Four Queens

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FOUR QUEENS

THE PROVENÇAL SISTERS WHO RULED EUROPE



Nancy Goldstone



CHAPTER I

THE LAND OF SONG

With my breath I draw toward me the air
that I feel coming from Provence;
everything that comes from there rejoices me,
so that when I hear good of it
I listen smiling,
and for every word demand a hundred:
so much it pleases me when I hear good of it.

For no one knows so sweet a country
as from the Rhône to Vence,
enclosed between the sea and the Durance,
and nowhere knows a joy so pure that it shines.

– Peire Vidal, troubadour, 1180–1206

Bordered to the west by the Rhône, to the northeast by the dramatic mountains of Savoy, and to the south by the blue-green waters of the Mediterranean, Provence, with its inviting vineyards, gentle climate, and profusion of sunlight and flowers, embodied the medieval ideal of an exquisite garden. It seems somehow fitting that the story of the four sisters who would become the most sought-after women of the thirteenth century should have as its backdrop so enchanting a setting. Salimbene de Adam, a Franciscan friar who lived in the archiepiscopal city of Aix-en-Provence, called it "a most salubrious place with an abundance of grain." Its principal towns

included Avignon and Arles, which bordered the Rhône and serviced the traders and travelers who flowed south with the current, for the river was the favored route to Marseille, which in turn served as a jumping-off point to the exotic and lucrative ports of Sicily, Cyprus, and Constantinople. Like much of the rest of Europe, the county of Provence – governed by a count, as a duchy was governed by a duke and a kingdom by a king – was sparsely populated and agrarian. Large tracts of countryside were still uninhabited, or dotted with small farms or the occasional château. The strongest of these was the castle at Tarascon, which stood large and reassuringly solid, its heavy stone towers dominating the landscape. The narrow, elongated windows of this citadel peered out like dark, mistrustful eyes, a trenchant reminder that, in the Middle Ages, even a garden needed protection.

The natural beauty of the landscape was of such potency that it inspired the voice of medieval culture – the troubadours, roving poets who set their words to music and played to the elegant audiences of the aristocracy. The troubadours were so ubiquitous to Provence, and so identified with its inhabitants and aesthetic, that the county was known throughout the rest of Europe as The Land of Song, and it was said by the chroniclers that Charlemagne himself had bequeathed Provence to the poets.

Marguerite, Eleanor, Sanchia, and Beatrice, as daughters of the count and countess of Provence, were steeped in the culture of the troubadours. It played as important a role in their upbringing as their lineage – indeed, it was their lineage. Their father, Raymond Berenger V, came from a long line of poets. His grandfather, Alfonso II, king of Aragon, was a highly respected troubadour whose verses were praised by Peire Vidal, the greatest poet of his day. Raymond Berenger V inherited his grandfather's talent and passion for literature, and embraced the troubadour culture. He wrote verses and his castle was always open to visiting poets and minstrels. His was a very literary court.

The troubadours were a cluster unto themselves, a microcosm of the society at large, and their poetry reflected the diversity of western European tastes and interests. They came from every class, career, and kingdom. Peers of the realm were troubadours, as were bakers' sons and serfs. Women, too, felt the allure of poetry and rambled around the south of France composing songs; they were called *trobairitz*. Although known today primarily as songwriters, they were also by turns journalists, political columnists, war correspondents, gossipmongers, actors, writers, directors; they were satirists, pageant artists, spin-doctors, and spies. For the savvy warrior, troubadours were as essential a part of his coterie as his lance bearers; how was the daring of one's exploits to be sung far and wide if there were no one present capable of composing a song? "It has been very justly remarked that Richard Coeur de Lion would never have had the brilliant reputation which he enjoyed in his time, if he had not patronized so many poets and minstrels," observed the French historian Fr. Funck-Brentano in his work *The National History of France in the Middle Ages.* Troubadours wrote the words and composed the music that other, lesser talents performed; they were higher on the social scale than the jongleurs, who were mimes and comics, or the minstrels with their red beards. A jongleur juggled or stood on his head, a minstrel could toss and catch apples with a pair of knives or make a dog walk on two legs, but a troubadour cast a spell over his audience, provoking laughter and tears at will, often by the sheer force of the music and the songwriter's charisma. Hundreds of troubadours roamed the south of France in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, and 2,500 of their songs survive. From these we know what the people of the time thought and felt and saw, what they admired, what they despised, what they aspired to: in short, who they were.

