhne valley and the mountains of the Massif Central in the east and the Atlantic Ocean in the west. In those days the kingdom of France itself was small, being centred mainly upon Paris and the surrounding area, which was known from the fourteenth century as the le de France; yet its kings, thanks to

the legacy of the Emperor Charlemagne, who had ruled most of northern Europe in the eighth century, were overlords of all the feudatories in an area roughly corresponding to modern France. Poitou was the most northerly of Eleanor's feudatories: its northern border marched with those of Brittany, Anjou, and Touraine, and its chief city was Poitiers. Perched on a cliff, with impressive ramparts, this was the favourite seat of its suzerains. To the east was the county of Berry, and to the south the wide sweep of the duchy of Aquitaine, named land of waters after the great rivers that dissected it: the Garonne, the Charente, the Creuse, the Vienne, the Dordogne, and the Vézère. The duchy also incorporated the counties of Saintonge, Angoulême, Prigord, the Limousin, La Marche, and the remote region of the Auvergne. In the south, stretching to the Pyrenees, was the wine-producing duchy of Gascony, or Guienne, with its bustling port of Bordeaux, and the Agenais. All these lands comprised Eleanor's inheritance. It was a rich one indeed, wealthier than the domain of its overlord, the King of France. Opulent Aquitaine, sweet as nectar thanks to its vineyards dotted about with forests, overflowing with fruit of every kind, and endowed with a superabundance of pasture land, enthused one chronicler, Heriger of Lobbes. Ralph of Diceto wrote that the duchy abounds with riches of many kinds, so excelling other parts of the western world that it is considered by historians one of the most fortunate and prosperous provinces of Gaul. The region boasted a temperate climate, and its summers could be very warm. It was a land of small walled cities, fortified keeps, moated castles, wealthy monasteries, sleepy villages, and prosperous farms. Its houses were built with white or yellow walls and red-tiled roofs, as many still are today. To the east and south, the land was hilly or mountainous, while fertile plains, high tors, and dense woodland were features of Poitou and Aquitaine, and flat sandy wastes and scrubland characterised Gascony. The people of Aquitaine, who were mostly of Romano-Basque origin, were as diverse as its scenery. In the twelfth century, *The Pilgrims Book of Compostela* described the Poitevins as handsome, full of life, brave, elegant, witty, hospitable, and good soldiers and horsemen, and the natives of Saintonge as uncouth, while the Gascons—although frivolous, garrulous, cynical, and promiscuous—were as generous as their poverty permitted. In fact, the whole domain was merely a collection of different lordships and peoples with little in common, apart from their determination to resist interference by their overlord, the Duke. Most people in Aquitaine spoke the *langue doc*, or Provençal, a French dialect that derived from the language spoken by the Roman invaders centuries before, although there were a number of local patois. North of the River Loire, and in Poitou, they spoke the *langue doeil*, which to southerners seemed a different language altogether. Eleanor of Aquitaine probably spoke both dialects, although it appears that the *langue doc* was her mother tongue. The Aquitanian lordships and their castles were controlled by often hostile and frequently feuding vassals, who paid mere lip service to their ducal overlords and were notorious for their propensity to rebel and create disorder. These turbulent nobles enjoyed a luxurious standard of living compared with their unwashed counterparts in northern France, and each competed with his neighbour to establish in his castle a small but magnificent court. Renowned for their elegance, their shaven faces and long hair, the Aquitanian aristocracy were regarded by northerners as soft and idle, whereas in fact they could be fierce and violent when provoked. Self-interest was the dominant theme in their relations with their liege lords: successive dukes had consistently failed to subdue these turbulent lords or establish cohesion within their own domains. The authority of the dukes of Aquitaine held good, therefore, only in the immediate vicinities of Poitiers, their capital, and Bordeaux. Although they claimed descent from Charlemagne and retained his effigy on the coinage of Poitou, they did not have the wealth or resources to extend their power into the feudal wilderness beyond this region, and since their military strength depended upon knight service from their unruly vassals, they could not rely upon this. Consequently, Aquitaine lagged behind northern France in making political and economic progress. Nevertheless, the duchy was wealthy, thanks to its lucrative export trade in wine and salt, and it was a land in which the religious life flourished. Its rulers erected and endowed numerous fine churches and abbeys, notably the famous abbey at Cluny—a pleasure of the angels—and the Aquitanian Romanesque cathedrals in Poitiers and Angoulême, built in a style typified by elegant archways with radiating decoration and lively but grotesque sculptures of monsters and mythical creatures. In the first century B.C. the Romans had founded Aquitania as a province of Gaul; vestiges of Roman culture and civilisation were still evident in the twelfth century. At the time of the Merovingian kings of France (A.D. 481–751), Aquitaine became an independent duchy. In 781 Charlemagne had his young son Louis crowned King of Aquitaine by the Pope, and appointed a council of nobles to govern in his name. By 793 the renowned warrior William of Orange, Count of Toulouse, had emerged as their leader, although in that year he was soundly defeated by the Moors of Spain during their last attempt to extend their Moslem empire north of the Pyrenees. A brave and devout man, of whom epic chansons de

