



## **Eleanor, Duchess of Aquitaine, Queen of England**

c. 1122 — April 1, 1204

Eleanor of Aquitaine was born to William X, Duke of Aquitaine and Count of Poitiers (whose domain was larger than that belonging to the French King), and Aenor de Châtelleraut. She was the eldest of three siblings: her brother, William Aigret, Aelith, and half-brother Joscelin, who was publicly acknowledged as William X's son, but was not eligible as his heir. Eleanor's maternal grandmother, Dangereuse de l'Isle Bouchard, was the mistress of her paternal grandfather William IX. Eleanor's awareness of the affair is unclear, but I think it's worth noting that infidelity was a part of her family structure, as it was for many at the time, and that it was not necessarily prohibitive of intimacy and friendship.

William X took great care to insure that Eleanor received the best education available. She became his official heir in 1130, upon the death of her mother and younger brother William Aigret, and inherited the duchy of Aquitaine seven years later after her father's passing. One month later, Eleanor was married to Louis VII, heir to the throne of France. She was 15 years old. This strategic match by Louis VI to secure her newly inherited land was ultimately a failure because of an agreement that the duchy of Aquitaine was to remain independent of France until Eleanor's yet-unborn oldest son was of an age to inherit both the duchy and the French throne.

Eleanor was disliked by some of the French nobles, including Louis VII's mother. She was seen as a bad influence. There were rumors of her numerous affairs and bad behavior (see "*I wanted poetry and power and the young men who create them both. I even wanted Henry, too, in those days*" on p. 28 of Susan's glossary for more info). My sense is that this reaction to Eleanor was a function of historical attitudes about intelligent women with strong opinions, of which she had both.

During her fifteen-year reign as Queen of France, Eleanor had two daughters: Marie, and Alix of France. She was politically influential in her husband's court, a trend that would continue throughout her life. Between 1147-1149, she joined her husband on the Second Crusade as the feudal leader of the soldiers from her duchy. Wikipedia has this to say about how she conducted herself: "...during their three-week stay at Constantinople...Eleanor was much admired. She was Penthesilea, mythical queen of the Amazons...she gained the epithet *chrysopeus* (golden-foot) from the cloth of gold that decorated and fringed her robe."

Also on the crusade, which ended as a failure by and large, Eleanor and Louis VII stayed with her uncle, Raymond of Poitiers, Prince of Antioch. The young woman had a close relationship with Raymond, and rumors that the two were having an affair soon began to spread. Louis VII is said to have become jealous, and while it may be impossible to know the truth of his feelings, their stay at Antioch is documented as the moment Louis VII and Eleanor's relationship soured. Their marriage was eventually annulled in March 1152. Eleanor retained the Aquitaine, but Louis VII kept custody of their two daughters.

Eleanor married Henry, Duke of Normandy in May of that same year. She was eleven years his senior. In 1154, Henry was crowned-Henry II, King of England, uniting Normandy and the west of France under his reign. Together he and Eleanor had five sons: William (who died at age 3), Henry (later known as Young King Henry), Richard (the Lion Heart), Geoffrey, (Duke of Brittany), and John (Lackland, Softsword, King of England), and three daughters: "Matilda, who married Henry the Lion, duke of Saxony and Bavaria; Eleanor, who married Alfonso VIII, king of Castile; and Joan, who married successively William II, king of Sicily, and Raymond VI, count of Toulouse. Eleanor would well have deserved the title "Grandmother of Europe." (Britannica).

Henry II was known for his infidelity, but Eleanor showed no signs of having been bothered by this. She even went so far as to raise one of Henry II's illegitimate sons. Then Henry II began his affair with Rosamund Clifford. Shortly after Clifford entered the scene circa 1166, Eleanor gave birth to her youngest son, John (and the last child she would bear). Eleanor stayed in England for the next two years while her daughter Matilda prepared to marry and move to Normandy. After celebrating Christmas in 1167, Eleanor departed without her husband, or her son John, for Poitiers, where she would conduct her "Court of Love" for approximately the next six years (see "*I have my maids and menials in my courtyard and I hold my little court. It suits me now*" on p. 18 of Susan's glossary for more on the Court of Love).

