

THE QUEEN OF TROUBADOURS GOES TO ENGLAND:  
ELEANOR OF AQUITAINE AND 12TH CENTURY ANGLO-NORMAN  
LITERARY MILIEU

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*The purpose of the present paper is to cast some light on the role played by Eleanor of Aquitaine in the development of Anglo-Norman literature at the time when she was Queen of England (1155-1204). Although her importance in the growth of courtly love literature in France has been sufficiently stated, little attention has been paid to her patronising activities in England. My contribution provides a new portrait of the Queen of Troubadours, also as a promoter of Anglo-Norman literature: many were the authors, both French and English, who might have written under her royal patronage during the second half of the 12th century. Starting with Rita Lejeune's seminal work (1954) on the Queen's literary role, I have gathered scattered information from different sources: approaches to Anglo-Norman literature, Eleanor's biographies and studies in Arthurian Romance. Nevertheless, mine is not a mere systematization of available data, for both in the light of new discoveries and by contrasting existing information, I have enlarged agreed conclusions and proposed new topics for research and discussion.*

The year 2004 marked the 800<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Eleanor of Aquitaine's death. An exhibition was held at the Abbey of Fontevraud (France), and a long list of books has been published (or re-edited) about the most famous queen of the Middle Ages during these last six years. <sup>1</sup> Starting with R. Lejeune's seminal work (1954) on

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1. Non fiction: Weir, A. 2007 (1999), *Eleanor Of Aquitaine: By the Wrath of God, Queen of England*. London: Vintage Books; Wheeler, B. and J.C. Parsons. (eds.). 2002, *Eleanor of Aquitaine: Lord and Lady*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan; Swabey, F. 2004, *Eleanor of Aquitaine, Courtly Love, and the Troubadours*. Westport: Greenwood Press; Boyd, D. 2004, *April Queen: Eleanor of Aquitaine*. Phoenix Mill: Sutton Publishing Limited; Bull, M. and C. Léglu. (eds.). 2005, *The World of Eleanor of Aquitaine: Literature and Society in Southern France between the Eleventh and Thirteenth Centuries*. Woodbridge: Boydell Press; Turner, R.V. 2009, *Eleanor of Aquitaine: Queen of France, Queen of England*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Eleanor Aquitaine's literary role, I have gathered scattered information from different sources: approaches to Anglo-Norman literature, Eleanor's biographies and studies on Arthurian Romance. Nevertheless, mine is not a mere systematization of available data, for both in the light of new discoveries and by contrasting existing information, I have enlarged agreed conclusions and proposed new topics for research and discussion.

## INTRODUCTION

Little do we know about the personality of the queen whose wooden funerary effigy lies under the main dome in the Abbey of Fontevrault. Eleanor of Aquitaine died in 1204, though the exact place where she passed from the world is not known for sure: according to some chroniclers, she ended her life in Poitiers; according to others, she was taken to Fontevrault "where she put on the garb of a nun before closing her eyes" (Kelly 1950:386). Her hands are holding a book, most probably a prayer book, the Holy Bible – or, why not, a courtly romance... The granddaughter of William IX of Aquitaine – the first known troubadour –, Eleanor, was born in 1122 or 1124, somewhere in the far south of Aquitaine, probably in Bordeaux or Belin, where she spent her early childhood before moving to Poitiers after 1130 (Lejeune 1954:50). "Charming", "welcoming" and "lively", as Geoffroi de Vigeois (Kelly 1950:6) described her, she exercised an unquestionable influence in the development and popularisation of the new courtly sensibility in France. Highly intelligent and well-educated – she probably knew Latin (Lejeune 1954:22) –, Eleanor was the great patron of the two dominant poetic movements of the time: the courtly love tradition, conveyed in the songs of the troubadours, and the historical *Matter of Britain*, best represented in Chrétien de Troyes' *roman courtois*.

It is my purpose to present some considerations on the role played by Eleanor of Aquitaine in 12th century English literary scenario, since her importance in the growth of courtly love literature in France has been sufficiently studied.<sup>2</sup> After the Norman Conquest (1066), literary activities in the vernacular were long abandoned in England with the exception of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, a text that, strictly speaking, is not a literary one.<sup>3</sup> It was not until 1100 that the first

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Fiction: Penman, S. 1995. *When Christ and His Saints Slept* (Eleanor of Aquitaine Trilogy 1). Harmondsworth: Penguin Books; 2003. *Time and Chance* (Eleanor of Aquitaine Trilogy 2). Harmondsworth: Penguin Books; 2009; Lofts, N. 2010 (1955). *Eleanor the Queen: A Novel of Eleanor of Aquitaine*. New York: Touchstone Books; Holland, C. 2010. *The Secret Eleanor: A Novel of Eleanor of Aquitaine*. New York: Berkley Publishing Group; *Devil's Brood* (Eleanor of Aquitaine Trilogy 3); O'Brien, A. 2011. *Queen Defiant: A Novel of Eleanor of Aquitaine*. New York: New American Library; English, C. 2011. *To Be Queen: A Novel of the Early Life of Eleanor of Aquitaine*. New York: New American Library.