geste (songs of deeds) were written, William retired to the abbey of Gellone near Montpellier, where he later died. In 1066 he was canonised and his burial place was renamed Saint-Guilhelm-le-Desert. Aquitaine remained a nominal kingdom until 877, but as Charlemagne's empire fragmented, so its status declined, and it was soon the subject of intense rivalry between the counts of Poitiers and Toulouse, who both wished to rule what was now the duchy of Aquitaine. By the middle of the tenth century, Ebalus, Count of Poitou, a distant cousin of William of Orange, had emerged victorious. Eleanor sprang from a noble race. Ebalus's son, William III (called Towhead), a wealthy, able, and devout ruler, was blessed with a capable wife, Adela of Normandy. She was the first of a number of strong-minded women in the ducal family tree. Like his famous namesake, William III also retired to a monastery, dying in 963. His son, William IV, nicknamed Fierabras (Strong Arm), was of a more volatile temperament. Married to another woman of character, the pious Emma, sister of Hugh Capet, King of the Franks, he so offended her sensibilities by overindulging in hunting and women that she left him twice—but not before wreaking her vengeance on his paramours. Finally bowing to pressure, he withdrew to a monastery around 996, leaving Emma to rule in the name of their son, William V, the Great. Fortunately, William V took after his mother, who remained in power until her death in 1004. Well-educated, he was interested in the teachings of scholars from the cathedral schools of Blois, Tours, and Chartres; he founded a similar school at Poitiers Cathedral, collected books, and promoted learning at his court at Poitiers, already the leading centre of southern culture. He established good relations and alliances with his feudal neighbours and with the Church, and made several pilgrimages to Rome. He, too, married a formidable woman: his third wife, Agnes of Burgundy, was another such as his mother had been. William V died in 1030. He was succeeded in turn by the three sons of his former wives, William VI (reigned 1030-1038), Eudes (reigned 1038-1039), and William VII, the Brave (reigned 1039-1058). The latter was truly warlike, second to none in daring, and endowed with foresight and abundant wealth, yet although he was eager for praise, pompous in his boastful arrogance and enjoyed a great reputation, he suffered a miserable defeat at the hands of Geoffrey Martel, Count of Anjou, in 1042. William VII was succeeded by his father's son by Agnes of Burgundy, Guy Geoffrey, who took the title William VIII. Despite the fact that she was now married to Geoffrey Martel, Agnes continued to exert her will over her son and his court, until her retirement to a nunnery in 1068. Yet William VIII was an energetic and dynamic ruler; by 1063, he had annexed Saintonge and Gascony to Aquitaine, thereby increasing the duchy's importance and power in western Europe. It was for a time sufficiently peaceful for its Duke to depart to fight the Moors in Spain. His victory at Babastro was still being celebrated in the chansons de geste of the twelfth century. William's first two wives were barren, so he took a third, Aude of Burgundy, twenty-five years his junior and related to him within the forbidden degrees of consanguinity. Their son, William, born in 1071, was not legitimated until the father had personally visited Rome and obtained the Pope's blessing on his marriage. William VIII died in 1086, when his son was just fifteen. William IX, Eleanor's grandfather, was a handsome and courteous, yet complex and volatile man who is regarded by historians as the first of the troubadours. Romantic literature flourished in the twelfth century, particularly in Aquitaine and Provence. The chansons de geste tended to celebrate military ideals of courage in battle, loyalty, honour, and endurance, as well as legendary heroes such as Charlemagne, Roland, and King Arthur, while the romantic poems and *lais* (lays) sang of love. It was the poets of the south, the troubadours, who popularised the concept of courtly love, revolutionary in its day. Drawing on ideas from Plato and from Arab writers, and influenced by the growing popularity of the cult of the Virgin Mary, these poets composed their lyric poetry and rather complex songs in the mellifluous *langue d'oc* and accompanied them with the music of rebeck and viol, fiddle and bow, pipe and tabor (tambourine). They deified women, according them superiority over men, and laid down codes of courtesy, chivalry, and gentlemanly conduct. These precepts were to be echoed in the *lais* of the trouvères of northern France, who wrote in the *langue d'oïl*. Thus were born ideals of honour and courtship that in the centuries to come would permeate European literature and culture to such a degree that their influence is still with us today. Under the rules of courtly love, the mistress, who is an idealised figure, often high-born and even married, remains unattainable to her humble, worshipping suitor, who must render her homage and prove his devotion and loyalty over a period of time before his love is even acknowledged. In this aristocratic game—for such it was—the woman always had the upper hand and set the pace and tone of the relationship. Her wishes and decrees were absolute, and any suitor who did not comply with them was deemed unworthy of the honour of her love. There was an underlying eroticism to these precepts, for it was tacitly understood that the persistent lover would one day have his hoped-for reward. The ideals of courtly love were at breathtaking variance with contemporary notions of courtship and marriage,