In 1173, Eleanor supported her three oldest sons in their rebellion against Henry II. She led the armies of Aquitaine alongside Richard, until she was captured by her husband. Henry II kept her imprisoned at various locations, bringing her out only for important gatherings (like the Christmas celebration depicted in *The Lion in Winter*), until his death in 1189.

Eleanor was released almost immediately following her husband's demise. She spent the rest of her life as a prominent and highly influential political figure in European politics. She acted as an administrator in the English court while Richard waged the Third Crusade, taking firm and definitive action against Prince John when he attempted to usurp the throne in his brother's absence. When Richard was kidnapped on his way back to England, the seventy-two year old Eleanor, raised 15,000 marks of silver for his ransom, and personally traveled to Trifels Castle to free him from Holy Roman Emperor Henry VI.

In 1200, John was crowned King of England, and Eleanor (now 80) crossed the Pyrenees to fetch her granddaughter, Blanche, from the court of Castile and have her married to the son of the French King, Phillip II. On their way back to Normandy, their escort, Mercadier, was killed and Eleanor was unable to continue the journey. The Queen sent her granddaughter to Normandy under the care of the archbishop of Bordeaux, and remained herself in Fontevraud. There she stayed for the next four years until her death...with the exception of one last adventure which Wikipedia describes like this:

When war broke out between John and Philip, Eleanor declared her support for John and set out from Fontevraud to her capital Poitiers to prevent her grandson Arthur I, Duke of Brittany, posthumous son of Eleanor's son Geoffrey and John's rival for the English throne, from taking control. Arthur learned of her whereabouts and besieged her in the castle of Mirebeau. As soon as John heard of this, he marched south, overcame the besiegers, and captured the 15-year-old Arthur, and probably his sister Eleanor, Fair Maid of Brittany, whom Eleanor had raised with Richard. Eleanor then returned to Fontevraud where she took the veil as a nun.

Eleanor eventually died (I know, hard to believe at this point) in 1204, and was laid to rest with Henry II and Richard at Fontevraud Abbey. She left behind an incredible legacy. She was a great supporter of poetry and culture, a brilliant political and military strategist, and the most powerful woman of her century. She cared for Aquitaine, her ancestral land, throughout her life, and earned the lasting loyalty of its people -whose allegiance remained with England even after the loss of Normandy to Phillip II. Eleanor outlived most of her children, survived only by King John and her daughter, Queen Eleanor of Castile. Upon her death, the nuns of Fontevraud wrote that she “surpassed almost all the queens of the world.”

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## **Henry II** **King of England, Duke of Normandy and Aquitaine, Count of the Angevin Empire**

1133 — July 6, 1189

Henry was born to the Empress Matilda and Geoffrey Plantagenet, Count of Anjou. He spent most of his early childhood in Normandy and Anjou. When he was nine years old, he was sent to Bristol for about a year, before returning to Anjou. He received his education from a string of prominent academics. In 1150, he became the Duke of Normandy, and was named count of Maine, Anjou, and Touraine upon his father's death in 1151.

Henry had a claim to the English throne through his mother's lineage, but was not expected to inherit the throne. In 1152, he married Eleanor of Aquitaine, following the annulment of her marriage to the French King Louis VII. With Eleanor's help, Henry invaded England and forced King Steven to name him successor. In 1154, King Steven of England died and Henry took his place as Henry II King of England unopposed. The same year, Thomas Becket was appointed as Henry II's chancellor (more on the position and Henry II's relationship with Becket in the glossary). Though Henry II's lands were extensive, each of his titles were separate unto themselves. He was therefore the only uniting factor of his territories. It was through the marriages of his children that he solidified political influence in areas such as Germany, Sicily, and Castile.

Henry II and Eleanor had five sons: William (who died at age 3), Henry (later known as Young King Henry), Richard (the Lion Heart), Geoffrey, (Duke of Brittany), and John (Lackland, Softsword, King of England), and three daughters: "Matilda, who married Henry the Lion, duke of Saxony and Bavaria; Eleanor, who married Alfonso VIII, king of Castile; and Joan, who married successively William II, king of Sicily, and Raymond VI, count of Toulouse.

