



The Canterbury Papers

By Judith Koll Healey
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The Story Behind the Book

I remember well the day I began to tell the story of Alais Capet. It was a sunny afternoon and we were lodged in the apartment of a friend in Villefranche Sur Mer, around the curve from Nice on the glistening Mediterranean.

This was to be a reading trip. I had just finished a long writing assignment, and wanted to take a rest from writing anything, and so had not even brought my laptop. But I had been reading history avidly. A few years earlier, while browsing in a Washington D.C. bookstore, I had picked up a biography of Eleanor of Aquitaine. It was not one of the 'big' biographies, but it was sufficient to reawaken an interest in the Twelfth Century fin-de-siecle politics and family drama of the ruling houses of the Kings of England and France, an interest which had been stimulated by an early reading of Robin Hood and an early viewing of the film *The Crusades*.

On this particular afternoon in France, I had just read that certain chronicles of the time hinted that there had been a child between Alais Capet, daughter of Louis VI of France and his second wife (the first was Eleanor herself), and Henry II of England, Eleanor's second husband. If there were such a child, of course, and if it was male, he could redirect history. The lineage of both the royal houses of France and England would be enough to give him power, or make him a threat. What happened to the child? No one seems to know.

I began to muse on the topic of Alais, herself, wondering if she was the delicate sprite shown in the film *Lion in Winter*, or whether, perhaps, she was made of sterner stuff. I had an idea of women in the Middle Ages as pawns but there have been certain models of assertiveness, strength, and talent in a number of women of that time, including Eleanor herself.

And what of feelings? Is it possible that we make assumptions about feelings from a distance? What if things were not at all as they appeared? What if Alais, far from being coerced, had feelings for Henry? How would the loss of her babe affect those feelings?

I found suddenly an urge to write the story, as if I were Alais Capet herself and wanted to explain. I had no computer, so I began in longhand (the way writers used to do) with her as a small child. I wrote many pages that I later discarded -- pages that led me into her character and her story.

It was never my intent to dramatize history, though I have tried in the external events to stay as close to dates and events as possible. What I wanted to do was create a character, and imagine her experience. How does it feel to lose a child? How does it feel to betray someone you love? How does it feel to fall in love after a long time? Alais did all this, in the midst of danger and intrigue.

Most of the places in the novel are known to me, although they are modified by imagination to reflect the earlier times. Sarum tower is no more, but the outline is still there and the history readily available for one to read. The grand hall of the palace of the Dukes of Poitiers is still open, although more modern buildings crowd around it now. The Conciergerie on the Isle de la Cite in Paris was the site of the Capet's residence before they completed the Louvre and certain parts of that building are said to date from medieval times. The manor house outside Chinon is now a Relais et Chateaux, but if you book a room there, be sure and obtain up-to-date information on cost.

Traveling in Europe has put me in touch with other times and the possibility of knowing characters from those times. I do not believe their emotions -- love, hate, ambition, tenderness and, sometimes, compassion -- are fundamentally different from our own. And if you place a strong woman in the midst of drama and intrigue no matter what the age, she will undoubtedly -- as my heroine does -- happily play her part!

Questions for Discussion

1. In the constant battles between England and France in this period, what did each kingdom seek? Did Louis and Henry appear to be sworn enemies? Did they have any common goals?
2. Why was King John, sometimes called Lackland in so much trouble with the church? What do you imagine his goals were? From the perspective of this story, does it appear he will be a successful king? What qualities does he evidence or lack that supports your opinion?
3. What do you make of the affair of Alais and Henry? Was he wrong to express his feelings as he did? What attracted him to Alais? What did she feel or not feel about him?
4. Why does William have access to so many resources? Where does his power come from? What are his gifts, in your opinion? What are his shortcomings?
5. What feeling dominates Alais at the beginning of the novel? Why does she undertake this journey? Is she putting herself in danger with her small party? Why or why not? Do you agree with her uncle's assessment of her when they meet at the Boar's Head Inn? What would you say her most significant asset is?
6. What role does her art play in her habits of thinking and seeing? What role did it play in her various assessments of the situation while she was traveling?
7. Alais had a physical difference about her. How did she treat this difference or think of it at various times? What do you know about what people thought of physical deformities in the middle ages? Where is the evidence of this in the book?
8. What is the major change Alais experienced in the course of this story. What aspects of the final scenes illustrate this change? What specific events in the story have helped to bring about that change?

9. Where in the book does Alais demonstrate courage? Where do you think she is rash? Would you have counseled her to do other than she did in any of the scenes?

10. This story was set in the time that the Grail stories were written. The original Grail stories were written by Chretien de Troyes, whose patron was Marie, Countess of Champagne, daughter of Eleanor and Louis. How could you view *The Canterbury Papers* as a grail story? What similarities are there between Alais' quest and the grail knights' quest? If Alais found a grail at the end of this story, what would it be? Would it be a person, or a quality, or a state of mind?