and there were many-Henry II among them-who regarded these newfangled ideas as subversive and pernicious. They were taken most seriously in the relaxed cultural atmosphere of southern France, where they evolved as an absorbing intellectual pastime of the upper classes, while in the more sober north, courtly love was often seen merely as an excuse for adultery. The age of the troubadours ended in the early thirteenth century with the vicious persecution of the Cathar heretics in what became known as the Albigensian Crusade. Culminating in the holocaust at Montsgur, this left southern France so devastated that its native culture, which had flourished under the auspices of Eleanor of Aquitaine and her forebears, was effectively suppressed and, in many cases, irrevocably lost. Duke William IX was intelligent and gifted, artistic and idealistic, with an insatiable thirst for sensual passion and adventure. His verses are erotic and occasionally blasphemous, and when coupled with his amoral behaviour, they succeeded-unsurprisingly-in offending the sensibilities of the Church. He began his reign well enough, quickly establishing himself as a capable and respected ruler and styling himself Duke of the Entire Monarchy of the Aquitanians. In 1088 he married Ermengarde, the beautiful daughter of Fulk IV, Count of Anjou, but it was not long before she began to have violent mood swings and to manifest the symptoms of what was possibly manic depression or schizophrenia. As there were no children of the marriage, William had no difficulty in getting it annulled. Ermengarde then married the Count of Brittany, and William, in 1094, went off to Aragon in serious pursuit of King Sancho Ramirez's nineteen-year-old widow, Philippa. Philippa was heiress to the county of Toulouse, which bordered Gascony in the south and was regarded by William as a desirable addition to his domains, since within it lay the important trade routes that linked Aquitaine with the Mediterranean. A great-niece of William the Conqueror, King of England, Philippa was a spirited lady in the tradition of the duchesses of Aquitaine: pious, high-minded, strong-willed, and of sound political judgement. Her father, William IV of Toulouse, after bestowing her in marriage, had gone on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, leaving his brother, Raymond, Count of Saint-Gilles, as regent of his duchy. But when William died five years later, Raymond, ignoring Philippa's right of inheritance, usurped her title. She was therefore anxious to marry a man with the political power and resources to recover Toulouse for her, and she accepted William of Aquitaine with alacrity. The early mediaeval period was an age of great religious fervour, when thousands of men and women went on long and dangerous pilgrimages to holy shrines, such as that of St. James at Compostela, St. Peter's in Rome, or even to the Holy Land itself, where was to be found the most sacred shrine of them all, Christ's burial place, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Since A.D. 640, Palestine had been under Arab rule. In 1095 Pope Urban II preached the First Crusade, in the hope of liberating Jerusalem from the Infidel. William IX considered taking the Cross at this time, but thought better of it. It was Raymond of Toulouse who, in 1096, led an army of 100,000 crusaders to the East, having first renounced his claim to Toulouse in favour of his son Bertrand. In 1098 William marched into Toulouse and successfully laid claim to it, incurring the anger of the Church by violating the Truce of God, which required all Christians to refrain from invading the lands of a crusader during his absence. The intercession of the Bishop of Poitiers successfully averted the threat of excommunication by the Pope, but William's relations with the Church were thereafter strained. In 1099 Philippa bore a son, called William the Toulousain after the place of his birth, and in the same year news of the taking of Jerusalem by the crusaders filtered through to Europe. This set Duke William thinking that perhaps he should have taken the Cross after all, so he mortgaged Toulouse to Bertrand to provide himself with men and funds, left Philippa as regent in Poitiers, and set off for Asia Minor. In 1101, at Heraclea, he watched from a hill, weeping, as his army was cut to pieces by the Turks. After that, he had no choice but to return home, although he lingered on the way to enjoy the exotic delights of the court of Antioch and visit the holy shrines of Jerusalem. Back in Poitiers, inspired by the culture of the East and the erotic works of Ovid, he began writing poems in the Provençal dialect, with robust, sensual lyrics celebrating female beauty, carnal delights, and the pleasures of love. Eleven of his works survive. Some are crude, portraying women as horses to be mounted or as wives chafing at the jealous vigilance of their husbands; others are melancholy. Nothing like them had been written since ancient times, and they caused a predictable stir, not least because William dared assert the unheard-of notion that a man should not demand love from a woman: it should be she who freely bestows it. Nevertheless, he openly admitted that he usually pursued a woman with only one end in view, and that most of his encounters ended with my hands beneath her cloak. It was not long before William's court at Poitiers became renowned throughout Europe for this new trend in literature; it was certainly, by the twelfth century, the foremost cultural centre in France. For the next few years, as his family grew, the Duke remained in his domains, writing poems and fighting useless wars against his unruly vassals, which only served to weaken his position and strengthen theirs.