Henry II and Eleanor had a harmonious marriage at first. Henry was known for his promiscuity, but he and Eleanor functioned more or less as a team until Henry began his affair with Rosamund Clifford circa 1166. Historians believe the two were madly in love, and it is well documented that Eleanor left Henry II's court for Poitiers soon following their daughter Matilda's wedding in 1167. She and Henry II never lived as a couple again.

In 1173, Henry's three oldest surviving sons, Henry, Richard, and Geoffrey rebelled against him. Young Henry, having been crowned co-regent three years earlier, but given no real power or influence, sought to overthrow his father. He garnered Eleanor's support in his endeavor, as well as that of her previous husband, Louis VII (details of Henry II's relationship with Louis VII can be found in the timeline and the glossary). Henry II was a formidable military leader, and quashed the rebellion in under two years. Britannica describes the events like this:

There was a general revolt of the baronage in England and Normandy, supported by Louis VII in France and William the Lion in Scotland. Henry's prestige was at a low ebb after the murder of Becket and recent taxation, but he reacted energetically, settled matters in Normandy and Brittany, and crossed to England, where fighting had continued for a year. On July 12, 1174, he did public penance at Canterbury. The next day the King of Scots was taken at Alnwick, and three weeks later Henry had suppressed the rebellion in England.

Henry II forgave his sons, but punished them by taking significant portions of their land and money and gifting it to his youngest child, Prince John, who was not yet nine years old. John had been traveling with Henry II throughout the rebellion, and the King would continue to raise him for the next decade. He was not so lenient with Eleanor. He imprisoned his wife at various locations in England and Europe, and kept her under guard until his death. Young King Henry, Richard, and Geoffrey fought each other for land and titles, and Henry II only intervened when it was necessary to prevent the realm from splitting.

In 1176, Rosamund Clifford died (more information on her life and death can be found in the glossary). Around the time of her death, rumors of Henry II's affair with Richard's betrothed Alais began to spread (the implications of this affair are detailed in Richard's biography). Henry prevented Alais from getting married at every turn, resisting pressure from the Church, as well as the French Government. Whether his actions were a political strategy, or an indication of a romantic relationship with Alais is unknown.

In 1183, Young King Henry died following an attempt to overthrow Richard as the Duke of Aquitaine which Henry II played a significant role in preventing. After Young King Henry's death, Richard was in line to inherit key lands, as well as the English throne, which made him a far greater threat than Henry II would presumably have been comfortable with. The English King demanded that Richard give John the Aquitaine -which we see negotiated in *The Lion in Winter*- which he refused to do. Richard and John would continue to fight over the duchy of Aquitaine for the next few years.

Geoffrey's death in 1186 temporarily eased the dispute. Henry II, still trying to find suitable inheritance for John, soon faced opposition from Richard and Phillip II -who was now the King of France. This conflict soon forced Henry II's hand in naming Richard his heir, and the English King died on July 6th, 1189, after discovering that John had joined Richard's effort against him. His death took place thirteen years, to the day, after Rosamund Clifford's.

"...[Henry's] governance of England displays a careful and successful adaptation of means to a single end—the control of a realm served by the best administration in Europe." (Britannica) Some of those "means" included: expansion and conquering of territories, but

perhaps the most notable was his reconfiguring of the English court system, the roots of which still echoes in the Court of England today. Henry II was an effective ruler, though he spent only a sum total of fourteen years of his life on English soil. The “French king...noted 'now in England, now in Normandy, he must fly rather than travel by horse or ship.’” ([royal.uk](https://royal.uk)) Henry II could also be loyal to those he loved, and sometimes wildly inhumane. His wit and military prowess were the stuff of legend, but the enormous amount of infighting between the members of his family are remembered more frequently than his successes.

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## **Richard the Lion Heart**

**King of England, Duke of Aquitaine, Poitiers and Normandy, Count of Anjou**

September 8, 1157 — April 6, 1199

Richard was the second surviving son of Henry II, King of England and Eleanor of Aquitaine. There is little documentation of his very early childhood, but it is assumed that he spent it in England. From an early age, Richard spent more time with Eleanor than his siblings. She took him to visit Normandy when he was eight years old -this was Richard's first trip to Europe- and at fourteen, she took him to see Aquitaine. It was around this time that the duchy of Aquitaine was bequeathed to Richard upon Eleanor's request. Shortly thereafter, mother and son went on what was essentially the medieval equivalent of a campaign tour through the duchy, introducing Richard to the nobles and participating in local ceremonies. In 1172 (one year later), Richard inherited Poitiers, and was recognized as the official Duke of Aquitaine and count of Poitou.

