



*The Daughters of Henry II and  
Eleanor of Aquitaine*

Colette Bowie

(Turnhout: Brepols, 2014)

Review by: Hayley Bassett

*The Daughters of Henry II and Eleanor of Aquitaine*. By Colette Bowie. Turnhout: Brepols, 2014. ISBN 978-2-503-54971-2. xvi + 212 pp. €75,00.

Many biographies have been written about Henry, Eleanor and their sons but relatively little has been published about their three daughters. Colette Bowie has sought to redress this balance with a detailed study of Matilda, Leonor and Joanna; not just looking at the traditional roles, responsibilities and lifecycles of these three royal women but also focusing upon “intergenerational relationships” (p. 14) within the Angevin family in a way which has not been explored before.

The study of queenship is a growing area of historiography and Bowie is well versed in the Angevin dynasty; she contributed an article on the dower of Joanna Plantagenet to *Queenship in the Mediterranean: Negotiating the Role of the Queen in the Medieval and Early Modern Eras*, edited by Elena Woodacre. Bowie’s book is more than just a biography of three sisters; it has a clear purpose, and whilst Bowie takes the reader on a journey through the events in these three women’s lives (childhood, marriage, motherhood and death), she consistently seeks to expose evidence of a familial relationship between Henry II, Eleanor of Aquitaine and their three daughters. Whilst even the heavyweights of historiography, like Ralph Turner and Jean Flori, concede that there is some degree of family bond between the Angevin children and particularly Eleanor as their mother, Bowie explores this in great detail looking in particular at their childhood, education, and roles and responsibilities as wives, mothers and patrons.

The strength of this book lies in the way Bowie draws upon her evidence; utilising the Pipe Rolls, contemporary chronicles and a limited number of surviving letters to show the numerous trips Eleanor took with her daughters during their childhood to deduce this would lead to a strong bond growing between mother and daughters. Emotions are a particularly difficult area to research as they are predominantly subjective, but Bowie makes a good case for her conclusions that Eleanor’s maternal feelings were reciprocated by her children, as both Matilda and Joanna returned to their mother when facing times of trouble after they had married, although they had no other real option at the time. Her methodology is refreshingly broad, especially the use of religious iconography to support her argument that Henry’s daughters promulgated the dissemination of the cult of Thomas Becket in their marital provinces; evidenced by Becket depicted at the heavenly coronation ceremony of Henry the Lion and Matilda in the Gmunden Gospel (also known as the Gospel Book of Henry the Lion).

The childhood, education and training of Matilda, Leonor and Joanna was specifically tailored to further the Angevin dynasty through marriage. Of

that there is little doubt, but Bowie argues that both Henry and Eleanor sought to choose the “right” man for each girl, sending eminent ambassadors to negotiate the marriage alliances. Whilst this suggests a higher level of care, which can be translated as a familial bond between parent and child, it also supports the purely political argument of sending the best man for the job to get the best outcome. To her credit, Bowie does confirm this analysis, but she places greater emphasis on the emotional relationship between parent and daughter.

The laying out of strands to an argument is what makes this book so interesting. At no point does Bowie reject an earlier theory; she provides a synopsis of earlier academic thought, looks at the evidence subjectively and then explores her own ideas before arriving at her conclusion. Each section of the book is carefully choreographed with a short introduction, followed by several chapters outlining the relevant theories supported by surviving financial records (the Pipe Rolls), charters issued with their respective husbands and the work of medieval chroniclers before ending with a concluding statement containing a taster of where the argument will go next. In short, Bowie builds her argument as the book progresses, adding layer upon layer of evidence to support her theory. Of particular note is the comparison of Fontevrault and Las Huelgas in Castile, by questioning the original purpose of each abbey and discussing how, why and when each became a family crypt, leading to the conclusion that Eleanor and Leonor possibly wished to establish a dynastic resting place for their family. Whether each had influence over the other or their husbands is open to speculation. The honest appraisal of the facts is a welcome approach given the speculative nature of the subject matter.

Bowie has certainly crafted a clearer picture of Henry and Eleanor of Aquitaine’s daughters, bringing them to life as individuals and members of the “family firm”. She has explored their marital unions, the importance and drawbacks of dowries and dowers and the significance behind the naming of their children, all with a clear focus on intergenerational relationships, not just between parent and child or grandparent and grandchild, but also between siblings. There are many books which cover Henry Plantagenet and his family both in English and French but Colette Bowie’s is significantly different. She has sought to analyse the emotional relationship between Henry, Eleanor and their daughters with a view to understanding the actions and choices they made in their own lives for generations to follow. It is a fascinating study, well written and highly readable.

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