

Eleanor of Aquitaine

By Cathleen Sheehan, Dramaturg

Mothers are conspicuously absent in most of Shakespeare's plays—a practical necessity with a small company of all male actors. *King John*, however, includes one of the most famous women in Medieval history, Eleanor of Aquitaine, the mother of King John. In 1137, when she was just 15, Eleanor inherited the vast, rich land of Aquitaine—the southwest corner of France. She was a famous beauty and her notable wealth no doubt added to her attractions. She drew the attention of Louis the Young, the heir to the French throne. They married three months after Eleanor had inherited Aquitaine—and Louis became King just one month later.

The marriage was a decidedly unhappy one. Eleanor and her husband shared few interests or much of an affinity at all. She was young, spirited and reluctant to curb her interests or energies to those of her more dour husband. Eleanor produced two daughters with Louis—but no sons. The throne would not be passed to a female heir or her descendants under French law, so the lack of a male heir was a cause for concern. In spite of the difficulties, the marriage limped along until 1152 when they divorced. Eleanor then turned her attentions to Henry of Anjou, who ruled over the northwest section of France and was positioned to inherit the throne of England. He was 19, and she 30. She married Henry just two months after her divorce from Louis—motivated in part to spite her first husband. Eleanor and Henry had eight children together—but this marriage also was a disaster.

Henry was a distant father, and Eleanor took on the parenting of her sons with a vengeance—encouraging them to rebel against and depose their father. They tried but failed. In what must have been a gag-inducing moment of swallowing her pride, Eleanor sent her sons to her first husband King Louis VII for protection. Eleanor was captured by Henry, who imprisoned her until the end of his reign (a situation creatively imagined in James Goldman's play *The Lion in Winter*, made into a film starring Peter O'Toole and Katharine Hepburn). Henry II died in 1189, and their son Richard became king, promptly freeing his mother. When Richard died in 1199, Eleanor actively garnered support for her son John, Richard's chosen successor. At the time, Eleanor was 77—an awe-inspiring age for the time—and was still a force to be reckoned with in spite of her advanced age. Shakespeare's play opens at this time, and Eleanor clearly still wields a powerful influence. For example, her acceptance of Philip as the illegitimate son of Richard helps define him as a real "Plantagenet"—and her grandson.

John's nephew—and threat to his reign—is, of course, Eleanor's grandson, too. Her distance from him may be due in part to another strong female presence in the play—Constance of Brittany. Because of their similarly strong political motivations for their sons, Eleanor separates herself from her daughter-in-law Constance. Constance's ambitions make her more than a mild annoyance to both John and Eleanor. Her choice of name for her son says it

all, really—Arthur, the legendary King of the Britons.

In *Constance and Eleanor*, Shakespeare explores maternal power, love and loss.