2. See: Kiessmann, R. 1901. *Untersuchungen über die Bedeutung Eleonorens von Poitou für die Literatur ihrer Zeit*. Bernburg: O. Dornblüth; Jeanroy, A. 1934. *La poésie lyrique des Troubadours*. Paris: Didier; Lejeune (1954:1-20).

3. We might also include *The Ryme of King William* or *The Site of Durhan*.

vernacular literary texts were produced, all of them in Anglo-Norman (Legge 1963:7). Though there is no break in the continuity of this corpus during Stephen's kingdom, Anglo-Norman literature did not reach maturity until the reign of Henry II: literary activity of all kinds saw a rebirth "in a closed French circle from which English vernacular sensibility was by definition excluded" (Swanton 1987:18). One may well expect that Eleanor's marriage with Henry Plantagenet helped in the retaking of literary activities in England.

The starting point of my research was a quotation from J.J. Parry's English edition of Andreas Capellanus's *Arte Honeste Amandi*:

Thomas of Britain wrote his *Tristram and Ysolt* under her inspiration, perhaps definitely for her. Wace dedicated to her his *Brut*, and it is generally believed that she is the noble lady to whom Benoît de Sainte-More dedicated his romance of Troy. (Parry 1969:13)

Irrespective of their place of birth (whether England or France), the authors that will be referred to in the present section are all included within that literary corpus which is known as Anglo-Norman. In doing so, I will follow a chronological order, the same used by Dominica Legge in her now classic study of Anglo-Norman literature.

#### A COURTEOUS QUEEN FOR A LITERATE KING

After a short-lived reconciliation favoured by Pope Eugenius III in 1149, the marriage of Louis VII of France and Eleanor was annulled in the Second Council of Beaugency (1152). Eleanor then regained possession of Aquitaine, and two months later (May 18th) she married the grandson of Henry I of England, Henry Plantagenet, Count of Anjou and Duke of Normandy. In 1154 he became Henry II: England, Normandy and the west of France were united under his rule. That same year, on December 8th, King Henry and his wife, who was ten years his elder, arrived at some harbour below New Forest, immediately heading to Winchester and then to London (Kelly 1950:92). Eleven days later, at Westminster Abbey, the royal crown fell upon their heads. The palace of Westminster had been despoiled and could not be occupied, so the royal couple took residence in Bermondsey, London.

According to Regine Pernoud (1995:114-115), there was something in England which was familiar for the new Queen. Being a girl, her imagination was most likely fed by the fantastic stories told by the Welsh or Breton *jongleur* Breri (or Bleheris), known to have been at Poitiers (ca. 1135).<sup>4</sup> These narrations, mainly from Celtic traditions, were about heroes who suffered from spells and endured tests from their fairy mistresses (Barron 1987:31). Once in England, she again heard about these Celtic characters, mainly Arthur and his knights, this time in an epic setting: Geoffrey of Monmouth had long ago written his *Historia*

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4. About this *conteur*, see R.S. Loomis (1956:193-95).

*Regum Britanniae* (ca. 1136). A new country, a loving husband, a new nation – the setting was perfect for fostering the type of literature and the spirit (*fin'amors*) she had promoted and enjoyed in Poitiers.

Louis had always been suspicious about his wife's literary tastes. It is not that he was an insensible or illiterate king, but the opinion of some of his advisors (Parry 1969:13) and the rumours about his wife's affairs during the Crusade did not particularly favour his acceptance of an ideal in which the most sublime manifestation of human love was, after all, adulterous. Once Eleanor withdrew from Paris, Louis expelled all the wastrels and gallants that inhabited the court in the Queen's days (Kelly 1950:84).