The overwhelming predilection among the troubadours was for songs of love. These ranged from the prosaic – "I love her and cherish her so much," crooned Bernart De Ventadorn – to the

practical: "God, let me live long enough to get my hands under her cloak!" exclaimed Gulhem de Peitieu. At the end of the twelfth century, a cleric named Andreas Capellanus, seeking to impress the Countess Marie of Champagne, the daughter of Eleanor of Aquitaine (who had herself raised promiscuity to an art form), had composed the definitive manual on the subject. Entitled *De Amore* (*On Love*), this treatise, written in a facetiously earnest tone, instructed the reader in every possible facet of love-making, including but not limited to medieval pickup lines ("When the divine Being fashioned you, he left himself no further tasks"); comebacks in the event of protestation ("Your objections to my bulging flabby legs and big feet are not securely grounded"); and chivalric delineation of what today would be called "rounding the bases": "Since ancient times, four separate stages of love have been distinguished. The first stage lies in allowing the suitor hope, the second in granting a kiss, the third in enjoyment of an embrace, and the fourth is consummated in the yielding of the whole person," Andreas wrote.

The whole concept of "courtly love," a highly idealized passion whereby the suitor suffers any degradation and performs any task demanded by a lady in order to win her affection, was the invention of a troubadour. The conceit had its genesis in the old King Arthur-Guinevere-Lancelot triangle. Courtly love was especially interesting because, according to the rules of chivalry, it could only take place between a married woman and someone other than her husband. Paradoxically, it was considered an ennobling passion. Knights were expected to be charming, courteous, gentle, and generous at court while under the spell of their one true love. (This last characteristic was especially important to the troubadours who relied entirely on their patron's hospitality for recompense for their efforts.) Moreover, courtly love was said to be responsible for augmenting a knight's physical strength and commitment. Just a glimpse of Guinevere could spur Lancelot on to feats of remarkable skill and bravery.

Despite the troubadours' influence, by all accounts, the sisters' mother, Beatrice of Savoy, countess of Provence, was very happy with her husband. Beatrice had married Raymond Berenger V in 1219, when he was fourteen and she twelve. Raymond Berenger V was the first count of Provence to actually live in Provence in more than a century – all his predecessors had preferred to stay in Aragon. During the summer months, when the weather was fine, he and Beatrice traveled around the county, meeting the barons and accepting their homage. The count was young and strong and athletic: he climbed the long eastern side of the Alps and visited villages unknown to his ancestors. In the winter months, he and Beatrice held court at their castle in Aix-en-Provence, or sometimes went south to Brignoles, which he had given to Beatrice as a wedding present.

Beatrice gave birth to twin sons in 1220, but they did not survive. Marguerite was born in 1221, when Beatrice was just fifteen years old. Eleanor came in 1223, followed by Sanchia in 1228, and finally the baby, Beatrice – four girls in ten years.

The children inherited their mother's loveliness. The renowned thirteenth-century English chronicler Matthew Paris, an eyewitness with no great love of foreigners, called Beatrice of Savoy "a woman of remarkable beauty." But she was also intelligent and capable. One of ten children, eight of whom were boys, Beatrice had learned at an early age to value strength and power. From her father, Thomas, a bellicose, domineering man who was happiest when making war on his neighbors, she had inherited a family ethos of solidarity at all cost. Thomas had ruled his large, unwieldy brood unconditionally and with an iron will. From their first breaths, Beatrice and all of her siblings had been taught to think first of the family's ambitions, and these were many.

The sisters' early education focused on learning to comport themselves as great ladies. They stood up straight while accompanying their parents to Mass and knew their prayers. For sport they went riding and hunting with falcons – falconry was very

popular in the thirteenth century; the emperor had even written a book on it. They learned to dance and play chess. They listened to the stories of the troubadours and dreamed of Lancelot and Guinevere.

During this period, Marguerite and Eleanor, only two years apart, were each other's constant companion (Sanchia and Beatrice were too young to be interesting as playmates). Marguerite's temperament resembled her mother's. She was patient, capable, intelligent, and responsible, with a rigid and highly developed sense of fairness. Eleanor was more mercurial. As is often the case with second children, she both admired and competed with her accomplished older sister. The differences in their personalities were complementary, and the bonds these two established while growing up in Provence would survive into adulthood. Marguerite and Eleanor were always much closer to each other than they were to either Sanchia or Beatrice.

