

# **The Lion in Winter Film Summary**

## **The Lion in Winter by Anthony Harvey**

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## Context

*The Lion in Winter* is loosely based on the true story of Henry II of England and his family. Henry II lived during the 12th century and ruled England from 1154-1189. Before ever becoming King of England, Henry already owned both Normandy and Anjou in France, and when he married Eleanor of Aquitaine in 1152 he gained her lands, including Aquitaine, Touraine, and Gascony.

With the gain of Eleanor's lands, Henry became even more powerful than King Louis VII of France, Eleanor's ex-husband. Henry and Eleanor had eight children together, including the three sons-Richard, Geoffrey, and John-seen in this film. The other children either died young or were girls.

Henry and Eleanor eventually had a falling out when she and his children plotted against him as he tried to steal land from his daughter, Joan. Henry had Eleanor imprisoned for plotting against him and began an affair with Rosamund Clifford (known in legend as the "fair Rosamund"). After the brief affair ended, Henry took up with his son Richard's betrothed, Alais, the princess of France. Alais was raised in the castle with Henry and Eleanor's children, but Henry tried to divorce Eleanor so he could marry Alais. Eventually, Henry died in battle against his son Richard, and Richard became King of England. After Richard's death, John became King.

Anthony Harvey's film is based on James Goldman's play. It is a brilliant piece of work about a specific moment in time experienced by these historical characters. *The Lion in Winter* portrays a time when Henry calls everyone home for the holiday to decide who will be his heir. Henry's wife and sons all plot against him along with King Philip of France. Additionally, Henry spends time trying to convince Eleanor to agree to a divorce so that he can marry Alais, the woman who was originally betrothed to his son, Richard. Henry does everything in his power to convince Eleanor to sign the papers, but she absolutely refuses unless he hands the kingdom over to Richard - something he will likely never do because he favors John.

Although this film is technically about historical figures, it is actually a dark comedy about family relationships. Families, even royalty, are far more complex than they may seem. The film explores the lengths that people will go to in order to get what they want. Family valuables are often fought over in any family, but no one fights as hard as those who will either win or lose a country. We see the love and the hatred among the members of the family as each seeks to manipulate Henry for his or her own means.

The film is a classic because the themes and the relationships are timeless. Every family has had difficulty working together at some time, and many families are just as dysfunctional as Henry's family. Audiences have always been able to relate to the dark humor in this film, and they love the multifaceted, complicated characters, especially Katharine Hepburn's portrayal of Eleanor of Aquitaine. As an interesting side note, Katharine Hepburn is actually a descendent of Eleanor of Aquitaine through numerous

lines, including both Elinor's marriage to King Louis VII of France and her marriage to King Henry II of England.

*The Lion in Winter* won several Academy Awards: Best Actress for Katharine Hepburn, (making her the third performer to win consecutive awards and the first to win them all for lead roles, although she did tie with Barbara Streisand for *Funny Girl* in this award); Best Music for John Barry; and Best Writing for James Goldman. The film also won two Golden Globe Awards: Best Motion Picture - Drama and Best Actor in a Drama for Peter O'Toole. The film won and was nominated for dozens of other awards from organizations around the globe.



## Summary and Analysis

As the film opens, the credits roll and horrifying masks appear in the background. The first scene begins with Henry involved in a sword fight with his son, John. After pinning John to the ground, Henry pulls him up and tells him that he's improving.

John runs off, and the scene turns to Alais singing and picnicking nearby. Henry joins Alais, and they discuss what will happen to the kingdom once Henry dies. Henry explains that everyone must know who his successor is before he dies so that his great country will be held together. Henry has decided that John is the rightful heir. Alais worries that she will lose Henry, but he reassures her of his love. She confronts him with the fact that he has loved others and that Eleanor, his queen, still lives locked in a castle at Sarum.

Captain Marshall, Henry's most trusted knight, rides up, and Henry tells him to bring Eleanor and all his children to the court at Chinon for Christmas. When Marshall asks what to do if Eleanor refuses, Henry replies that "she would not miss this for the world."

At a tournament, one man is thrown off his horse in a joust. Richard, the winner, prepares to behead the knight, but Marshall appears and stops him. The scene then moves to a beach where two parties of men move toward each other; one walks openly along the beach while the other hides behind boulders. On a hill nearby, Geoffrey watches quietly. Geoffrey gives a signal and the hidden party rides out, meets the other party, and begins to fight them. Geoffrey gives another signal, and another party rides out from behind nearby cliffs to join the fight. From behind him, Marshall calls to Geoffrey and tells him that Henry wants to see him. Finally, Marshall then goes to Eleanor's tower and tells her about the Christmas court. When he tells her it will be held at Chinon, she seems to become interested.

At Chinon, the bell tolls, and the court begins to rise. Henry tries to get ready, while Alais asks him what would happen if for once she didn't obey him. Alais also asks how much trouble she could be if she chose. While breakfasting, Alais tells Henry that she cannot be his mistress if she is married to John as planned. She asks him to hide her, but he says her brother will want his dowry returned. John appears on the scene as Alais and Henry almost kiss.