Her new husband, the most powerful man in Europe, was different. In a letter to the Archbishop of Salerno, Peter of Blois – then a clerk in Henry II's court – compares the king of Sicily with the Plantagenet:

Your king is a good scholar [...] but ours is far better. [...] With the King of England there is school everyday, constant conversation of the best scholars and discussion of questions. (West 1938:20)

The same opinion is held by Walter Map (James 1994:476) in his *De Nugis Curialium* (Dist v, c. 6):

nullius comitatis inscius, litteratus ad omnem decenciam et utilitatem, linguarum omnium quae sunt a mare Gallico usque ad Iordanem habens scienciam, Latina tantum utens et Gallica.<sup>5</sup>

Although Henry was too busy with politics, his tastes were inclined towards the literature and learning of his age. His reign was a time “of very learned and acute men, and of culture enough to appreciate and conserve the fruits of their labours” (Stubbs 1887:136). Henry, a king that has been defined as “probably the most scholarly man ever to occupy the throne of England” (Swanton 1987:18),<sup>6</sup> was always surrounded by men of erudition (Kelly 1950:99). Besides, Henry II could not help but feel seduced by the figure of King Arthur, a kind of British messiah, as Geoffrey of Monmouth had depicted him in his *Historia Regum Britanniae*: this Breton chief became a model for all Christian knights, his fabled court the materialization of the feudal ideal of social harmony. The Plantagenet was particularly seduced by the Arthurian legend, so much so that some excavations were carried out in Glastonbury at his command. Indirectly, he sparked the interest of his people for those stories that narrated the deeds of the Knights of the Round Table, deeds that would soon be adorned with love adventures and refined manners in the pages of Chrétien de Troyes' romances, the very core of the Arthurian canon.

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5. Translation by James: “with no polite accomplishment was he unacquainted; he had skill of letters as far as was fitting or practically useful, and he had a knowledge of all the tongues used from the French sea to the Jhordan, but he spoke only Latin and French” (James 1994:477).

6. Haskins provides a list of all the authors and works which might be, in one way or another, related to Henry II (1925:74-6).

In London, therefore, with a second husband who was more in sympathy with her ideals, Eleanor's influence was to be certainly considerable (Parry 1969:13).

## THE QUEEN'S INFLUENCE ON ANGLO-NORMAN LITERATURE

Eleanor's role as a promoter of literary activities has always been located, both in time and space, in the period when she held her court at Angers (1153) (Kelly 1950: 83-84)<sup>7</sup> and particularly, in Poitiers, ruling the duchy in the name of Richard Coeur de Lion, her younger son (1170-1174). There she welcomed the most reputed troubadours and propitiated the combination of those elements that best define the *roman courtois*: *fin'amors*, chivalry and Celtic myths (Pernoud 1995:116). And so, the presence of the Queen of Troubadours in England did not pass unnoticed in the literary circles of Henry II's court during the period that goes approximately from 1154 to 1170, and maybe from 1189 to the end of her life (1204), years in which, nevertheless, her visits to the continent were frequent (Lejeune 1954: 50-57).

### *The Court of Henry II*

It is generally agreed that Anglo-Norman literature reached its maturity and zenith in the reign of Henry II. Though much has been said about Henry's patronage of the arts, the changes that took place in this new artistic milieu represent "strains of influence the queen was uniquely prepared to bring together" (Kelly 1950:99), mainly the courtly tradition of the troubadours and the *Matter of Britain*. London's society was shaken out of its insular isolation, turning its eyes to France: "It seems that there grew up at the time in which the famous Countess of Poitou presided in the courts of the Plantagenets, a notable change in social patterns" (Kelly 1950:98-99). Exactly as it would happen in Poitiers, Eleanor was a patroness, a source of inspiration and an influence in poetic creation.

### Philippe de Thaon

Among the earliest Anglo-Norman authors, the cleric Philippe de Thaon – "probably born on this [English] side of the Channel" (Legge 1963:18) – might well be singled out as the first to write under Eleanor's influence. Philippe wrote one of the first examples of *scientific* works in Anglo-Norman literature: the *Cumpoz* or *Comput*, a kind of ecclesiastical calendar. He also wrote a lapidary and a bestiary (*Liber de Creaturis*), both allegorical. Bestiaries were a typical Romanesque genre; but the one by Philippe de Taon, written between 1121 and 1135 (Legge 1963:22), was conveniently adorned with knights and ladies (Pernoud 1995:117), surely to make it more fashionable for the new courtly tastes. This text was originally

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7. "Poets, artists, annalists, and other foot-loose professional who require a measure of bread and tranquillity for the flowering of their gifts, found hardly a patron in the western world" (Kelly 1950:84).