Increasingly self-indulgent, he openly pursued women, even boasting that he would found an abbey for prostitutes near his castle at Niort. He was brave and gallant, but too much of a jester, finding pleasure only in one nonsense after another, listening to jests with his mouth wide open in a constant guffaw. Not surprisingly, the Church and many of his more sober contemporaries were outraged by Williams behaviour, while his wife maintained a dignified silence and turned increasingly to religion for solace. Robert dArbrissel, founder of the Order of Fontevrault, was a Breton scholar and inspired teacher who wandered the roads of northwestern France with his growing band of followers. A large number were women, attracted by his enlightened and sympathetic view of the female sex, and by his compassion for the outcasts of society. His reputation quickly spread, and Pope Urban II recognised him as an apostolic preacher. Nevertheless, there were those who resented his assertion that women were in many respects the superior sex and made better administrators and managers of property than men. To his critics, this sounded like heresy. Impressed by what she had heard of dArbrissel, the Duchess Philippa persuaded her husband to grant him some land in northern Poitou, near the Angevin border, where he could establish a religious community dedicated to the Virgin Mary. In 1100, by a fountain at Fontevrault, near the River Vienne, he founded a double monastery for priests, monks, lay brethren, and three hundred segregated nuns, all under the rule of an abbess—a revolutionary arrangement for its time. In other respects, the abbey followed the rule of St. Benedict. The community was housed in wooden huts and had a simple chapel. In 1119 building commenced on a new stone church, consecrated that year. The head of the order was the Abbess of Fontevrault; dArbrissel stipulated that she had to be nobly born and a widow, in order to confer prestige on the order and ensure that it was administered by someone familiar with running a large household. The office was filled by several notable ladies during the twelfth century, among them Isabella of Anjou, the widow of William the Atheling, son and heir of King Henry I of England. By the time of dArbrissels death in 1117, Fontevrault Abbey had become very popular with aristocratic ladies wishing to retire or temporarily retreat from the world; among them was William IXs first wife, Ermengarde of Anjou, who withdrew there after the death of her second husband. These ladies were accommodated in their own apartments, where they could enjoy worldly status and comforts while living in seclusion. The majority of the nuns came from noble families and had lay sisters as maids, but no one, however humble, was turned away. Fontevrault also became a refuge for battered wives and penitent prostitutes, and housed a leper hospital and a home for aged religious. Above all, it quickly earned a reputation for piety and contemplative prayer, and thus fulfilled its founders aims of enhancing the prestige of women in general and promoting their rights. Philippas absorption in what was going on at Fontevrault irritated William of Aquitaine, and he turned elsewhere for female company. He was again at odds with the Church, having once more been threatened with excommunication. But as the Bishop was about to pronounce the sentence of anathema in the cathedral of Saint-Pierre, William charged in with drawn sword, grabbed the startled prelate by the neck, and threatened to kill him if he did not absolve him. The Bishop stood his ground, and William backed off. I do not love you enough to send you to Paradise, he sneered. In 1115 the Duke had conceived a violent passion for the wife of his vassal Aimery I de Rochefoucauld, Viscount of Chtellerault; she was appropriately named Dangerousa. She had been married to Aimery for seven years and had borne him three children: Hugh, his heir; Raoul; and Aenor. With no regard to the consequences of his actions, William abducted her from her bedchamber and bore her off to his palace at Poitiers, where