Theirs was a life of gaiety, affluence, and leisure. The court of Raymond Berenger V and Beatrice of Savoy was padded by elaborate manners and conspicuous expenditure. The count was an important man, and in the thirteenth century important men had a responsibility to live opulently. Plentiful food and gifts for guests were also the mark of true nobility. One troubadour outlined the menu of a meal that would do justice to his patron's status; the poet advised serving eighteen courses, including venison, wild boar, duck, capon, hens, fish, pastry, fruit, fritters, and spiced wine. Another troubadour reported that a viscount once used a shovel to dispense "priceless" pepper to a guest and built a bonfire of nuts rather than wood in order to prove that he was a real aristocrat and not a country bumpkin.

Raymond Berenger V and his family were very much a part of this culture of studied affluence. They entertained often and lavishly. "Count Raymond was a lord of gentle lineage . . . a wise and courteous lord was he, and of noble state and virtuous, and in his time did honorable deeds, and to this court came all gentle

persons of Provence and of France and of Catalonia, by reason of his courtesy and noble estate," wrote the medieval chronicler Giovanni Villani. Among his many visitors were his wife's brothers. The count kept a large retinue and rewarded his entourage with gifts of money and clothes. His daughters were dressed in gowns of rich red cloth, the sleeves long and tightly laced to their arms. Over this they might wear a jacket of green silk. White gloves protected their hands from the sun. Even as children, they had their hair, which they wore down around their shoulders (only married women put up their hair), dressed in jeweled combs.

They had no chores, they did no work. The nobility had by long custom set themselves as a class apart from and above the despised "villein" (peasantry), but Raymond Berenger of Provence took the notion a step further and established a series of laws institutionalizing the distance separating persons of quality from the rest of the county's inhabitants. Provençal knights were prohibited from farm work, including ploughing, digging, or carrying loads of wood or manure. A gentlewoman was defined by law as "one who went neither to the oven, nor to the wash-house, nor to the mill."

An excessive obsession with outward appearance, careless largesse, a disdain for physical labor – it was at precisely the time that Marguerite, Eleanor, Sanchia, and Beatrice were growing up that the nobility in France embarked consciously and deliberately on the path that six centuries later would lead directly to Robespierre and the guillotine.

If Raymond Berenger V's hospitality was prodigious, his income was not. The count was frequently in need of money to satisfy his household needs. Whenever his financial difficulties threatened to become embarrassing, Raymond Berenger turned to his most trusted adviser, Romeo de Villeneuve. Romeo was a judge of Catalonian descent whose father had been a loyal servant of Raymond Berenger's father. He was a shrewd administrator with an eye for undervalued assets and a knack for finance. One of

Romeo's favorite borrowing techniques was to pledge one or more of the count's castles as security against future payments. The fact that he always pledged the same castles did not seem to bother anyone. "In a short time, by his industry and prudence, [Romeo] increased his master's revenue threefold," Villani observed.

There was an additional aspect of their childhood that set the sisters apart. The evidence is very strong that the daughters of the count and countess of Provence were literate. Customs in the south of France were different from those of the rest of Europe. There was precedence in France that, in the absence of a male heir, a woman could both inherit and administer her property. There were even women who acted as judges.

Raymond Berenger V had no male heir. He took seriously the Provençal tradition that allowed heads of households to will property to a daughter. Provence was a large county, the governing of which required literacy. As further evidence that all of the girls were trained in their native *langua d'oc* (vernacular southern French, the language of the troubadours) as children, there is the occasion much later, in 1256, when Beatrice of Savoy asked a doctor named Aldebrandino of Siena to compile all of the recent knowledge on pediatric medicine into a book so that she could take it to her daughters as a gift when she went to visit them in England and France.

But there was more to suggest that at least Marguerite and Eleanor knew their letters not only in the poet's *langua d'oc*, but in the scholar's Latin as well. Letters written in Latin when the sisters were older survive today. Matthew Paris would later sneer that Beatrice of Savoy referred to her daughters as "sons" in "a vulgar fashion" – but perhaps that was because she thought of them that way, had had them educated to rule as a son would rule, the way her brothers had been educated, and that would involve learning some Latin. Most telling of all is Marguerite's commissioning, when she was older, the composition of a children's book of simple first prayers in Latin, called a Psalter, specifically for girls. Psalters were the primers of the Middle Ages, the way young children learned to recognize letters and begin reading.