After having received these lands and titles, he followed his older brother, the Young King Henry, to France where Richard was knighted. In 1173 he joined Young Henry and his younger brother Geoffrey in rebellion against their father. The boys garnered the support of their mother, Eleanor, and Louis VII -King of France- in their effort. Richard and Eleanor headed the rebellion in Aquitaine together until her capture and imprisonment by her husband, at which point the fifteen year old boy was left to lead the armies of Aquitaine alone. Henry II invaded Aquitaine twice before Richard was forced to surrender and take refuge in France for the remainder of the war. Henry then offered peace to his three sons, but they refused, having promised Louis VII that they would accept nothing without his consent. Henry II eventually reconciled with the French King in the truce at Gisors, but Richard was specifically left out of the agreement. A few weeks after the truce, Richard made his way to Henry II's court at Poitiers and begged his father's forgiveness, which Henry II granted. He left Richard with two castles in Poitou and half the income of Aquitaine, a meager fortune compared to what he owned prior to the rebellion. Young Henry and Geoffrey followed their brother's example, and tenuous peace was restored between father and sons. Eleanor remained imprisoned.

Following Richard's resolution with his father, Henry II sent him back to Aquitaine with orders to punish the very Barons Richard had lead into battle just a year before. Needless to say,

this did not go over well with the barons. In fact, Richard faced revolt from barons in various territories: 1179 - in which the barons received support from Young King Henry and Geoffrey-, 1181-1182 -this time the barons got backing from Philip, who had been crowned King of France in 1180-, and 1183 -Young King Henry and Geoffrey joined the Gascons in trying to throw Richard off his own land. During these ongoing revolts, Richard refused to pay homage to Young King Henry (recognize him as sovereign) and had been in conflict with his father over the matter. However, during the third rebellion Henry II recognized the danger that the realm might be split by the brothers infighting, and lent Richard his support. Henry II's involvement combined with the unexpected death of his oldest son, the Young King Henry, put a swift end to the uprising.

Upon his brother's death, Richard became the heir to Normandy and Anjou, as well as the Norman Vexin and Gisors -through his betrothal to Alais. Henry II, no doubt put off by Richard's new power, demanded that he surrender the duchy of Aquitaine to his youngest brother John (we see some of this action in *The Lion in Winter*). Richard refused to give up the title, and went to spend time living with the French King.

Rumors of Alais' affair with Henry II had begun to take hold circa 1177. The veracity of these rumors and the extent to which Richard was aware of them at that point is unclear, however, I think the implications are worth noting in service of the dynamics in the play. Henry II's decision to sleep with Alais would have effectively ended Richard's engagement to her in the eyes of the church. Alais' dowry was of great political import to Henry II, and it created a fragile alliance with Philip II, so it was not in his interest to allow the betrothal to be dissolved. This put Richard in a difficult position: unable to marry her and reap the political benefits of the match, but disallowed to call off the engagement and marry someone else. Needless to say, this can't have been good for family relations.

There were also rumors that Philip II and Richard had a romantic relationship. This assumption may have stemmed from a historical account that the two men slept in the same bed, but this was a gesture of trust or goodwill between rulers, and would not have been unusual. It would have been what we think of as a 'publicity stunt' today. In 1188, Richard paid homage to Philip II in exchange for English holdings in France, and in 1189, the two men take on Henry II together. According to *Britannica*: "They chased [Henry II] from Le Mans to Saumur, forced him to acknowledge Richard as his heir, and at last harried him to his death (July 6, 1189)."