he appears to have installed her in the newly built Maubergeonne Tower. Soon the affair became notorious, and Dangerousa was nicknamed La Maubergeonne. Aimery made no recorded protest: he was probably afraid of offending his volatile overlord. When Philippa returned from a visit to Toulouse, she was shocked at what she found and begged the papal legate, Giraud, to remonstrate with William. But it was useless, for the Duke told the bald legate that curls would grow on his pate before he would part with the Viscountess. Even a renewal of the sentence of excommunication against him had no effect on William. He defiantly had Dangerousas portrait painted on his shield, saying that it was his will to bear her in battle as she had borne him in bed. A local hermit cursed this sinful union and predicted that neither William nor his descendants would ever know happiness in their children. Philippa refused to tolerate his behaviour. Before the year was out, she retired in grief to Fontevrault, where she died of unknown causes on 28 November 1118. A year or so later, Dangerousa suggested that Williams son and heir marry her daughter Aenor. Their marriage may almost certainly be dated to 1121. Young William was a reluctant bridegroom. Very tall, broad, and robust, with a huge appetite—it was claimed that he ate enough for ten men—and a quarrelsome nature, he had inherited some of the Dukes charm but also his violent temper, and he was very resentful of the way in which his father had betrayed and humiliated his mother. We know very little about Aenor of

Chtellerault, Eleanors mother. Her position cannot have been an easy one, abandoned by a mother who was branded an adulteress, and then married to a man who did not want her. Aenors first child, the daughter who became known to history as Eleanor of Aquitaine, was born in 1122. The exact date is not known, but the year can be determined from evidence of her age at death and from the fact that the lords of Aquitaine swore fealty to her on her fourteenth birthday in 1136. Some chroniclers give 1120 as her birth date, but her parents cannot have been married until 1121. Eleanors birthplace was probably either the ducal palace at Poitiers or the Ombrire Palace at Bordeaux, although a local tradition claims that she was born in the chateau of Belin near Bordeaux, one of her fathers residences. She was christened Alinore, a pun on the Latin alia-Aenor, the other Eleanor, to differentiate her from her mother, although her name is variously spelled in different sources and has been anglicised for this text. Aenor bore William two other children: Petronilla, who is sometimes called Aelith, in c.1125, and a male heir, William Aigret, around 1126/1127. On 10 February 1127, William IX died, still excommunicate. In 1122 the deceased Count Bertrands brother, Alfonso Jordan, had taken possession of Toulouse, but William had no longer had the heart or the energy to try to reclaim it. One of his last poems laments the fact that he must soon leave Poitou for the exile that is death; he craves pardon from his friends and from Jesus Christ, and prays for his heir, soon to be left in a world torn by conflict. Although he passed on his domains intact to his son, who now became William X, he had been unable to curb the aggression and growing independence of his vassals, with the consequence that ducal authority had been even further undermined. William Xs reign was troubled and brief, marred by strife with his vassals and quarrels with the Church. The court at Poitiers seems to have remained an important cultural centre, for although the new Duke was no poet himself, he patronised the troubadours Marcabru and the Gascon Cercamon, both of whom composed eulogistic laments when he died, and perhaps also a Welsh fabulist called Bledri, who may have told the Poitevin court some very early tales of King Arthur. Troubadours from beyond the Pyrenees, from Aragon, Castile, Navarre, and Italy, were also welcomed at the ducal court. In 1130 the Church was rent by schism, with rival popes claiming the throne of St. Peter.