All of this, in combination with a father who penned verses, and a household steeped in the troubadour tradition, with regular concerts and performances and poets continually underfoot – the sisters from Provence could read and write.

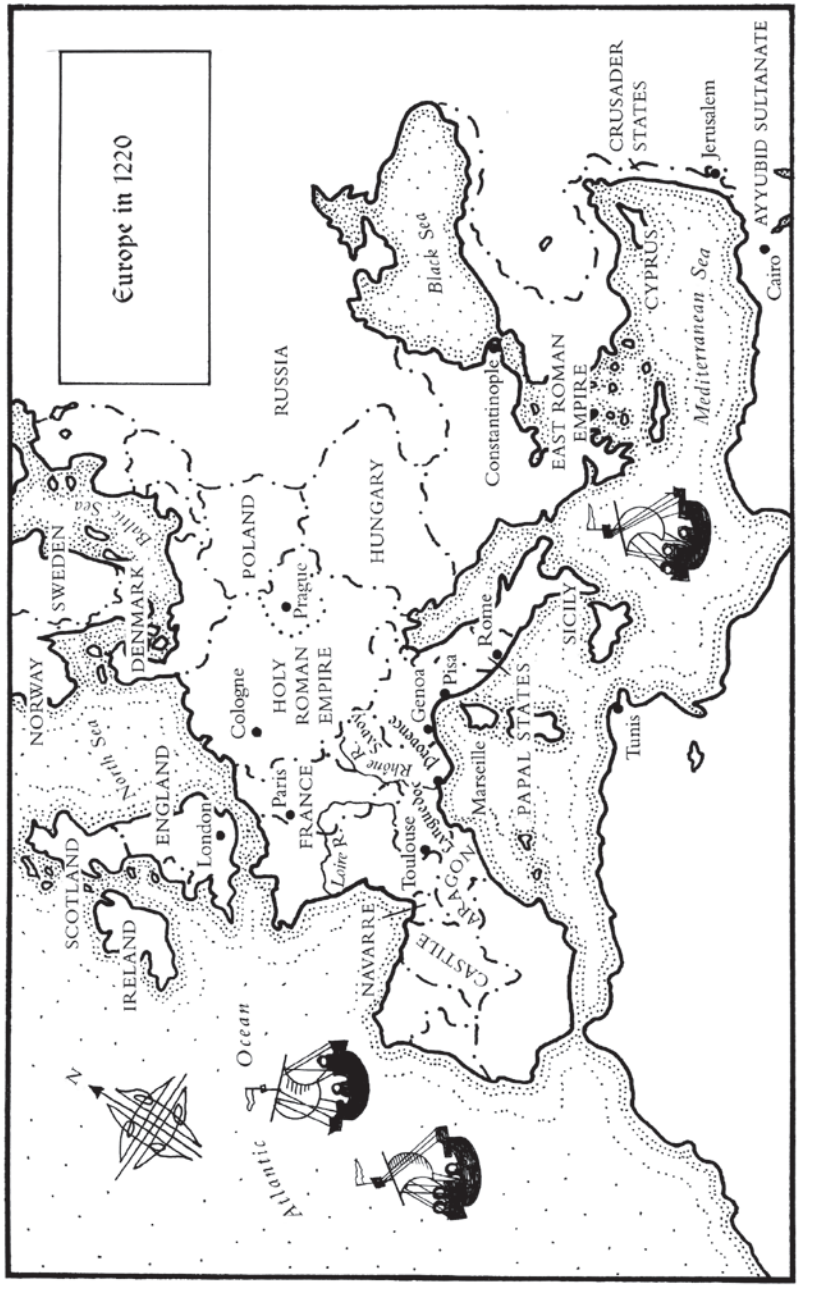
Although their home was a contented one, the girls' situation was not without risk. The children themselves were too young to appreciate a growing danger of which their parents were only too aware. A war raged to the north and west, which threatened to spill over into Provence; it had its roots in a struggle between Church and state, king and count that would forever change the political landscape of southern France.

Thirteenth-century Europe inherited a world that was as stratified as it was unstable. There was a deep, universal respect, almost a reverence, for the past but this sentiment was paradoxically juxtaposed against a manifest and overwhelming opportunism that would shape the future. There were no lack of boundaries and laws and regulations in existence, but they only worked if they were enforced, and enforcement was by no means assured. Just the opposite. It often seemed as if the rules existed simply to be broken.

