CHAPTER 11

THE RECIPROCAL LOYALTY
OF ELEANOR OF AQUITAINE
AND WILLIAM MARSHAL

Evelyn Mullally

The Anglo-Norman verse biography of William Marshal (ca. 1226) affords brief but favorable glimpses of Eleanor of Aquitaine unobtainable from any other source. In 1168, she lavishly rewards his part in rescuing her from a Poitevin ambush; after her son Richard I’s accession, William supports her in the government of England during Richard’s absence.

One source that gives an unequivocally positive image of Eleanor of Aquitaine is the Anglo-Norman verse biography of William Marshal, composed ca. 1226 and edited a century ago as the Histoire de Guillaume le Maréchal. Tantalizingly brief as are the Histoire’s episodes concerning Eleanor, they are our only source for certain events in her life that, though mentioned in every biography of her, have never been studied in their full context. William Marshal had an extraordinary life, from his relatively obscure birth ca. 1147 as the younger son of a minor knight to his final eminence as regent of England from 1216 to his death in 1219. One of the most fascinating and enjoyable narratives of Eleanor’s day, the Histoire recounts an amazing number of adventures and reversals of fortune, culminating in William’s detailed and uplifting death scene. As well as being a primary source for the history of the Plantagenets, the text is a mine of information on aspects of social history, such as tournaments and family relationships,
though unfortunately for our purposes, its insights are entirely from a masculine point of view (as is, of course, the case with virtually all narrative sources of the time).

Dominica Legge long ago noted with regret that the *Histoire* was better known to historians than to students of literature. It is to be hoped that the forthcoming edition will increase its readership, though historical narratives in verse even now run the risk of falling unluckily between two stools. Political historians tend to treat anything written in rhyme as “poetry” and, as such, not quite worthy of serious consideration as documents. Literary historians tend to treat such writings as creative works of art and search them for subtle artistic purpose. It is important to remember that at this period, anything written for secular consumption will be written in the vernacular and in the simple rhyming couplet, the medium most suited to oral delivery. Though very well written, William’s biography is down-to-earth and factual, and largely devoid of literary allusion. In a later age, it would certainly have been written in prose.

If the format is banal, however, the content and purpose of the text are original, indeed unique. Unlike chroniclers who recorded the events of a reign or a region, the *Histoire’s* author concentrates on one individual’s life, the earliest known biography of a man who was neither king nor saint. William was certainly a remarkable individual, and the author has no hesitation in telling us at the outset of his narrative that he will relate the life of the best knight of the age (ll. 15–17). William’s faithful and self-effacing squire, John of Earley, was the source of most of the work’s personal details and perhaps its actual author. The epilogue indicates that the work was composed to preserve William’s memory for his children. The prologue alludes to a larger audience, though as the *Histoire* survives in only a single manuscript it seems not to have reached a wide public. It is nonetheless a most valuable witness to the mentality of Eleanor’s contemporaries.

William’s life is the life of a man in a man’s world. Remarkable woman though she was, Eleanor is only briefly mentioned in a text of over 19,000 lines. The *Histoire’s* great themes are William’s courage, worthiness, and above all loyalty in the service of successive lords. The key rhyme is *Mareschals/leals*; the author misses no chance to emphasize his hero’s integrity, remarkable in an age when conflicts of feudal loyalty were common and when so many lords he knew acted with violence and greed.

William’s father was an example of the ruthless, ambitious man of the period. John Marshal let nothing stand in his way: when he could not defeat Earl Patrick of Salisbury, he decided to join him. To that end he unceremoniously discarded a wife with whom he had been perfectly happy and married Patrick’s sister. A son of this second marriage, William counts for nothing in his father’s struggle for power. Desperate to keep his castle