After his ascension to the English throne, Richard immediately sent men to release his mother from captivity, only to discover that she had already been set free following her husband's death. He then proceeded to raise money and left the country in 1190 to wage the Third Crusade. He broke off his engagement to Alais, using her alleged affair with his father as an excuse to smooth things over with Philip II, who was fighting alongside Richard in the Crusade. On May 12th, 1191 Richard married Berengaria of Navarre. The match solidified Richard's alliance with Navarre, which gave his reign stability necessary for waging a crusade. Philip II was forced to accept Richard's decision, but by breaking his oath to marry Alais, he created a rift with the French King that would last the rest of his life.

In 1192 a truce was reached and Richard's participation in the crusade came to an end. He began to make his way back to England upon hearing word that John was trying to usurp the throne, but was kidnapped by Leopold of Austria, who eventually handed him over to Holy Roman Emperor Henry VI, and was imprisoned in Trifels Castle. Eleanor, hearing of her son's



capture, campaigned for his ransom and two years later, at age 72, personally took 1,500 marks of silver to Trifels to pay for Richard's freedom.

Richard easily defeated John upon his return and was re-crowned at Windsor castle. He then began to take back the land Philip II had conquered from England in his absence. Richard succeeded in getting his land back, but was fatally wounded during the effort. He died during a siege (a siege that he himself was waging against a local Baron in France) five years later.

Richard was a formidable opponent, clever military mind, and a ruthless ruler. He spend significant time with his mother throughout his life, receiving administrative aid from her in the English court while he was waging the Third Crusade. He also gave a generous pension to his wet-nurse upon his coronation, which I think is an indicator of his care (maybe even respect?) of at least some of the women in his life. He was known to be handsome, composed poetry, and wrote in French and Limousin. It is unknown whether or not Richard spoke any English. Richard had no sons, and instead passed the English crown to John after his death. He would become the stuff of legends, but even history loves to tell stories of Richard the Lionheart: Brave and Fearless King, the details of his person: his sexual orientation, his feelings about Eleanor and his brothers, his pressured development as a soldier, are left up to our imaginations.

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### **Geoffrey Plantagenet, Duke of Brittany, Earl of Richmond**

September 23, 1158— (circa) August 19, 1186

There is little written about Geoffrey in comparison to his parents and siblings. He was brushed aside by historical accounts with the same indifference as employed by his own family, at least politically, gaining importance only by his proximity to major players. It would be easy to assume that he was therefore unintelligent, or unambitious. This was not the case. “[Gerald of Wales](#) wrote the following of him: ‘He has more [aloes](#) than honey in him; his tongue is smoother than oil; his sweet and persuasive eloquence has enabled him to dissolve the firmest alliances and by his powers of language able to corrupt two kingdoms; of tireless endeavour, a hypocrite in everything, a deceiver and a dissembler.’”([Wikipedia](#))

Geoffrey was the third surviving son of Henry II and Eleanor of Aquitaine. It should be noted however, that the laws of the time did not guarantee the oldest son inheritance of the throne. It would not have been peculiar for him to harbor hopes of one day becoming King, even as a young boy. Not much is written about Geoffrey’s early life. When he was eight years old, Geoffrey was betrothed to Constance, daughter of the Duke of Brittany. Upon their engagement, her father was forced to name Constance heir to the duchy and surrender most of his land for Geoffrey’s use. This was a strategic move by Henry II. The King had been trying to conquer Brittany for years. By forcing the Duke to name Constance his heir, which would have been unusual considering the Duke’s other eligible children, Henry II effectively took ownership of the land. Three years later, Geoffrey received the homage (recognition of his position as their Duke) of the Breton Nobels. This solidified Henry II’s control of the region.

In 1173, Geoffrey was fifteen years old. He joined his older brothers Young King Henry, and Richard in a rebellion against their father. Geoffrey’s efforts failed quickly, and Henry II sent him back to Brittany. In 1174, Geoffrey participated in the truce at Gisors. The truce cultivated temporary peace between Geoffrey and his father, but stipulated the confiscation of significant lands and money which were then awarded to Henry II’s youngest son John. Geoffrey joined Young King Henry for a second rebellion in 1179, against Richard. This effort was also unsuccessful.

At twenty-three years old, Geoffrey married Constance. Two years later, in 1183, he joined Young King Henry in aid of the Gascon’s revolt against Richard. Henry II lent Richard his

support, leaving the two rebel brothers and local nobility outmatched for the second time. Geoffrey fought with Richard over land and title for the rest of his life.