William rashly supported the antipope Anacletus against Innocent II, which led to Innocents excommunicating William and placing Aquitaine under an interdict. In 1135 Williams distant kinsman, the formidable and saintly preacher Bernard of Clairvaux, intervened, venturing into the Dukes domains on Gods business and threatening William with divine vengeance if he persisted in his obstinacy. This was too much: as Bernard celebrated mass at Parthenay, William, fully armed, stormed into the church intending to throw him out; but the holy man bore down on him, holding the sacrament aloft. This had such a salutary effect on William that he suffered some kind of seizure or mild stroke and collapsed in fear, foaming at the mouth and unable for a time to move. When he recovered, Bernard attributed it to a miracle, which greatly enhanced his own reputation and left William with no choice but to capitulate. Humiliation was followed by personal tragedy. In March 1130 the Duchess Aenor and her children took up residence at Williams hunting lodge at Talmont on the coast of Poitou, north of La Rochelle. Aenor and young William Aigret died there soon afterwards, leaving Eleanor as her fathers heiress-presumptive. At eight years of age, she was old enough to realise that she was a very important little girl-indeed, the most important in Christendom. Despite losing her grandfather, mother, and brother at an early age, Eleanor enjoyed a privileged girlhood. Children in those days were required to honour and obey their parents, and any transgressions were usually punished with severe beatings, but the evidence suggests that Eleanor was spoiled. Richard le Poitevin, writing in the 1170s, states that she was brought up in delicacy and reared with abundance of all delights, living in the bosom of wealth. Like all courts at that time, William Xs was itinerant, and Eleanor would have travelled with him from place to place, residing at his castles, palaces, and hunting lodges. His favourite seat-and later hers-was the ancient palace at Poitiers, dating from Merovingian times. Sited on the banks of the River Clain, it was surrounded by beautiful gardens. In the tenth century, William V had partially rebuilt it and erected the great hall, which survives today, much altered; known colloquially as the hall of lost footsteps, it serves as the antechamber to the Palais de Justice in Poitiers. A more recent addition was the imposing Mauber-geonne Tower, in which were situated the ducal apartments. Dangerous still lived there while Eleanor was a child, but we have no means of knowing how much she influenced her granddaughte. Another favoured residence was the Ombrire Palace at Bordeaux, a tall keep known as the Crossbowman, which was set in courtyards with tiled fountains and beautiful semitropical gardens. Bordeaux itself had been founded by the Romans, and the walls they had built to encircle it still stood. Just outside these walls was another property used by the ducal family, the Tutelle Palace. William X owned a number of other keeps and palaces that would have been visited by Eleanor, including those at Limoges, Niort, Saint-Jean d'Angly, Blaye,

Melle, and Bayonne. At other times, the court would have stayed in the guest accommodations available in the great abbeys in the region. Women, as we have seen, played a subordinate role in mediaeval society. During the Dark Ages, when feudal states were being forged out of the ruins of a Roman Empire ravaged by barbarian invasions, life was brutal and uncertain; might generally prevailed over right, and it was male strength that counted. The weaker sex therefore found itself subjugated, the chief functions of noblewomen being to produce heirs to feudal domains and to act as chatelaines of the castles that were springing up all over Europe. The teachings of the Church Fathers, who followed St. Paul in preaching that a woman's role was to learn in silence and be subject to her husband at home, served to sanctify this masculine domination of society. Although in the twelfth century the parallel codes of chivalry and courtly love would go far towards improving the status of women, they did not seriously challenge their subservient role. Aquitanian laws, laid down in the years before the Church increased its influence in the ducal domains, were generally favourable to women, ensuring that their status in the duchy was higher than elsewhere in feudal Europe. Women could inherit property in their own right and even rule autonomously over lands they inherited. They took a part in public life and, unlike women in northern France, were not kept secluded from men or mainstream society. High-born and wealthy women were renowned for their elegance in dress, yet censured by the Church for their painted cheeks, their charcoal-rimmed eyes, and their oriental perfumes, and females of all classes were notorious for their lax attitude towards morality: in the north it was asserted that the whole duchy was no better than a vast brothel. A wife's adultery was not punished, as elsewhere, by imprisonment or execution: Aquitanians took a sanguine view of such matters. The formal education of women was rarely considered important. Girls of good birth were taught domestic skills at home or in a convent, and rarely learned to read and write, for it was feared that if they did they would waste their talents writing love letters or reading romances that led to promiscuity. Eleanor of Aquitaine was a notable exception. Duke William ensured that his daughter, unusually for the time, received some formal education. She was taught to read in her native tongue; Bertran de Born, who addressed many chansons to her, says, they were not unknown to her, for she can read. She was also given instruction in Latin. While she certainly became acquainted with the *gai saber* (joyous