John runs out to meet his brother, Geoffrey. John is only sixteen, and he is very impulsive. Inside, Henry explains that he cannot return Alais's dowry, and he tells Alais about his former relationship with Eleanor. Henry tells Alais that she will do what he says, and he will use her as he wants. Alais tells Henry that she will fight for him. The sons talk about Eleanor, and Richard says he is not as close to her anymore while John says he does not want to see her. They also discuss who will be Henry's heir. Richard says that he has experience and will be king. John exclaims that he is Henry's favorite, and he will be king.



Eleanor finally arrives at Chinon, and Henry and Alais meet her at the boat; she greets them warmly. When she sees her children, Eleanor talks with them about "the role of sex in history." Had Eleanor had boys with Louis VII, she would still have been the Queen of France. Richard calls Alais "the family whore," and Eleanor says she is nonetheless fond of Alais. As they discuss the crown, Eleanor tells the men that two of them will have to learn to live with disappointment.

Henry and Eleanor then go out to meet King Philip of France, Alais's brother. Philip is concerned that the treaty made when Alais was sent to England is being broken. He tells Henry that either Alais and John wed, or she comes back to France and Henry returns the dowry. After Philip leaves, Richard tells Henry that he will have the crown and Alais, and he will fight to the death to get them. John becomes upset at the insult Richard throws his way, and Eleanor tells John to go to dinner. John responds that he only obeys the King, but he is angry when Henry sides with Eleanor. John stomps out in a childish temper.

Eleanor asks Henry if that is the person he wants to rule the country. From behind her, Geoffrey says that he will run the country while John rules it. Geoffrey tells his parents that there is no affection for him in his own home. After Geoffrey leaves, Eleanor confides to Henry that she doesn't "much like our children" except for Alais, the one she raised but did not bear. Alais does not believe Eleanor ever felt fondness for her, but Eleanor says Henry can have anyone in his bed that he wants. Alais tells Eleanor that trying to hurt her is not fair as she has no defense. After hearing that Henry let his last mistress go in a trade for Eleanor's land, Alais leaves.

Eleanor and Henry discuss their lives together, and he tells her that although he loves Alais, she is simply his latest love; he will use her in the way that will best serve his country. When asked about her time in the castle, Eleanor tells him that she rather enjoys it now. He tells her she will never be freed because she almost won the last war she began against him. The couple walks to join the dinner. Henry says that he is tired of war. Eleanor tells him that if John and Alais do not marry, she will make certain that he loses his land. They arrive to the shouts of the people. They taunt and threaten one another quietly as the people cheer their entrance. At dinner, Henry tells Eleanor that he never loved her; she is glad to hear this as it will make it easier for her to have him killed should he not do as she desires.

Back in her room, Eleanor is joined by Richard. She tells him she has been keeping up with him because she loves him, but he has difficulty believing her. He accuses her of being deceptive, saying, "You're so deceitful you can't ask for water when you're thirsty. We could tangle spiders in the webs you weave." Suddenly, John bursts in to tell her that Henry has finished the treaty terms.

The family goes to meet Philip, and they discuss the treaty terms. Henry tells Richard that he wants him to be the successor - he will have both Alais and the crown - and John begins to whine that he is the favorite. Henry tells John that he would be unable to keep the country together, and tells Richard that he is only getting the country so he won't pull it apart. Alais begins yelling that she is the only one hurt in this situation.



"Kings, queens, knights, everywhere you look and I'm the only pawn. I haven't got a thing to lose - that makes me dangerous." John makes it clear he is not ready to give up.

Geoffrey talks to Eleanor, and she tells him that she doesn't trust him. Geoffrey wants to be Richard's chancellor now so that he can gain power; he wants to see his parents suffer. They both know that getting Henry to give up Alais and his kingdom will not be easy. Eleanor later tells Richard that Geoffrey will sell them all out to each other. Richard confronts his mother and explains that he will not be used as a pawn against his father. She recounts her life with Henry, but he tells her that she loves no one, including him. She cuts herself to show her love to him; she wishes to give him everything.

Before Henry meets with Philip, Geoffrey warns Philip that the treaty is a lie and asks what would happen if Geoffrey were king. Philip tells him that this is his game. Geoffrey then meets with John and tells him that they should join Philip to destroy Richard and the family. The men agree to the war after Philip assures them that they will win.

Alais confronts Henry about his offer to give her to Richard. She makes it clear that she does not want to be a pawn. He explains that Eleanor only wants Aquitaine in order to torture him. Eleanor eavesdrops and then interrupts the conversation. Henry demands the Aquitaine for John, offering Eleanor her freedom in exchange. Crying, Eleanor tells him how much she wants her freedom, saying, "You offer me the only thing I want if I give up the only thing I treasure." He jumps up and asks her to sign the papers, but as she sits down, she makes a final request: have the wedding now. Henry reveals that although he loves Alais, he can live without her. Eleanor begins to torment Henry about old rumors that she slept with Henry's father. Henry rushes out, calling his family together and calling for a priest.

