

Eleanor of Aquitaine & The Court of Love

In the late 12th century, around 1180 CE, there lived a great queen with a courageous spirit and a brilliant energy. She was Eleanor of Aquitaine, the granddaughter of William IX, Duke of Aquitaine, “the first troubadour,” and patroness of troubadours. Married to the King Henry II of England and mother to ten children, Eleanor was an anomaly in her age: independently titled, wealthy, cunning, and wise. Frustrated with her husband in England, Eleanor returned to her castle in present-day France to escape the boredom and problems of his rainy, feudal kingdom. So, in the city of Poitiers, Eleanor, the Duchess of Aquitaine and Queen of England, established a “court of love” at her lively castle filled with troubadours.

The purpose of the court was to instruct men in the burgeoning art of chivalry. Along with her ladies-in-waiting, most notably her grown daughter Marie, Countess of Champagne, Eleanor sought to elevate the status of women by educating men on the nature of love, chivalry, and romance. This court heard “cases”

brought forward by knights and noblemen who presented their love problems to the jury of women--and only women--in search of answers. The ladies, sometimes 60-strong, then passed judgement on how the men were to dress, speak, and act while in the presence of women. Eleanor and her gracious ladies were tired of raunchy, undisciplined men who swaggered in from bar brawls and sword fights expecting their attentions, so they encouraged the men to write poetry, play music, and be romantic.

Eleanor and Marie used a reference book for their court. It was written by the male cleric Andrea Capellanus. The “Treatise on Love and the Remedies of Love” contained thirty-one articles which the court followed when passing judgements.

Women were, at best, second-rate citizens in medieval society. At the castle in Aquitaine, however, women were teachers and facilitators. The court was not so much a service to the menfolk as a demonstration of women’s intellectual prowess and potential. The idea of the court was so outrageous, so novel, that it became fashionable

and was copied in other castles and kingdoms. The notion that women could command over men, even in such a trivial way, was so subversive that it attained cult status.

Sadly, the idea was also fashionably short-lived when Eleanor's unromantic and reactionary husband disbanded the court and sent the ladies packing. Andrea Capellanus later denied any involvement in writing the book and lambasted Eleanor and Marie for their heretical ideas. The second-tier status and plight of women remained for centuries thereafter, but the seedling for women's equality may have been established by Eleanor of Aquitaine.