

# Sibling Rivalry on a Royal Scale

## four sisters of the House of Savoy

Marguerite. Eléonore. Sanchia. Beatrice. These four sisters, members of the prestigious House of Savoy, made history in the 13<sup>th</sup> century when they all became queens – of France, England, Germany, and Italy.

Arguably the most famous women in the Western world during their lifetimes – praised in the *chansons* of the Southern troubadours, mentioned in Dante Alighieri's *Inferno*, lauded by chroniclers for their incomparable beauty – the sisters of Savoy also might have been, as a group, the most powerful.

Working together was the key to their success, as their mother, Beatrice of Savoy, had doubtless told them many times. Had they continued to do so, they might have made remarkable accomplishments for their kingdoms and their family. Indeed, Marguerite and Eléonore, the eldest sisters, worked together with the younger Sanchia to promote peace between England and France for the first time since the Norman Conquest of 1066. Yet the death of their father and his bequest of Provence to the youngest, Beatrice, tore the sisters apart, with tragic consequences.



"Family comes first." That's the motto the queens' mother, Beatrice of Savoy, hammers home to her daughters in my novel about them, *Four Sisters, All Queens* (to be pub. May 2012, Simon & Schuster/Gallery Books).

As daughter in an up-and-coming aristocratic family, the Countess of Provence knew what she was talking about. Initially rulers of a small, inconsequential area in the foothills of the Alps, the House of Savoy increased its influence not through battles and conquests as others did, but by virtue of marriages, diplomacy, and political maneuvers. (Ultimately, the Savoyards would rule all of Italy for centuries until the middle of the twentieth century.) Beatrice of Savoy knew how important one's family can be to securing and maintaining power, never more so than when one's family members are also powerful.

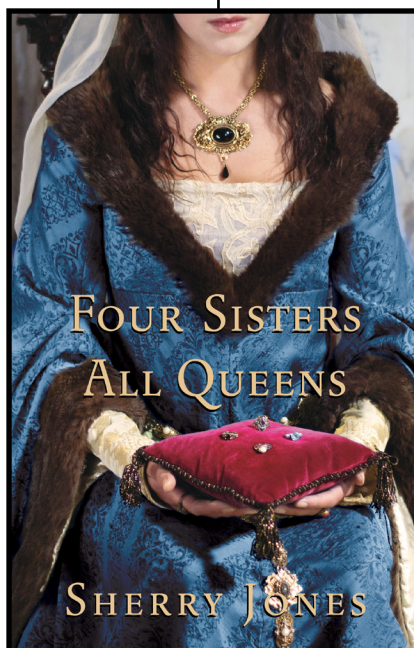
*Four daughters had Count Ramon Berenguer,  
Each one of them a queen, thanks to Romeo*

Although Dante credits the count and countess's steward, Romeo de Villeneuve, with the sisters' marriages to kings, Beatrice of Savoy's influence cannot be overlooked. After all, she had eight brothers, of whom seven were essentially landless. Given her involvement in her daughters' lives until her death, it's certain that she played an important role in their marriages to kings and future kings. Not for nothing did she have them schooled in the *trivium* and *quadrivium*, comprising the seven liberal arts of grammar, rhetoric, logic, arithmetic, geometry, astronomy and music. This type of education, almost always reserved for boys, gave her "boys," as she supposedly called them, an edge when it came to meeting the demands of courtly life. Indeed, it probably helped Marguerite impress the King of France's envoy, Giles de Flagy, on his visit to Aix-en-Provence to inspect her as a potential bride.

"If you marry the first well, you will marry all the others the better for the sake of her kinship," Romeo is supposed to have told the girls' father, Ramon de Berenguer. Not long after Marguerite's marriage to King Louis IX of France, his prediction seemed destined to come true: Marguerite's younger sister Eléonore married King Henry III of England in 1236.

The sisters, only two years apart in age, must have competed with each other from the time Eléonore was born, for they certainly competed as queens. Friendless and without family in Paris – and tormented by her spiteful mother-in-law Blanche de Castille, the powerful "White Queen" (whose story is told in my Gallery Books e-novella, *White Heart*, scheduled for release in April 2012) – the childless Marguerite, facing annulment of her marriage, must have turned positively green with envy when Eléonore announced the birth of a son. Eléonore was also able to provide for the Savoy family what Marguerite was not: landed titles. Soon her uncle Guillaume became King Henry's chief advisor; her uncle Thomas, the Count of Flanders; and her uncle Boniface, the Archbishop of Canterbury. Not until their kingdoms faced grave crises, however, did these sisters truly shine.

In 1248, when King Louis IX sailed to Egypt with an eye toward



by Sherry Jones

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conquering Jerusalem in the Seventh Crusade, Marguerite went with him – and, when he was captured, saved Damietta from invasion, negotiated the terms of the King's release, and raised the funds to ransom him. When she and her husband returned to France after Queen Blanche's death, Marguerite played a prominent role in the kingdom's administration and business affairs.