Geoffrey allied himself frequently with the French, and spent significant time at the French court in Paris throughout his life. Philip II even appointed him a seneschal (a senior administrative position in the French court).

In 1186, Geoffrey died in Paris. There are varying accounts of his death, which may have been due to a rumor that he and Philip II were plotting to take Normandy at the time of his demise -one story points toward an innocent tournament accident, another toward a plotting session which resulted in cardiac death. One chronicler wrote that Philip II was so overcome by grief at the funeral, that he threw himself into Geoffrey's grave. This story may have been embellished, but speaks to an assumed friendship between the two men. He was survived by his wife Constance, daughter Eleanor, and son Arthur I. Arthur was born six months after his death, and would go on to cause complications for Geoffrey's brothers John and Richard regarding the succession of the English throne. His line ended with his daughter Eleanor in 1241.

During his life Geoffrey regularized the succession of military fiefs in Brittany, and made a habit of attacking churches and monasteries to raise money for various campaigns. He was known for his strategy, and intellect, and for his betrayal of family members on several occasions. He was the only one of Henry II's surviving sons never to have been crowned King.

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### **Alais of France, Countess of Vexin**

4 October, 1160 – c. 1213 or 1220

There is very little factual information about Alais which is not pertaining to her involvement in Plantagenet family politics. She was born to Louis VII and Constance of Castile. Her mother died in childbirth, and her father married his third wife Adèle of Champagne five weeks later. Alais had two half sisters, Marie and Alix of France (daughters of Louis VII and Eleanor of Aquitaine), one sister, Margaret of France, and one half brother, Philip II (son of Louis VII and Adèle of Champagne) who would later become King of France. When she was eight years old, Alais was betrothed to Henry II's second surviving son Richard as a strategic stipulation of the Treaty of Montmirail. She was thereafter sent to England where she was raised by the Plantagenets.

Upon Henry II's defeat of the rebellion in 1174, he took the wives and fiancées of all his sons to Normandy to quell disquiet in Anjou and Poitou. The party included Alais, Joanna and Margaret among others. Following the journey Henry II collected Eleanor from Poitiers and brought all the women back to England.

1177 (Alais was then 17 years old), the church of England -facing pressure from Louis VII- threatened the English King and demanded that he proceed with the marriage between Alais and Richard. Henry II eventually resolved the conflict, and Alais remained unmarried. It was around this time that rumors of Alais and Henry II's alleged affair began to spread.

When Young King Henry died in 1183, the Norman Vexin and Gisors (property in France) were transferred from his possession (via marriage to Margaret of France) to Alais' dowry. Margaret, newly widowed and without land, returned to France shortly thereafter. The transfer of these lands to Alais' dowry complicated the matter of Alais' marriage further. Because her husband would be in possession of significant lands, whoever married her posed a threat to Henry II. It was therefore strategically prudent for him to postpone her marriage for as long as possible. For this reason, Alais was kept under lock and key at Winchester castle. It was around

this time that “The Lion in Winter” took place. It may have been true that he disallowed her marriage because of his own desire, but it is just as likely that his decision was simply a political strategy. Regardless of reason, Alais was kept under Eleanor’s care until Henry II’s death in 1189.

In 1190, Eleanor was released from captivity and brought Alais with her -under guard- to Rouen in Normandy. Soon after, Richard broke his betrothal to Alais in favor of a more strategic match, using the rumor of her affair with his father as an excuse. The rumor was convenient for Richard because it allowed him to back out of the engagement without inciting major conflict with Philip II. Alais’ brother would have been unable to protest because, if the affair had taken place, the marriage would have been illegitimate in the eyes of the church.

Alais was then offered to Prince John, but Eleanor prevented the marriage, presumably to stop her younger son from gaining the power that came with Alais’ dowry. Philip II tried twice (in 1193, and 1194) to free Alais from the Plantagenet, but failed. She was however, freely given to her brother by Richard in 1195.

On August 20th of that year, Alais was finally married. She was 35 years old, and her husband William IV Talvas, Count of Ponthieu, was 18 years her junior. They had a daughter, Marie, Countess of Ponthieu, and two more children whose existence is disputed: Isabelle, and Jean - who was stillborn.