art) of the troubadours, there is no evidence that she inherited any of her grandfathers poetic talent, as some writers have claimed. Nevertheless, she shared William IX's enjoyment of romantic literature and poetry, and would in time come to patronise troubadours such as Bernard de Ventadour. Eleanor grew up to be an energetic and consummate sportswoman. She was certainly taught to ride at an early age, and in later life she enjoyed hawking, and kept some royal gyrfalcons at her hunting lodge at Talmont. It is likely that she was also given some tuition in the traditional feminine skills of needlework and household management. Some biographers have claimed that in later life Eleanor displayed a knowledge of Aristotelian logic, either taught in childhood—which is highly unlikely—or learned in the schools of Paris while she was Queen of France. The letters in which this skill is apparent were in fact composed for Eleanor in 1193 by the accomplished royal secretary Peter of Blois, and it is far more likely that it was he rather than his royal mistress who was responsible for the Aristotelian arguments so forcefully set out in them. Eleanor's name first appears in contemporary records in July 1129, when she, her parents, and her baby brother witnessed a charter granting privileges to the Abbey of Montierneuf in memory of her grandfather, who was buried there. Each inscribed a cross by his or her name, while the infant made a print with a finger dipped in ink. There is no evidence that Eleanor ever learned to write: princes and nobles in those days customarily employed clerks to serve as secretaries and write their letters for them. The court in which Eleanor grew up was sophisticated and highly civilised and enjoyed a standard of living luxurious for its time. Richard le Poitevin tells us that Eleanor developed a taste for luxury and refinement. Her patronage of poets and writers in later life suggests that she was captivated early on by the troubadour culture that pervaded aristocratic society in Poitou and Aquitaine. She loved music, delighting in the melodies of the flute and rejoicing in the harmonies of the musicians. Her young companions sang their sweet songs to the accompaniment of the tabor and cithara, the latter possibly an early type of lute. Above all, she conceived a great love and loyalty for her ancestral domains: throughout her life Aquitaine would always be her first priority. These were the years that shaped Eleanor's character. She had inherited many of the traits of her forebears, and was energetic, intelligent, sophisticated, headstrong, and perhaps lacking in self-discipline. She possessed great vitality and, according to William of Newburgh, a lively mind. Impetuous to a fault, she seems to have cared little in her youth for the conventions of the society in which she lived. Sharing many qualities with that company of ambitious, formidable, and strong-minded female ancestors, she was to surpass them all in fame and notoriety. Eleanor grew up to be very beautiful: all contemporary sources are

agreed on this point, and even in an age when chroniclers routinely eulogised royal and noble ladies, their praise of her was undoubtedly sincere. In youth, she was described as *perpulchra*-more than beautiful. Around 1153, the troubadour Bernard de Ventadour called her gracious, lovely, the embodiment of charm, referring to her lovely eyes and noble countenance and declaring that she was one meet to crown the state of any king. William of Newburgh emphasised the charms of her person, and even when she was old, Richard of Devizes described her as beautiful, while Matthew Paris, in the thirteenth century, recalled her admirable beauty. No one, however, left a description of Eleanor or even recorded the colour of her hair and eyes. Her tomb effigy shows a tall and large-boned woman, but this may not be an accurate representation. Her seal of c.1152 shows her with a slender figure, but this could in no way be said to be anything other than an impersonal image. However, at the age of fifty-one she was still slim enough to disguise herself as a man, which suggests that she was reasonably tall, lithe, and not too buxom. The contemporary ideal of beauty was the blue-eyed blonde, and several historians have suggested that the chroniclers would not have been so fulsome in their praises if Eleanor had not conformed to this ideal. However, it is more likely that she had red or auburn hair, since a mural in the chapel of Sainte-Radegonde at Chinon (see Chapter 19), which almost certainly depicts Eleanor and was painted during her lifetime in a region in which she was well known, shows a woman with reddish-brown hair. What is certain is that from an early age Eleanor attracted the attention of men, not only because of her looks but also because of her welcoming manner and inherent flirtatiousness and wit. Gervase of Canterbury described her much later as an exceedingly shrewd and clever woman, born of noble stock, but unstable and flighty. All the evidence from accounts and chronicles shows that Eleanor enjoyed dressing elegantly in fine clothes, often of silk embroidered in gold thread, and it appears that she became a leader of fashion. She evidently loved jewellery, for she amassed a great many pieces during her life, including jewelled circlets to hold in place the veils that all married women wore in the twelfth century. Some writers have claimed that Eleanor's uncle, Raymond of Poitiers, her father's younger brother, was close to her as a child. In fact, he had gone to England before her birth as the protégé of King Henry I, who had lost his legitimate sons when the White Ship sank in 1120. The landless Raymond was reared and trained for knighthood at the English court, and left it only in 1133, when King Fulk of Jerusalem chose him as ruler of Antioch. He