As might be expected under these conditions, power was a fluid and intensely personal concept. Each of the three great rulers of the time – the Holy Roman Emperor, the king of France, and the pope – were bent on enlarging their territory and authority at the expense of the other two. They were men who came to their positions with an inherited sense of imperial leadership and a devotion to an historic ideal. All of their efforts were focused on retrieving past glory. For the king of France, this meant a return to the ideal of Charlemagne, the greatest European king in memory, who four hundred years earlier had ruled an empire stretching from the Baltic to the Mediterranean. Similarly,

the Holy Roman Emperor, whose dominions had so dwindled over the years that only Germany remained, aspired to be another Julius Caesar. The emperor (who also held the title of king of Sicily, a legacy from his family on his mother's side; his father had been German) was intent upon reclaiming the vast lands that had been Rome's a thousand years before, beginning with Italy. The pope's dreams were no less sweeping: he meant to hold not just spiritual but political sway over all of Christendom. In the Middle Ages, popes did not restrict their activities to the realm of religion but often engaged openly in territorial conquest, even going so far as to raise armies for this purpose. As the Church claimed authority over Rome and much of the surrounding area, the pope's ambitions came into direct conflict with the emperor's. The entire thirteenth century would be marked by their struggle.

Nobody in Europe questioned these goals. Great men were expected to have continental ambitions. Whether they would achieve those grandiose ambitions, or even come close to achieving them, depended on the political realities forged by the second order of stratification, the counts and marquis and dukes and other nobles who controlled the minor fiefdoms that nonetheless made up the real power base of Europe. This second tier of political aristocracy was driven by the desire for tangible, practical control of a specific region. Members of this group did not, as a rule, have great visions of world domination (although occasionally someone from the pack would try to organize a general revolt against the top tier, which would inevitably fail). What was important was to expand one's own territory at the expense of one's neighbors – or to foil a neighbor's plot to achieve the same against oneself. It was a game of relative numbers of households and knights, a town here, a castle there. This propensity for limited warfare was as much for pride, exercise, and a little excitement as it was for actual gain. Bertran de Born, a troubadour who fought with Richard the Lion Heart, summed up this chivalric sensibility eloquently:



I tell you there is not so much savor
in eating or drinking or sleeping,
as when I hear them scream, "There they are! Let's get them!"
on both sides, and I hear riderless
horses in the shadows, neighing,
and I hear them scream "Help! Help!"
and I see them fall among the ditches,
little men and great men on the grass,
and I see fixed in the flanks of the corpses
stumps of lances with silken streamers.
Barons, pawn your castles,
and your villages, and your cities
before you stop making war on one another.

The noblemen who controlled these fiefdoms operated in a netherworld of dependence and autonomy that today we would call spheres of influence. In theory, every count, duke, or marquis owed his land, position, and authority to the good offices of either a king or the emperor and as a result owed fealty to that sovereign.

For example, Provence was a fief of the Holy Roman Empire, which made the count of Provence a vassal of the emperor. Technically, this meant that if the emperor needed troops to conduct a war, he could call on Raymond Berenger V to provide him with a contingent of knights and foot soldiers, and Raymond Berenger would be obliged to either honor this request or pay a fine in lieu of supplying the actual regiment. It was also understood that the count of Provence would not act openly against the wishes or ambitions of the emperor, or join in a conspiracy against the Holy Roman Empire, or otherwise engage in activities that would damage his interests. In exchange, the emperor graciously allowed the count autonomous rule of Provence, which meant he did not meddle in its internal affairs or extract large cash tributes. Also, he was obliged to call upon the resources of the empire to defend Raymond Berenger V against attack if at all possible.

That was the theory. In practice, it worked a little differently. In Raymond Berenger V's case, Provence was so far from the emperor's base of operations in Sicily, and so tangential to his interests, that the emperor could neither enforce a demand on the count nor come to his aid. Also, as Raymond Berenger V was a pious man, the pope had influence over his decisions and policies. Since the pope's dictates were almost always in direct conflict with those of the emperor, Raymond Berenger was often forced to choose between the two. Lastly, there were the count's own territorial ambitions to consider and those of his extremely aggressive neighbor, the count of Toulouse.