dedicated to Henry I's second wife, Adeliza or Adelaide of Louvain (Kelly 1950:101; Legge 1963:22; Barron 1987:48; Burnley 1998:126), whom he had married in 1121. According to Kelly (1950:101), it seems that the poet revived his interest for the bestiary under Henry II's patronage, adding to it an offertory to the new Queen, Eleanor:

Dus gart ma dame Alienor,  
 La reïne chi est censor  
 De sens, de onur e de beuté.  
 De largesce e de b[on]té!  
 Dame, a bone ure futis née  
 Ey al rei Hanri espusé (Lejeune 1954:28).<sup>8</sup>

Legge's opinion (1963:25) about Philippe's authority of this second dedication is not so conclusive: only one of the manuscripts in which the *Bestiary* has been preserved (Merton College 249) contains the rededication and, what is more, "it seems unlikely that Philippe was still active about 1152"; any anonymous praiser might have done it.

#### Wace

Born in Jersey, Wace (c.1100-after 1174) was soon sent to France for his upbringing. In 1155 he finished his *Roman de Brut*, a redaction of Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae*, which he presented to Eleanor. None of the extant copies of Wace's text show traces of this (Foulon 1959:95). However, in the prologue to his *Brut* (1190) – a Middle English adaptation of Wace's work – Layamon refers to his sources:

Boc he nom þe þridde, leide þer amidden,  
 þa makede a Frenchis clerk,  
 Wace wes ihoten, þe wel coupe written.  
 and he hoe ʒef þare æðelen Ælienor  
 þe wes Henries queen, þes heʒes kinges. (ll.19-23)<sup>9</sup>

There is, however, no agreement about the date in which Wace supposedly presented his text to Eleanor. Layamon refers to her as *quene* and so Foulon (1959:95) claims that "a copy was presented to Eleanor, the new Queen of England".<sup>10</sup> This seems to be possible, as much as Henry and his wife were crowned on 19 December 1154, and Wace finished his text in 1155. Kelly (1937:7; 1950:100), on

8. "God save lady Alianor / Queen who art the arbiter / Of honor, wit, and beauty / Of largess and loyalty. / Lady, born were thou in a happy hour / And wed to Henry King" (Kelly 1950: 101). For an edition of this text, see: Walberg, E. 1900. *Le Bestiaire*. Lund and Paris.

9. "[T]he third book he [Wace] took, and laid there in the midst, that a French clerk made, who was named Wace, who well could write; and he gave it to the noble Eleanor, who was the high King Henry's queen" (Mason 2007:9).

10. This opinion is also shared by Madden (1847:i.3).

the other hand, assumes that she received the text before the coronation of Henry Plantagenet. Be it as it may, Wace certainly knew the tastes of Eleanor and his text is adorned with the elements of the new courtly fashion (Loomis 1963:40); as Barron (1987:134) puts it, Wace coloured his text “faintly as *roman courtois*”. Thus, it seems reasonable to infer that Wace’s *Brut* was, not only presented, but also dedicated to Eleanor, an assumption that even Broadhurst is ready to accept (1996:71).<sup>11</sup>

Eleanor’s presence behind the *Roman de Brut* might not be simply that of the receiver, but of its promoter. In fact, when the text was begun (c. 1152) – in clear support of Henry’s claim to the English throne –, it was but a hope that the crown of England would be for the young Plantagenet. The future king was at the time engaged fighting against his rival, to pay any attention to literary affairs: “Il faut donc admettre qu’Aliénor a non seulement reçu le *Brut* mais qu’elle l’avait commandé” (Lejeune 1954:25). Broich shared this same view (1962:69-70, 77), while Broadhurst remains sceptical about it (1996:70-71).

In 1160, this time at the invitation of Henry II (Foulon 1959:95), Wace begun his *Chronique ascendante des Dics de Normandie* – or *Roman de Rou* –, a narration in which the Plantagenet was also presented as the legitimate heir. Right at the beginning of this text, Wace shows his favourable opinion of Henry and his wife; one cannot help feeling that the poet was particularly concerned about Eleanor:

Del rei Henri voil faire ceste premiere page,  
 Ki prist Alianor, dame de halt parage.  
 Deus duinst a ambedous de bien faire corage!  
 Ne me funt mie rendre a la curt la musage:  
 De duns e de promesses chascun[s] d’els m’ausage.  
 Mais bousins vient suvent, ki tsot sigle e tost nage.  
 E suvent me fait metre le denier e le gage.  
 Franche est Alienor e de bon aire e sage.  
 Reïne fu de France en sun premier aage:  
 Loëwis l’espusa, ki out grant mariage,  
 En Jerusalem furent en lune pelegrinage;  
 Asex i traist chascun[s] travail e ahangé.  
 Quant repairié s’en furent, par conseil del barnage,  
 S’en parti la reine od riche parentage.  
 De cele departie n’out ele nul damage:  
 A Peitiers s’en ala, sun naturel menage:  
 N’i out plus prochain heir, qu’el fu de son lignage.  
 Li reis Henri la prist od riche mariage. (ll. 17-34)<sup>12</sup>

11. In her article, Broadhurst claims that Eleanor’s role as a promoter of literary activities has been overstated (1996:70).

