Eleanor of Aquitaine

Eleanor of Aquitaine (1122–1204) was the woman who probably wielded the greatest power of any woman in the Middle Ages. Indeed, she is one of the great female figures in history. Eleanor was both a master political manipulator and a primary force for the advancements of the cultural movement of courtly love in the High Middle Ages.

Eleanor was the daughter of the duke of Aquitaine, a large province in northern France. In 1137, she was married to Louis VI, who became king of France. She accompanied Louis on the Second Crusade in 1149, where her flirtations and political meddling resulted in a falling-out with the king. Their marriage was annulled in 1152. Two years later, she married Henry II, king of England. When Eleanor's French holdings were united with Henry's property, the result was a formidable political empire.

Eleanor had four sons, two of whom became kings of England, Richard I (the Lionhearted) and John. In 1173, Henry's sons rebelled against their father and Eleanor sided with her sons (some historians think she instigated the rebellion). Henry crushed the rebellion and had her imprisoned for several years. Eleanor orchestrated Richard's coronation as king in 1189 after Henry's death, and despite her advancing years, she held the kingdom together when Richard was away on the Third Crusade.