

Eleanor of Aquitaine, a 'Foolish Woman'?

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Elizabeth Hallam writes that Eleanor of Aquitaine, wife of King Louis VII of France and future wife of King Henry II of England, was a 'foolish woman' because of her conduct on the Second Crusade. Hallam's comment, from *Chronicles of the Crusades*, was prompted by an incident in which Eleanor sided against her husband in a political debate. Hallam also condemns her as an 'imprudent' woman, and alleges that Eleanor was unfaithful to her husband's bed. It is true that Eleanor's conduct on the Second Crusade does not seem to have been entirely appropriate. However, rumours of her affair with Raymond of Antioch have never been substantiated. In the end, it seems that Eleanor was guilty of nothing more than publicly offering a political opinion to her husband.

Eleanor's conduct on the Crusade does not seem to have been entirely appropriate. When Saint Bernard of Clairvaux preached the Crusade in 1146, King Louis VII of France decided to go. Perhaps out of excessive love or for some other reason, he determined to take his beautiful wife Eleanor with him. They reached Antioch and were welcomed warmly by Raymond, Prince of Antioch, who was also Eleanor's uncle. A dispute between Louis and the Prince then took place over what was the best strategy to take in the politics of the Crusade. Prince Raymond wanted to invade, with Louis' help, the neighbouring territories. Louis remained firm in his idea of going to Jerusalem. Eleanor argued passionately in her uncle's favour. Presumably, Louis would have felt put out by her failure to support him. To make matters worse, Eleanor and her uncle were seen too often together. Rumours of an affair soon came to her husband's ears. Enraged and jealous, Louis, at the suggestion of his advisers, prepared to leave Antioch immediately. Eleanor then announced her intention of remaining and seeking a divorce from her husband. Louis kidnapped Eleanor, and dragged her to his ship. He [Louis], who had been received with such honour on his arrival, left ignominiously (Hallam : p.142).

These details of Eleanor's conduct on the Second Crusade rely on two main primary sources. William of Tyre wrote an account of the kingdom of Jerusalem between about 1127 and 1185. As Hallam admits, his information was obtained second-hand, as he himself was studying in France at the time (Hallam : p.140). John of Salisbury is the other source that Hallam claims has an intimate knowledge of the affairs of the king, since he was an observer at the Papal court at around the time in question. He records the break down of their marriage and says that Louis' alarm was due only to the prince's familiarity with Queen Eleanor and his almost uninterrupted series of meetings with her (Hallam : p.142). Though hinting at Eleanor's rumored indiscretions he offers no proof that this actually was the case. It can therefore be said that, though numerous documents have been written about this particular incident, there is no real evidence to substantiate the existence of an amorous affair between Eleanor and Raymond.

Perhaps the hostility of her contemporaries can be explained by the fact that, unlike most women of the time, Eleanor played an active political role. Eleanor is known particularly for her political career throughout her life and was also instrumental in those of her family as well. This atypical personality made her more subject to gossip and perhaps she represented a threat to them. It is also possible, as Christopher Tyerman points out, that this piece of gossip may well have been embroidered as a post facto justification for the divorce [between Louis and Eleanor] in 1152. (Tyerman : p.195). Another possible reason is that, if the documents by

William of Tyre and John of Salisbury were written after all the events of the divorce between Louis and Eleanor had taken place, then they might be harbouring some resentment toward Eleanor out of sympathy for their abandoned king. This resentment might have been further excited by Eleanor's marriage to the king's most powerful vassal, Henry Plantagenet, not eight weeks after the divorce.

Steven Runciman interprets Eleanor's role in the events at Antioch in quite a different light to Hallam.

"Queen Eleanor was far more intelligent than her husband. She saw at once the wisdom of Raymond's scheme but her passionate and outspoken support of her uncle only roused Louis' jealousy. Tongues began to wag. The Queen and the Prince were seen to often together. It was whispered that Raymond's affection was more than avuncular." (Runciman : p.279).

The notion that Eleanor of Aquitaine was a foolish woman is unsubstantiated and inaccurate. A closer examination of the sources reveals that the writers of these sources had no real knowledge of the events at Antioch, and were probably merely repeating gossip. Eleanor was probably not well liked at the time the documents were written, because of her divorce from King Louis, and gossip was given the status of truth. Eleanor may have been guilty of nothing more than offering political advice to her husband.

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