12. “I want the subject of this first page to be King Henry / Who took as his wife Eleanor, a lady of noble birth / May God give both the courage to make good wrks! / They did not let me waste my time at court / with gifts and promises they both reward me. / But need, that sails and rolls swiftly, often presents itself. / And makes me to pledge for money. / Eleanor is noble, as well as kind and wise. / She was Queen of France in her first age. / Louis took her as wife in a great marriage / They went to Jerusalem in a long pilgrimage. / Each them suffered there great hardships and pain. / When they returned, after the advice of the barons, the Queen parted from him because of their kinship. /

Later on, Wace's devotion for Eleanor had consequences. In 1174, when the Queen had fallen out of her husband's favour, Henry II commanded another history of the Normans not to Wace, but to Benoît de Sainte-Maure (*Chronique des Ducs de Normandie*).

#### Thomas of Britain

The Anglo-Norman poet known as Thomas of Britain (or *of England*) wrote a version of the Tristan story in French (1150-1170), which is clearly adorned with the topics and conventions of courtly literature. Loomis was the first to establish the link between Thomas' *Tristram and Ysolt* and "the brilliant entourage of Henry II and Eleanor of Aquitaine, or of their son Richard I" (1919:39).<sup>13</sup> Thomas' attempt to resolve the tragic conflict between fateful love and feudal loyalties in favour of the sovereignty of passion, turning the magic potion into a mere symbol, seems to suggest Eleanor's complicity rather than her husband's. Still in Angers, she was probably seduced by the story of Tristram and Ysolt in some earlier form (Loomis 1931:xi; Kelly 1950:87). In this same vein, Lejeune (1954:33) was very much inclined to think that Eleanor might well have inspired the composition of Thomas' *Tristram*, either in Poitiers (from 1163 to 1173) or, much more probably, from 1154 to 1158, in her English court (Lejeune 1954:35).<sup>14</sup> A Queen in her thirties, she would enjoy "the dialectical nature of Thomas's version" of the Tristan story (Legge 1963:49).

This connection, on the other hand, was rejected as conjectural – since no reference is made to either Henry or his Queen in Thomas' text – by Broadhurst (1996:1976). Other prominent scholars have echoed Loomis' claim, bringing no conclusive arguments to prove their views.<sup>15</sup>

#### Marie of France

Marie de France (+1216?),<sup>16</sup> was probably of French birth and might very well have known English (Larrington 1995:20).<sup>17</sup> Ernst Hoepffner claims that

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But this departure did no harm to her: / She went to Poitiers, her home land: there was no other heir who belonged to her family. / King Henry took her in a great marriage" (my translation). For an edition of this text, see: Andresen, H. (ed.). 1877-1879. *Roman de Rou et des Ducs de Normandie*. Heilbronn.

13. See also Loomis (1922:24; 1963:84).

14. See also Bezzola (1958:3.1.294).

15. This is the case of Dronke (1976:188) and Owen (1993:40, 165-66).

16. In the conclusion to her *Ysopet*, she refers to herself as "Marie ai nom, si sui de France" (Roquefort 1820, vol II:401). What little is known about her is taken or inferred from her writings and from a possible allusion or two in the works of contemporary authors. The most plausible identification of her historical identity is that she was the illegitimate daughter of Godefroy d'Anjou. If this is really the case, Loomis (1959:116, n. 3) wonders, "how could a daughter of Geoffrey of Anjou say she was 'de France'?"

17. Dinah Hazell has challenged all these "traditional assumptions, several of which have become so inculcated in the scholarship that they are no longer seriously questioned and cloud the search for

she passed her childhood in France, but spent some time in England, where she probably wrote her literary works, all of them in French (Hoepffner 1959:116): the *Lais*, the *Fables* (*Ysopets*) and a version of *St. Patrick's Purgatory* (*Espurgatoire of Saint Patrice*).<sup>18</sup> From her surviving texts, the twelve brief *Lais* are relevant for the present purpose: it has been claimed (Legge 1963:72; Barron 1987:49) that some (if not all) of these short stories were written in England. The question to elucidate is whether or not a connection with Eleanor can be established.