may have visited his native land en route for the East, but it is doubtful whether he would have had time to establish a close relationship with his niece. Beautiful, able, and intelligent Eleanor might have been, but she was still a woman, and although contemporary evidence suggests that her father taught her some of the skills of government, it was not considered practicable for a woman to rule a feudal state. To begin with, she would be unable to perform the forty days annual knight-service required by every overlord from his vassals, and even though she might pay one of her lords to do this for her, it was universally agreed that it was not fitting for a woman to hold dominion over men. In 1136, William X resolved to provide his subjects with a male heir, and to this end he proposed marriage to Emma, daughter of Viscount Aymer of Limoges and widow of the Lord of Cognac. But Emma's father's friends and allies did not want their duke extending his authority over the affairs of the Limousin and arranged for Count William of Angoulême to kidnap and marry Emma instead. When their marriage was announced, the Duke took no action, because he was pre-occupied elsewhere, having been invited to help his northern neighbour, Count Geoffrey of Anjou, invade and conquer Normandy. This enterprise lasted a mere four weeks and was abandoned after Count Geoffrey was severely wounded in the foot. William X returned in a deep depression, tormented by nightmares and haunted by memories of the horrors of war. He had never succeeded in subduing his turbulent vassals, and it was now obvious that another rebellion was brewing in the Limousin. But William, with his usual inability to set his priorities in order, decided that he was going on a pilgrimage to the shrine of St. James at Compostela (Santiago de Compostela), in northwestern Spain, to seek forgiveness for his sins and pray for God's help against his enemies. His hostile vassals, however, believed he was going to seek military aid from his neighbours, to be used against them. The situation in Aquitaine was potentially explosive. William began to set his affairs in order. Although he intended, after his pilgrimage, to marry and father sons, he realised that he might never return. In that case his vast domains, comprising a quarter of modern France, would pass to a mere girl, his daughter Eleanor, making her the richest and most desirable heiress in Europe. In order to ensure as far as possible her smooth succession, he summoned his vassals and, on Eleanor's fourteenth birthday, commanded them to swear homage to her as the heiress to Poitou, Aquitaine, and Gascony. But this would not be enough to protect her from the ruthless ambition of predatory lords in a land torn by unrest; she would be at the mercy of any fortune hunter, yet because of her sex there could be no question of her ruling her lands by herself. It was imperative that a

strong and powerful husband be found for her, to rule in her name. The Duke therefore made Eleanor a ward of his overlord, Louis VI, King of France, with a view to her marrying the Kings son and heir, another Louis. William knew that Louis VI was the only man with the power, status, and authority to protect Eleanors inheritance and safeguard her interests. The ancient pilgrim route to Compostela passed through Williams dominions, and during the Lenten season of 1137 he travelled along it with his daughters as far as Bordeaux, where he left them in the care of the staunchly loyal Geoffrey de Loroux, Archbishop of Bordeaux. He then journeyed south towards Spain, garbed as a pilgrim and attended by only a small retinue of knights and servants. Presently the little group crossed the Pyrenees via the pass at Roncesvalles and proceeded across the kingdom of Navarre. On Good Friday, 9 April 1137, Duke William arrived at Compostela, seriously ill after drinking contaminated water, and collapsed by the wayside. Realising he was dying, he made his will, bequeathing his domains to Eleanor and appointing King Louis her guardian. He made his friends promise to approach Louis and ask him to arrange the marriage of his son to Eleanor without delay. In the meantime, Louis could rule Aquitaine. In order to ensure that his duchy was not swallowed up by the French crown, William further stipulated that Eleanors domains should not be incorporated into the royal demesne but should remain independent and be inherited by Eleanors heirs alone. He asked that news of his death be sent in confidence to King Louis and also to the Archbishop of Bordeaux, so that Eleanor could be informed; only then could it be made public. Near death, the thirty-eight-year-old Duke was carried into the cathedral at Compostela, where he died that same day shortly after receiving Holy Communion. His companions arranged for him to be buried before the high altar next to the shrine of St. James the Apostle. When his death was announced in Aquitaine, the chronicler Geoffrey de Vigeois claimed that it had been providential, for it had saved the Limousin from being drenched in blood. Eleanor, a young virgin of fifteen, was now Countess of Poitou and Duchess of Aquitaine and Gascony in her own right. *Revue de presse* "Her biography reads like a medieval romance, a marvellous intermingling of fact with legend...fascinating...splendid" (Literary) "Weir approaches Eleanor's story with an objective eye and a mass of primary and secondary source material. The result is as vivid as it is informative" (The Times) "Sensible and eminently readable" (Times Literary Supplement) "When you finish the book you feel you have been put painlessly (but not necessarily without tears) in possession of the facts of this extraordinary, indefatigable woman, her sufferings and triumphs" (Bevis Hillier Spectator, Books of the Year) "Triumphantly done" (Sunday Times)