Alais was a pawn for most of her life. She is a prominent character in many works of historical fiction, but few details of her life were documented. She was probably well educated, and may have been treated well in her captivity, but like many women of her time, she had little agency. Though little is known about her relationships, I like to believe that the last years of her life were spent in relative peace, or at least in blissful disregard of English politics.

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## Phillip II, King of Franks (France)

August 21, 1165 — July 14, 1223

Philip II was born to Louis VII of France and his third wife, Adela of Champagne. He was nicknamed *Dieudonné*, or ‘God-given,’ presumably because his father had been trying, unsuccessfully, to conceive an heir for many years. In 1179, when Philip II was fourteen years old, his father became ill. Later that year, when it became clear that Louis VII would not survive, the young boy was crowned King of France. The newly crowned Philip II found himself face to face with a slough of uncles who expected his age to render him easily manipulated and weak. They were in for a surprise. Philip II learned quickly and became an efficient ruler. In 1180 he married Isabella who brought with her a significant dowry (Artois). On June 28th of that year, he renewed an understanding with King Henry II, leaving the House of Champagne politically isolated and Philip II truly in charge of his own region. On September 18th, 1180, Louis VII finally passed away.

At this point, Richard ran Aquitaine, Geoffrey had hold of Brittany, and all of the Angevin Empire (controlled by Henry II and his sons) posed a significant threat to French rule. When *The Lion in Winter* takes place in 1183, there was a general sense of instability regarding land ownership between French and English royalty. There had been long standing disputes over the Vexin, which was part of Alais’ dowry. Philip supports various efforts to overthrow members of the Plantagenet family throughout Henry II and Richard’s reigns respectively, but saw little success. Richard paid homage to Philip II voluntarily in November of 1188, after which the two mount an attack on Henry II. The two men forced Henry II to name Richard as his successor, and on July 4th 1189, Henry II renewed his homage to Phillip II and “to confirm the cession of Issoudun, with Graçay...and to renounce his claim to suzerainty over Auvergne. Henry died two days later.” Britannica

In 1190, Philip II joined Richard on the Third Crusade, but in 1191 the French King fell ill and returned to France to secure the succession of the French throne while Richard is still away. Once back in Europe, Philip II breaks a promise he made to Richard during the crusade, and begins to take back French land from England. Richard’s eventual return put an end to the effort, but the victory would be short-lived. Philip continued to fight with Richard, and later John, over land and succession for many years. Eventually “putting an end to the Angevin Empire by defeating a coalition of his rivals at the Battle of Bouvines in 1214.” Wikipedia



By the time Philip II died at the age of 57, he was the richest and most powerful King in Europe. During his reign, he re-conquered French territory from English Kings, was a key player in the Third Crusade, instituted new administrative classes in French court: the *baillis* and the seneschals, and built a great wall around Paris (the Wall of Philip II Augustus). He was popular among both townspeople and clergymen -a feat in its own right- and was the first French King not to crown his son before he died. This decision was indicative of the confidence he had in the continuing success of his legacy, a confidence that was by no means misplaced. After his death, France went on to become once of the most powerful and influential countries in Europe, and is a center of Western culture to this day.

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## **King John of England**

December 24th, 1166 – October 19th, 1216

John was the last child born to King Henry II of England and Eleanor of Aquitaine. He was nicknamed “John sans Terre” which translates to John Lackland, because his father had no significant territory left to bequeath to his youngest son. This was especially significant given the practice of inheritance within the monarchy at the time:

Although the custom of [primogeniture](#), under which an eldest son would inherit all his father's lands, was slowly becoming more widespread across Europe, it was less popular amongst the Norman kings of England.<sup>[10]</sup> Most believed that Henry would divide the empire, giving each son a substantial portion, and hoping that his children would continue to work together as allies after his death. ([Wikipedia](#))

John’s parents were at odds for most -if not all- of his young life. When he was just two years old, his mother left the English court to live in Poitiers, and John was sent to live at Fontevrault Abby. When he was five, John was betrothed to Alais (not the one in the play), daughter of Humbert III of Savoy. Upon their betrothal, John was promised the castles of [Chinon](#), [Loudun](#) and [Mirebeau](#), which were to be Young King Henry’s. The Young King had

already been deprived of political power by their father, despite his title, and Henry II's decision to give some of his belongings to John added insult to injury. Alais, however, died before they could marry and John was once again left with nothing to inherit.