Raymond VI of Toulouse (not to be confused with the sisters' father, Raymond Berenger V – Raymond was a very popular name in this part of the world) was an extremely powerful nobleman. During Raymond Berenger V's childhood, the county of Toulouse had dominated the south of France from the Pyrenees to the Rhône, a region that at the time was known, because of the regional dialect, *langua d'oc*, as Languedoc. By contrast, the kingdom of France was at the time confined to Paris and its immediate environs. Consequently, Raymond VI of Toulouse oversaw more territory than the king of France, owned more castles, commanded more knights. Although technically a vassal of the French king, Raymond was actually more of a rival, the monarch of a second, shadow kingdom to the south of Paris. But he was also reckless. Secure in his wealth and sovereignty, Raymond flouted the rules of polite society. He had married and buried four wives, and his womanizing was legendary. His court was a hodgepodge of suspicious characters whose tastes were none too particular and whose moral inclinations suited those of the count.

Worse, the count of Toulouse tolerated the heretical religion of Catharism. The Cathars were a peaceful Catholic sect whose members did not believe in worldly riches or ambition, and who did not recognize the pope's authority as head of the Church on earth. For years, the papacy had tried with conspicuous failure to

curb Raymond VI's excesses and convert his citizens back to orthodoxy. The situation reached a crisis in 1208 when Raymond murdered a visiting papal legate who had refused to consider rescinding the count's latest excommunication ban.

It was an audacious move even for a shadow king, and it provoked an equally audacious reprisal from the pope. The pontiff called for a crusade against Toulouse, the first time in the history of the Church that Christian Europe was roused to fight against Christian Europeans. To encourage participation in what was admittedly a unique enterprise, the pope announced that any of Raymond's territory conquered by a true Catholic would henceforth become the property of that Catholic.

The pope's offer of land-for-heretics was a powerful inducement, and the call was answered. An army of French knights led by the seasoned crusader Simon de Montfort assembled and began the march south.

Simon de Montfort was one of the most renowned figures of his day, and a pivotal actor in the drama that would result in French hegemony in the region. Simon was austere, honest, pious, faithful to his wife, abstemious, uncomplaining, and relentless. His only flaw of character seems to have been the unbridled, exuberant brutality with which he slaughtered those whose religious beliefs did not conform to his own. Here was a man who loved his work.

Led by Simon, the crusaders marched to Carcassonne and Béziers. There, hundreds of Cathars were killed, including dozens of families who had sought sanctuary in a church and who were burned to death when the crusaders set fire to it. The viscount of Carcassonne, a relative of Raymond VI's, was thrown into prison and died of mysterious causes three months later. Simon de Montfort got all of his land.

From then on, the crusade pursued its deadly course in the name of the French. Heretic-killing was a warm-weather sport, and every summer Simon de Montfort's army would swell with new recruits from the north and more towns would be destroyed

and more land would change hands. Thousands of innocent people – farmers, peasants, shopkeepers, burghers, men, women, children – perished in the flames, still clinging to their faith like larks to a divine song.

Finally, Simon de Montfort, that battle-scarred warrior, avenger of the one true faith and slaughterer of an entire population, was himself killed by a large rock emanating from a siege-engine. The king of France, Louis VIII, impressed by his effort and the lucrative territories that were passed on to the French crown upon his death, pledged to continue the crusade. Every summer, Louis would come down from Paris with an army, kill a few heretics, take a castle here and there, and leave. But when it came to war, Louis was no Simon. And just at this time, Raymond VI's son, Raymond VII, took over Toulouse upon his father's death. Raymond VII was young, strong, and dedicated to recovering his family's former eminence. He began to fight back.

Events came to a head in 1226 when Louis made his annual appearance in Languedoc. It was a hot, hellish summer and taking the castle he wanted proved surprisingly difficult. The king of France caught a fever from the unhealthy conditions in the camp – they lived with the rotting garbage and sewage – and died on the way home, leaving his wife and twelve-year-old son to rule France.

The death of the king provoked a war of succession. History records the victor in this contest as Louis IX, the king's eldest son. He was to go on to become one of the most powerful and respected rulers of the thirteenth century. Under his administration, formerly independent fiefdoms would be absorbed one by one, with slow and relentless efficiency, making France the dominant force in Europe. This would in turn exert enormous influence on the fortunes of all four sisters from Provence.

Louis IX did become king. But it was not he who was responsible for the ascendancy of France. It was his mother, Blanche of Castile, the White Queen.