The composition date of the *Lais* is hard to establish. Lejeune (1954:39-40) held to M. Hoepffner's opinion:<sup>19</sup> the first six were composed before 1167 and the last three, after that year. Hoepffner (1959:116) extended the date of redaction from 1155 to 1189, on the basis that Marie must have read Wace. Legge (1963:72) simply stated that they were written in the same period as Thomas' *Tristram*. In any case (and leaving aside the years of imprisonment), the referred dates coincide with Eleanor's heyday of literary activities. Still, Marie dedicated his *Lais* not to the Queen, but to that "noble Roi, pieux et courtois" (Lejeune 1954:39), who has been generally identified as Henry II (Lejeune 1954:39; Loomis 1959:116; Barron 1987:49).<sup>20</sup> And yet, Lejeune (1954:39) states that it is natural to assume that she was writing for a female audience, that is, Eleanor and the ladies at her court; this claim is convincingly rejected by Broadhurst (1996:62). In any case, Marie most probably contributed to the splendour of Eleanor's court at Poitiers, in the period that goes from 1170 to 1173 (Kelly 1950:165). In the light of this, it is reasonable to suppose that she was also with the Queen at her English court, moving with Eleanor in many of her frequent crossings of the Channel: "la géographie de plusieurs de ses *lais* coïncide avec celle de certains déplacements d'Aliénor" (Lejeune 1954:39).

After smashing down the rebellion of his sons and their mother, Henry put an end to the activities of this royal academy of Poitiers, sending his wife and other highborn ladies to England in the early summer of 1174: "And if Marie de France was, as some now suppose, the king's sister, she too may have been of that company" (Kelly 1950:184). That would put an end, at least until Henry II's death, to the relationship between Eleanor and her sister-in-law. The next historical reference to Marie could be around 1181, if she was the Abbess of Shaftesbury (Kelly 1950:192), a woman who died in 1216 (Hoepffner 1959:116).

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other possibilities" (2003). According to this scholar, Marie of France would not have been writing in England, although she said "Marie ai num, si sui de France"; all her works are preserved in Anglo-Norman manuscripts; and she includes English words in her texts. In my opinion, it takes more faith to accept her views than those of the other scholars that she refutes.

18. Another Anglo-Norman poem has been recently attributed to Marie de France, *Vie seinte Audree*, written by a woman named Marie in the late 1100s or early 1200s. This poem is based on Latin sources, as the *Espurgatoire*. Besides, its conclusion is reminiscent of *Isopet* (McCash 2006). See also: McCash, J.H. 2002. "La vie seinte Audree: A Fourth Text by Marie de France?". *Speculum*, 77(3):744-777.

19. This M. Hoepffner, quoted by Lejeune, is not to be confused with Ernst Hoepffner, to whom I am also referring.

20. However, it is a matter of dispute that the king to which she refers is Henry II, his son the Young King (died in 1183) or King John Lackland (Lejeune 1954:35, 39; Loomis 1959:116; Legge 1963:72).

## Benoît de Sainte-Maure

Benoît de Sainte-Maure was patronized by Henry II, “perhaps for the benefit of the Young King and queen” (Legge 1963:75). He was the author of an Old French poem in about 30,000 octosyllabic couplets, the *Roman de Troie* (ca. 1165).<sup>21</sup> Its subject was provided by Henry II, and the poet dedicated his work to Eleanor (Barron 1987:49). Benoît was probably from Sainte-Maure, a village in the way from Tours to Poitiers. Besides, he had taken an active part in the Queen’s literary circles in her court of Aquitaine, sharing with her and other poets (mainly Bernart de Ventadorn and Chrétien de Troyes) a particular predilection for Ovid (Lejeune 1954:22). As Bernart, Benoit never explicitly mentioned the name of the Queen. Approximately in the middle of the *Roman de Troie*, he inserted a special dedication praising the “riche dame de riche rei”, a phrase that has been generally attributed to Eleanor (Cowper 1930:379-382; Kelly 1939:7 and 1950:100-101; Lejeune 1954:22; Pernoud 1995:117):

De cest, veir, criem g’estre blasmez  
 De cele que tant a bontez  
 Que hautece a, pris e valor,  
 Honesté e sen e honor,  
 Bien e mesure e sainteé,  
 E noble largece e beauté;  
 En cui mesfait de dames maint  
 Sont par le bien de li esteint;  
 En cui tote sciënce abonde,  
 A la cui n’est nule seconde  
 Que el mont seit de nule lei.  
 Riche dame de riche rei,  
 Senz mal, senz ire, senz tristece,  
 Pousseiz aveir toz jorz leece! (ll.13457-13470)<sup>22</sup>