Eléonore, exiled in France during the rebel baron Simon de Montfort's mutiny against the Crown in 1264, raised an army to send across the Channel, using funds given by Marguerite. Only her husband's letter begging her to desist convinced her to drop her bold plan.

Sanchia enjoyed a less illustrious career, in part because of her shy nature. She wanted to join the convent but instead wed King Henry's brother Richard, Earl of Cornwall, who became King of Germany. Richard's support was crucial for the England-France treaty. Did Sanchia help convince him to support the agreement, which meant an end to English aspirations on the Continent?

Peace must have been in the sisters' minds when they brought their families together for Christmas in 1254. Although King Henry and King Louis warmed to each other, the treaty they signed five years later was no easy feat. King Henry gave up claims to Normandy and other lands his father, King John, had lost to France, and King Louis agreed to pay for them. The Treaty of Paris would keep the peace between these perpetually battling kingdoms until the Hundred Years' War some eighty years later.

Where was Beatrice during the love fest? Sitting at the royal equivalent of the "kids' table." Marguerite had placed her there saying that, because she wasn't a queen, she couldn't sit with the rest of them. Marguerite was resentful over property her father had promised for her dowry, then awarded to Beatrice – and that Beatrice refused to give up. The baby among the sisters, Beatrice was seen as spoiled and selfish – but was she any more ambitious than her siblings? Her marriage to Charles of Anjou, King Louis's brother and Marguerite's nemesis, only fanned the flames of her sisters' resentment, and caused them to join forces against her.

"Be at peace," Charles told her, "for I will shortly make you a greater queen than them." She had to work hard for the honor, raising an army of ten thousand to help him conquer Sicily, then leading those troops over the Alps in the wintertime. While Charles fought, Beatrice acted as his general in Rome, coordinating the campaign. She was crowned Queen of Sicily in 1266, but her reign was short: she died the following year.

One wonders if, at her sister's funeral, Marguerite felt remorse for the way she had treated Beatrice. Was gaining a castle in Provence worth the price of her sister's love? Apparently so. Beatrice gone, Marguerite turned her efforts to overthrowing Charles and taking Provence for herself. It was a fight she would continue for the rest of her life.

### Marguerite

Married to King Louis IX when she was thirteen, the witty and intellectual Marguerite learned patience the hard way: by enduring the contempt of her mother-in-law, the formidable

Blanche de Castille. Suppressed by the jealous and possessive Blanche, Marguerite finally got to show her mettle in Egypt, when, just hours after giving birth, she convinced a group of merchants not to abandon Damietta to starvation and conquest by their Saracen enemies. She also negotiated the ransom and release of her husband and his knights from Egyptian prison.

Her marriage to Louis, however, was not a happy one. Although she bore him eleven children, the king's chronicler, Jean de Joinville, criticized him for his inattentiveness to her and their offspring. After King Louis died, Marguerite refused to testify in favor of his sainthood. "Louis," she says in *Four Sisters, All Queens*, "was no saint."

### Eléonore

The stylish Eléonore, known for her cutting-edge fashions, was King Henry III's bold and daring Queen of England who advanced her family's interests at the expense of England's coffers and her own popularity. She and Henry enjoyed a happy marriage; their many interests in common included the Arthurian legends. Eléonore braved angry crowds on the London Bridge in effort to reach her eldest son, Edward I, when he was in danger, and she raised armies more than once on her husband's behalf. She, more than any of her sisters, advanced the interests of her family by helping her Savoyard uncles gain prominent positions in the church and aristocracy.

### Sanchia

Timid, sweet Sanchia was said to be the best-looking of all the sisters, who, according to the chronicler Matthew Paris, inherited their mother's renowned beauty. She married King Henry's brother Richard, the Earl of Cornwall, after he fell in love with her at first sight. She hated Germany, despite being crowned its queen; her husband, disillusioned with her, left her to die alone in their castle in Berkhamsted.

### Beatrice

The baby of the family, Beatrice was the favorite child of the Count of Provence, who left the county to her in order, he said, to ensure her an advantageous marriage. Men traveled from kingdoms far and wide to woo her, but, like Penelope in Homer's *The Odyssey*, she resisted them all. Only Charles d'Anjou, the daring and ambitious younger brother of King Louis IX, won her by literally sweeping her off her feet and carrying her on horseback to France, where they married. While fighting against her sisters' efforts to wrest part or all of her inheritance from her, Beatrice also raised an army of 10,000 to conquer Sicily, then led them over the Alps in the thick of winter. ❀



SHERRY JONES is the author of the controversial bestseller *The Jewel of Medina* and its critically acclaimed sequel, *The Sword of Medina*. Her e-novella, *White Heart: A Tale of Blanche de Castille, the White Queen of France* debuts in April, and her novel *Four Sisters, All Queens* debuts in May 2012, both from Simon and Schuster's Gallery Books. Find her online at [www.authorsherryjones.com](http://www.authorsherryjones.com).