Inventing Eleanor: the Medieval and Post-Medieval Image of Eleanor of Aquitaine

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Author: Michael R. Evans
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Over 800 years have passed since Eleanor of Aquitaine’s death and yet she continues to fascinate us. Michael R. Evans’ book charts this fascination, beginning with the image of Eleanor shaped by her contemporaries and then examining both the ‘black legend’ and ‘golden myth’ which have been continually refreshed and reworked about her life up to the present day. While Evans is not the first scholar to address the construction and long-term development of Eleanor’s image, what he has created is a tightly focused and approachable overview of the topic.

Evans begins with an introductory chapter which briefly discusses the ‘real’ Eleanor. His intention here is not to provide an intensive biography, rather to give an overview of what is known about her life before he can proceed to evaluate how the ‘meta-Eleanor’ has grown out of the reality. Evans rightly points out that historical evidence and documentation for her life is fairly scarce, indeed he argues that the paucity of material to study her life makes a ‘flimsy foundation on which a large edifice of speculation has often been erected’ (p. 1). The introductory chapter also tackles the issue of Eleanor’s exceptionalism, analyzing her career in comparison to her medieval peers and in light of the active research in the field of queenship studies to argue that Eleanor is not as unique in terms of the power, authority and influence that she wielded as she has often been portrayed as being.

After this reality check, as it were, the second chapter addresses the creation of Eleanor’s ‘black legend’. This negative portrayal of Eleanor, Evans argues, originates in medieval chroniclers who reacted to what they perceived as her scandalous behaviour. Two key themes pervade the ‘black legend’: the Second Crusade and adultery. Eleanor’s experience on the Second Crusade was often commented on and criticized by medieval writers, indeed the failure for the crusade has been attributed by some, to Eleanor’s reckless behaviour. Evans analyses the myth of her Amazonian entourage and the portrayal of her faltering marriage with Louis VII, which may have been exacerbated by her close relationship with her uncle, Raymond of Antioch. Indeed Raymond is hardly the only man wit whom Eleanor is alleged to have committed adultery in the ‘black legend’ – other potential lovers include another uncle Raoul, Saladin and Geoffrey of Anjou, who later became her father-in-law. Another element to the ‘black legend’ is the accusation that Eleanor killed Henry II’s mistress, the fair Rosamund, in a violent reaction to her husband’s adultery. Evans argues
that the ‘black legend’ was not solely the creation of French chroniclers, bitter over her separation from Louis of France and subsequent remarriage to Henry of England, but was also fuelled by anti-Angevin British writers such as Gerald of Wales, Walter Map, Richard of Devizes and John of Salisbury.

In the second chapter, Evans addresses the historiographical treatment of Eleanor from the Enlightenment to the 20th century. He argues that while, in some respects at least, these historians attempted to correct the myths which surrounded Eleanor, they could also be seen as perpetuators of the legendary aspects of her life. Evans demonstrates that Eleanor was not treated kindly by the French historians of the Enlightenment and revolutionary period. He particularly focuses on Michelet’s portrayal of Eleanor as a ‘Jezebel’ figure who presented a challenging antithesis to appropriate female behaviour and represented a ‘repressive feudal order’ which was a bar to France’s progress as a state (p. 51). Remaining in the 19th century, Evans turns next to female writers who were developing a narrative of women’s history through biographical studies of queens and other well-known figures, by comparing Eleanor’s treatment by French writer Laure Prus and in Agnes Strickland’s famous Queens of England collection. Next, Evans continues this theme, comparing Eleanor’s portrayal both by French historians, who examined her in a regional Aquitanian context, and by English historians who focused on her in the context of the creation of the Angevin Empire. Evans turns next to the well-known popular biographies of Eleanor in the 20th century, beginning with the English language works of Amy Kelly and Marion Meade. Kelly’s emphasis on the notion of Eleanor as the patroness of the Courts of Love and Meade’s promotion of Eleanor as a ‘proto-feminist’ figure created a ‘golden legend’ which influenced future scholars and the public in equal measure. Again, Evans balances these works with analyses of biographies by French scholars, noting the very different approaches to Eleanor taken by Regine Pernoud, Jean Markale and Martin Aurell. Overall, Evans argues that neither the more negative or dismissive view of Eleanor in the 18th and 19th century nor the mid-20th-century feminist approach of Kelly, Meade and Pernoud are helpful as both camps promoted myth and legend over a realistic portrayal of the queen-duchess.

The next chapter is very much connected to the themes raised in chapter two and attempts to debunk the ‘southernness’ of Eleanor and the image of her as a proponent of Occitan language and troubadour culture. Evans argues that this erroneous perception of her was developed both by Kelly’s emphasis on the notion of the Courts of Love and the work of regional historians, including Jacques Chaban-Delmas who sought to brand Eleanor as a figurehead for Aquitainian identity and even tourism.