It must be admitted that these lines do not imply that the poem was necessarily dedicated to the Queen, or that it was written at her command (Broadhurst 1996:73). However, it is more than reasonable to assume that Eleanor is the “riche dame” whom the poet praises, an impressive presence that surely shaped the form of Benoît’s poem. The author clearly adapted the theme of his story, the so-called *Matter of Rome* (legends from classical antiquity), as well as its style to please Eleanor (Lejeune 1954:22; Legge 1963:106). The result is a story of passionate love, full of knights and ladies in an aristocratic and courtly

21. For an edition of this text, see: Constans, L. (ed.). 1904-1912. *Le Roman de Troie*. 6 vols. Paris: SATF.

22. “For this, truly, I fear to be blamed / by her who has so much kindness/ who has nobility, esteem and merit, / honesty, wisdom and honour, / goodness, temperance and cleanness, / noble generosity and beauty; / in whom the misfits of many ladies / are by her goodness extinguished; / In whom all science abounds, / and she is second to none / who may be in the world in any law. / The great lady of the great king, with no evil, wrath, or sadness, / may you always have joy” (my translation).

setting. Benoît introduces his praise just at the right place – after an antifeminist outburst –, knowing for sure that the Queen would certainly read his poem. To point at Eleanor’s conscious and official patronage of Benoît’s work, as Lejeune does (1954:24), is certainly going too far; but she is right in establishing a parallel between the Queen and the Greek princess Helen: “une vie assez ardente, et se passionne, plus que toute autre, pour les histoires d’amour” (Lejeune 1954: 23).

### *1170 and after*

This period is characterised by the Queen’s capture in 1173, which was followed by ten year imprisonment; most authors “turned from fairy-tales to truth” (Legge 1963:75).

#### Jordan Fantosme

This is the mysterious name for an author whose identity is by no means clear. From 1174 to 1182 he was working in a text, conventionally named *Chronique*,<sup>23</sup> which covers the years 1173 and 1174. Jordan Fantosme was a “clericus reginae Alienorae”, as Robert W. Eyton described him (Lejeune 1954:27), in 1187 and very possibly English born (Legge 1963:76). Lejeune (1954:27) suggests that Eleanor would have commanded Jordan to write his *Chronique* in order to exalt her husband’s deeds of arms – a subtle attempt to regain her freedom.

Some months before the crushing of the revolt in 1174, Eleanor was taken prisoner north of Poitiers and sent first to the tower of Chinon, then to Winchester and finally to a tower in Old Sarum Castle (Lejeune 1954:55; Pernoud 1995:171). According to Legge (1963:74), Eleanor’s withdrawal had a direct effect on the literary circles. On July 6 1189, Eleanor’s husband died and she freed herself from fifteen years imprisonment. The truth is, nevertheless, that she was not a prisoner in the modern sense of the word: on several occasions she moved to Berkshire or Nottinghamshire, always under the strict surveillance of De Glanville or Fitz-Stephen (Lejeune 1954:55); the amounts of money paid for her maintenance are also telling. Besides, after the death of her son Henry (1183), Henry II softened gradually the severity of Eleanor’s situation: she was visited by her daughter Matilda (1184), a visit Eleanor payed back the following year going to Winchester; besides, she used to spend Easter at Berkhamstead (Lejeune 1954:55; Pernoud 1995:180-181). It seems reasonable to assume that she enjoyed some degree of freedom to occasionally resume her patronising activities, being visited by poets. Chroniclers have left no specific mention of this, but they do report that her years of imprisonment had not been squandered:

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23. Michel, F. (ed.). 1840. *Jordan Fantosme. Chronicle of the War Between the English and the Scots in 1173 and 1174*. London: J.B. Nichols and Son.

She had had her occasional traffic with bishops and barons and with emissaries from her sons, with whom she had never lost her authority. Even in utmost penury she had known the ministrations of chaplains and clerks, of keepers and serving folk. (Kelly 1950: 249)

Although Broadhurst rejects the idea that Jordan Fantosme had dedicated his text to Henry II (1996:60), she omits any reference to a possible connection between this author and Eleanor, as made explicit by Rev. Eyton. Fantosme, in his capacity as clerk of the Queen, could have possibly visited her.