In 1173, the older princes -Henry, Richard, and Geoffrey- mounted a rebellion against their father with Eleanor's support (details of the revolt can be found in the *Plantagenet Family Timeline*, and in the biographies of all involved). During the rebellion, Henry II collected the seven year old Prince John, and kept him close. When a tenuous peace was struck between Henry II and his three rebellious sons the next year, he took some of their land and money as punishment for their actions. Henry II awarded some of their confiscated belongings to John... not excellent circumstances for cultivating brotherly love. Henry II also took land from nobles for his young son. [Wikipedia](#) lists some of the lands John received around this time:

In 1175 he appropriated the estates of the late [Earl of Cornwall](#) and gave them to John.<sup>[24]</sup> The following year, Henry disinherited the sisters of [Isabella of Gloucester](#), contrary to legal custom, and betrothed John to the now extremely wealthy Isabella.<sup>[27]</sup> In 1177, at the Council of Oxford, Henry dismissed [William FitzAldelm](#) as the [Lord of Ireland](#) and replaced him with the ten-year-old John.<sup>[27]</sup>

Henry II kept John close after the revolt of 1173-1174. Young King Henry, Richard, and Geoffrey spent much of the next decade fighting each other over lands and titles, Eleanor spent it imprisoned after having been captured by her husband, and John spent it growing up under the tutelage of his father. When Young King Henry died in 1183, Henry II further reorganized his plan for his sons' inheritance. He demanded that Richard give John the duchy of Aquitaine, but Richard refused to surrender the title (this is when *The Lion in Winter* takes place).

In 1185, John spent time in Ireland, which Henry II wanted him to rule, but failed to make political connections that would secure his power and influence there and returned to England later the same year.

In 1189, Henry II died, after having named Richard his successor. Richard had been planning to go on a crusade, but needed to stabilize the realm before his departure to prevent John -or anyone else- from attempting to take the crown in his absence. He named John the [Count of Mortain](#), gave him land in Lancaster, Cornwall, Derby, Dorset, Devon, Somerset, and of course Nottingham. In exchange for these properties, as well as an advantageous marriage to Isabella of Gloucester, John promised to stay out of England for the next three years while Richard was on crusade.

The new King also named an heir before he departed. John would have been the logical next in line, following Geoffrey's death in 1186, but Richard probably didn't trust that his little brother wouldn't try to usurp the throne while he was out of the country. He instead named Geoffrey's four year old son, Arthur. John, upset by Richard's choice, broke the promise he had made to his brother and tried to take the throne as soon as the King set off on the Third Crusade. His efforts failed, and John was sent into exile upon the Richard's return.

John eventually did inherit the throne from Richard in 1199. He spend his reign losing land to Phillip II, and working, with Eleanor's help, to maintain stability in England. He earned his second nickname: John Softsword, for his preference of negotiation over war. Though not the

military strategist his parents and older brothers were (his only two military successes were due to Eleanor's aid), John is viewed by historians as a brilliant administrator. Administration and record keeping were increasingly complex in John's time, so he spent more time at court than his predecessors. He also continued to fine tune the judicial system Henry II had put in place, which meant the courts were much more involved in local law enforcement. This took power away from the barons, who were the arbiters of justice up to that point, and increased income for the Crown by raising fees and taxes. These are the choices that earned him his unfavorable place in English legend.

By 1205, John had lost Normandy and Anjou. Despite his lack of prowess as a warrior, or perhaps because of it, he led a long life. He even outlived Eleanor, one of only two of her children to do so. John died of dysentery when he was fifty years old. During his reign, he was unpopular among church officials and nobles alike. He was known to have an unpredictable and cruel temper, and has gone down as one of the most disliked monarchs in history. He also expanded upon the structure that would become the modern day English court system, and managed an incredibly complex administration. He may have been unpopular, but John Lackland was, in the end, undeniably influential.

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