

Eleanor of Aquitaine

[Dr Helen Castor]

As the centuries have gone by, Eleanor of Aquitaine's fame has endured less as a she-wolf than as a queen of the romantic world of chivalry and courtly love. In fact we know very little for certain about Eleanor's looks or her emotional life.

The only contemporary image of her that survives is this effigy from her tomb at Fontevraud Abbey and it's hard to get a sense of the extraordinary woman behind this mask-like face.

One clue to her intellect is perhaps the book she's holding - not a typical prop for a medieval woman but then Eleanor wasn't typical in anything she did.

History does not see her not as a passive consort but as a dynamic force in her own right. Above all she was a woman who believed in her own agency, her ability to determine her own fate.

Hidden inside what are now the law courts in Eleanor's city of Poitiers is all that remains of her vast palace.

We don't know very much about the details of Eleanor's rule but it's clear that she exercised independent power here, holding great courts where she gathered Aquitaine's lords around her.

Instead, her role as Aquitaine's Duchess was accepted. A woman in charge was much less challenging, it turned out, if she were ruling as the lieutenant of an absent husband.

However, the stories that surround this period of Eleanor's life are tales of romance and chivalry. Aquitaine was the home of the troubadours who sang of knights declaring their passionate devotion to unobtainable ladies and attempting heroic deeds of valour to win their hearts.

One 12th century text entitled *De Amore* puts Eleanor at the centre of these stories, ruling over a court of love that pronounced judgement on questions such as whether true love could exist in marriage.

There's no evidence that the courts of love ever really existed, but it's interesting that the idea has persisted so powerfully. How much easier to think of Eleanor- as the Queen of romance concerned with emotions, not politics.