At this point the book changes focus; the next four chapters look at portrayals of Eleanor in stage, screen, fiction and in the visual arts. The first of these chapters examines Eleanor’s portrayal in plays from the 16th to the end of the 19th century. Evans argues that in these plays, Eleanor is most often in the later years of her life, as Henry’s queen, John and Richard’s mother or indeed as Arthur of Brittany’s unsympathetic grandmother. There is an interesting analysis of the tension between Eleanor and her daughter-in-law Constance of Brittany in Shakespeare’s King John and the late 16th-century play, The Troublesome Reign of King John. The portrayals discussed in this chapter are largely negative in tone and include Eleanor’s role as the villain of the Rosamund story, which is demonstrated in several examples from the 18th and 19th centuries including Thomas Addison’s 1706 comic opera, an 1826 French Restauration play, Spanish and Italian operas and Tennyson’s famous Becket.

In the following chapter ‘A Lioness in Winter’, Evans notes increased interest in Eleanor and a far more positive image of Eleanor on stage and screen in the 20th century in line with the more favourable and feminist portrayal of her in concurrent biographical works. Evans begins by stringing together a series of small, but important cameos of Eleanor in both films and television, from Robin Hood tales to the 1964 film Becket, derived from Jean Anouilh’s play. Next, Evans engages in a lengthy analysis of The Lion in Winter, examining not only Katherine Hepburn’s Oscar-winning 1968 portrayal but other stage and screen adaptations of James Goldman’s work. The end of the chapter focuses on the 1978 BBC drama The Devil’s Crown and two very different representations of Eleanor on the French stage in Zoe Oldenbourg’s 1992 play Aliénor and in Laurent Rogero’s experimental work Aliénor exagère!
Chapter six tackles Eleanor in fiction, beginning with a 1779 novella and working through Victorian and 20th-century adult and young fiction novels. Evans notes how both the ‘black legend’ and ‘golden myth’ have influenced the construction of these novels, demonstrating the tension in recent novels between a desire to integrate recent scholarship to give a more accurate portrayal of Eleanor’s life and the temptation to regurgitate the colourful legends which surround Eleanor and present her as a strong ‘modern’ woman in an attempt to engage the reader. Evans also demonstrates how Eleanor’s character has moved far beyond mainstream fiction, into mystery novels, new age Arthuriana and even erotic works on Eleanor’s ‘vie galante’.

The final chapter gives a brief overview of Eleanor in the visual arts, noting how very few medieval images can be safely identified as portraits of Eleanor. Given this lack of material evidence for her appearance, Evans notes that she is regularly described as (or assumed to be) beautiful, and is normally portrayed in modern images as such – barring perhaps the clutch of 19th-century works which featured her as the murderer of Fair Rosamund. In connection with the previous chapter, Evans examines the portrayal of Eleanor on the covers of modern novels, arguing that they often ‘fetishize and objectify Eleanor’s body’ (p. 161). The conclusion summarizes Evans’ approach and asks why we are still fascinated by Eleanor, when many of her peers including her mother-in-law the Empress Matilda or her granddaughters Blanche and Berenguela of Castile were equally fascinating and powerful figures.

Indeed Evans’ purpose with this work is not to only examine but perhaps also to deflate the Eleanor myth/legend, attempting to place her in context and argue that she is not the ‘exceptional’ queen that she is often hailed as being. Evans’ tracing and deconstruction of ‘meta-Eleanor’ is both interesting and helpful, not only enhancing our understanding of this famous queen but also encouraging us to consider the long-term portrayal of well-known women in historiography and popular culture. By placing the two together, Evans is able to demonstrate how in Eleanor’s case, the work of historians and popular culture have become so deeply enmeshed that each has influenced the other, perpetuating the myths and legend that have developed about Eleanor’s long life. Even recent historians, such as Ralph V. Turner, who have attempted to create an academic study based on the historical evidence have found that it is not possible to examine Eleanor without engaging with ‘meta-Eleanor’, if only to refute the popular image of her.

Inventing Eleanor has much to offer both the historian and the interested public in its tightly focused study of Eleanor’s enduring image. However, while it offers useful examples and effective comparisons between French and English perceptions of Eleanor, these are often just samples to represent the work in respective fields or forms of media and there is much additional material which could really benefit and expand this somewhat short work. In addition to expanding the examples in various chapters to make the work more comprehensive, further exploration of how Eleanor is represented in the copious historical dictionaries and collective biographies of the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries would be helpful given the crucial link they offer between the medieval and modern sources. Plates would also be extremely helpful to reinforce his discussion of images of Eleanor in art, film and on the covers of novels – however, this may well have been the publisher’s decision rather than the author’s. Overall, this is an engaging examination of Eleanor’s myth, legend and long-term image which is an excellent addition to scholarship not only on Eleanor, but also on the middle ages, medievalism and queenship.

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