#### Mestre Thomas

One last name could still be included, *Mestre* Thomas, a clerk associated with the court of Henry II.<sup>24</sup> He is the author of the Anglo-Norman *Romance of Horn*. An explicit connection with Eleanor has not been made. However, in her edition of the romance, M.K. Pope (Legge 1963:97) suggested that Thomas (or his family) was connected with Poitiers, an indication that might suggest Eleanor's influence on the *Romance of Horn*. The rich texture of Thomas' text and its detailed descriptions of courtly life and accomplishments – both lacking in thirteenth century *King Horn* – (Fellows 1993:ix) indicate a movement towards a more courtly and refined conception of chivalry. Some other features are equally telling: the excellence of Horn's beauty and its effects on women; the hero's musical accomplishments; Horn's genuine unworthiness to accept Rigmel's love; etc. (Fellows 1993:267ff). For Broadhurst, the lack of an explicit reference to Eleanor in Thomas' text rules out any possibility of the Queen's interference in the work (1996:76).

#### *The End of the Twelfth Century*

After her release, Eleanor played a greater political role than ever before. It seems indeed that this was probably the busiest time of her life: as Queen Mother she assumed the responsibility of trying to keep together the Angevin empire. This she did, first by assuring the coronation of Richard; then in his absence, thwarting the intrigues of his brother John Lackland and Philip II Augustus, king of France, against him; finally, after Richard's death (1199), by insuring peace between the Plantagenets of England and the Capetian kings of France.

#### Béroul

Béroul is the name of a Norman author who wrote a Tristan poem, in true Norman dialect, but very likely for an Anglo-Norman audience and in England, where he might have been residing for some time (Legge 1963:59; Barron

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24. This Thomas is not probably to be identified with the author of *Tristram* or with that other Thomas of Kent, who wrote *Roman de Toute Chevalerie* (Legge 1963:96).

1987:49).<sup>25</sup> The *terminus a quo* of this text, 1190 or 1191 (Lejeune 1954:35; Whitehead 1959:135),<sup>26</sup> creates some problems when trying to assert a direct patronage on the part of the Queen. Although “there is no clue to the writer’s patron” (Legge 1963:59), Lejeune seems to leave the door open for this possibility:

“Ne serait-ce pas pour elle [Eleanor] que Béroul reprend, dans ces mêmes années (‘après 1190’), une fois de plus, l’histoire qu’elle a tant aim’ee, celle de *Tristan et Iseut*?” (Lejeune 1954:49)

## CONCLUSION

The courtly romance tradition rapidly spread in the late 12th century (Brooke 1989:xxiii). The great courts of Europe had become very cosmopolitan thanks no doubt to the periods of peace Europe was enjoying:

In the twelfth century it is significant that the two most advanced states from the point of view of administrative organisation, England and Sicily, should be precisely those in which literature and learning are most fully developed in relation to the royal court. (Haskins 1925:71-72)

During the first fifteen years of the reign of Henry II and Eleanor there was a period of calm and literary activity on both sides of the channel. In the case of Anglo-Norman literature, it would be fallacious to think her responsible for the composition of this corpus at the time she was Queen of England. In the majority of cases presented here, explicit textual links are missing, whereas in others the author himself mentions the Queen. It does not follow from this that only the latter are to be taken into consideration: if a conclusive reference to Eleanor is absent, we should not too easily assume she was not relevant for the genesis of the work; equally, an explicit dedication might mean nothing but obligation or a formal requirement. What I am trying to state is that Eleanor was not only a patroness but a living icon of beauty, the perfect embodiment of all the qualities that adorned the *duenna* of *fin’amors*, all in all a source of inspiration for those (courtiers and poets) around her. Textual proofs of this influence are very rarely found. We are not dealing with intertextuality or sources, but with the birth of a literary work. “Better to say nothing, then,” somebody could reasonably argue. However, I think it is worth recreating the setting in which this or that poet met the Queen. I am not totally legitimated to conclude Eleanor was the patroness of all the texts I have

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25. Whitehead (1959:134) is not so sure about Béroul’s stay in England: his unusual knowledge of Cornwall might very well be that of his source.

26. Béroul’s poem cannot be dated with certainty. The so-called German school places its various redactions near the close of the twelfth century; therefore, the Béroul is dated in 1190. The French school, on the other hand, places the different versions of the Tristan story in the middle of that century, Beroul’s poem being dated in 1165 (Deister 1922:287). See also, Whitteridge, G. 1959. “The date of the *Tristan* of Béroul”. *Medium Aevum* 28:167-171.

referred to, but the presumption is very largely in favour of the supposition that she was, at least, behind many.

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