

The Queen of Hearts

The character of the Queen of Hearts is a good fit to that of Eleanor of Aquitaine as founder of the 'courts of love' and the dominant queen figure in 12th century England in Henry's absence.

Alice



Alice and the Queen of Hearts. John Tenniel (1865).

The Queen of Hearts is the dominant personage in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, around whom all the other characters revolve in trepidation. It is ironic that Carroll's Queen of Hearts, the symbol of love, is such a foul-tempered monarch, but this dual personality accords well with the dual character of Eleanor of Aquitaine as the doyenne of the courts of love but

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Eleanor



Mediaeval woodcut depicting a queen and a near-sighted pope watching gamblers in an early card game (~14th century).

As far as is historically known, playing cards were introduced into France before their first mention in 1377, apparently from Saracen sources. Although an association with Eleanor of Aquitaine is purely speculative, the introduction of playing cards to Europe through Arabic and Saracen sources seems just the sort of thing that Eleanor, as a traveller on the Second Crusade to Edessa (Turkey) and Jerusalem, and later to Spain, would have been likely to have mediated. Eleanor was known to play games as a pastime, for she brought chess sets with her to Byzantium on the way to the Holy Land (Yalom, 2004, p. 89).

In fact, Eleanor was a high-spirited individual who led a contingent of 300 women with her on the Second Crusade to Jerusalem, became very close with her uncle Raymond of Toulouse, and may even have attempted to escape from her loveless life with Louis by eloping with the young Saladin himself!

the iron-fisted ruler of her extensive lands from Southern France through northern England. Literary attributions as to the character of the Queen of Hearts do not include Eleanor, however, focusing on the allusion to Queen Victoria, who was very much in love with her Albert when she was young, but frequently irascible in her later years.

The Queen of Hearts is commonly mistaken for the Red Queen in the story's sequel, *Alice Through the Looking-Glass*, but in reality shares none of her characteristics other than being a queen. Moreover, in his article *Alice on the Stage*, Carroll does not account for her designation in the Hearts suit, giving her more of a resemblance to a Queen of Clubs:

“I pictured to myself the Queen of Hearts as a sort of embodiment of ungovernable passion — a blind and aimless Fury. The Red Queen I pictured as a Fury, but of another type; her passion must be cold and calm — she must be formal and strict, yet not unkindly; pedantic to the 10th degree, the concentrated essence of all governesses!”

Lewis Carroll, Alice on the Stage, The Theatre, 1887.



Modern Paris pattern Queen of Hearts playing card.

It is interesting to speculate that, inspired by the Saracen Mamluk cards she encountered whiling away the months in the Levant during the Second Crusade in 1145-9, Eleanor herself may have developed the Western card suites during her 15-year imprisonment in England, as a means for tracking the fate of her four sons (three of whom became kings, while one almost did), three daughters (all of whom became queens) and one stepdaughter, Alice (who was betrothed to be queen to two of Eleanor's sons and effectively even to her husband). It is clear, at any rate, that Eleanor devoted a great deal of energy, both when with Henry and while in prison, to scheming the power politics of much of western Europe during the 12th century, and that this ethos is reflected in the court structure of playing cards.

The Second Crusade set off from the Church of St Mary Magdalene, in Vézelay, Loire Valley, where Mary Magdalene's remains are supposedly buried. Eleanor's son, King John, later founded a church of St Mary Magdalene in Woodstock in Eleanor's honour (in 1210).



Mediaeval queen participating in a battle (~14th century).