The family gathers in the middle of the night for Richard and Alais's wedding. Alais protests, but Henry pulls her into the chapel. However, when Richard finds out that Eleanor is giving Henry the Aquitaine in exchange for her freedom, Richard refuses to marry Alais. Philip speaks up and tells everyone that Henry never meant to have the wedding. Henry says that Alais will never marry while he lives. Geoffrey announces that they are at war, and Geoffrey will not rest until John becomes king.

Eventually, only Alais, Henry, and Eleanor remain in the chapel. Henry exclaims that he loves being king, and Alais reprimands him for playing with her heart. Before she leaves, Eleanor asks to see Henry kiss Alais so she can compare it to her imaginings. Henry again professes his love to Alais, then kisses her as Eleanor cries at the door.

Back in her room, Eleanor reflects on her fate. She is bitter and sad, and she realizes that she has lost the fight for her freedom. Geoffrey comes to her room to wish her a Merry Christmas. He asks why they do not love him and never have. Eleanor tells Geoffrey that she is sick of them all. John and Richard both come to her room and complain that they are all prisoners of Henry. She tells Richard to deal with the loss for now, and John begins to taunt him. John then begins to panic as he remembers that



they were supposed to start a war with Henry, and he will be disowned if Henry discovers the situation. Eleanor sends Richard to talk to Philip.

Geoffrey meets with Philip and says that he could have the crown by morning. John was eavesdropping and now attacks Geoffrey. John and Geoffrey hide as Richard comes inside. Richard asks for Philip's help, but Philip explains that he could destroy John and Geoffrey more easily than Richard. Richard and Philip make a deal. The viewer learns that they have been lovers in the past, and Philip is angry that Richard had not written. Another knock at the door and Henry enters while Richard hides behind the curtains.

Henry and Philip discuss Philip's father, and Philip tells Henry that he doesn't want any of his peace. Philip explains that he has plenty of time, while Henry is growing older by the day. He sees no reason to fight Henry when Henry's sons will be more than happy to do the job. Henry starts to leave, having found out all he needs to know about Philip's strategy and schemes.

Philip then accuses Henry of taking everything from his father and then making his father love him for it. Philip says that sodomy apparently passes through the generations, and tells Henry that Richard began a relationship with him when he was only fifteen. Philip tells Henry that he told Richard he loved him so that one day he could tell Henry the story. Richard cannot bear the strain anymore and makes his presence known. Richard asks Henry why he never loved him.

Geoffrey also comes into the open. He accuses Henry of lacking in love to him. Geoffrey says that he is the only hope for the crown: everyone else has betrayed Henry. Geoffrey pulls back the curtain to show John, but Henry still tries to believe that John loves him. John makes it clear that he has never felt loved either, and he does not intend to wait until Henry dies to claim his kingdom. Geoffrey reiterates that he is all that is left for Henry.

Confronted by his sons, Henry says, "My life, when it is written, will read better than it lived. Henry Fitz-Empress, first Plantagenet, a king at 21, the ablest soldier of an able time. He led men well, he cared for justice when he could and ruled, for thirty years, a state as great as Charlemagne's. He married out of love, a woman out of legend. Not in Alexandria, or Rome, or Camelot has there been such a queen. She bore him many children. But no sons. King Henry had no sons. He had three whiskered things but he disowned them." Then, Henry disowns his sons and runs out. In the hallway, he damns God and cries for his lost boys.

Henry goes to his chamber and wakens Alais, but he then goes to the roof and cries. Now awake, Alais begins to sing carols. Eleanor joins Alais and tells her about what had happened during the night. Eleanor admits that she once loved Henry, but that was a long time ago. Alais explains that Eleanor still loves Henry, but also loves his country; Alais simply loves Henry. Eleanor tells Alais that she will give Henry anything he wants. Alais says that for Christmas she wants to see Eleanor suffer, and Eleanor tells her that she will do it just for her. Alais bursts into tears, and Eleanor comforts her.





Henry comes inside and begins discussing the stars. Alais tells Henry that Eleanor wants him back, but Eleanor does not admit it. She tells him that she has seen Richard and believes that Henry will disinherit him. Eleanor tells him she will do anything if he will just leave her alone. He begins applauding her performance. He tells her that her word is worth nothing, and she asks how they finally got to this point.

Henry tells Eleanor that he wants neither John nor Richard; however, he does want a new wife. Henry explains that the Pope owes him a favor, so he can have their marriage annulled. He wants to marry Alais so that he can have another son. Eleanor tells him that a country town could be filled with women who have borne him sons, but he tells her that he doesn't want any of them, including her sons. Henry catalogs the faults of their sons, showing that none are acceptable to take the crown.

Henry and Eleanor discuss their life together. Henry tells her that she threw him out of their bed for Richard, and she says he threw her out for Rosamund. She tells him that she adores him still; he says that she is lying, but as she cries, they embrace. They reminisce about their first meeting, and he tells her that he loved her. Finally, they kiss. Eleanor tells Henry there will be no annulment because she doesn't want to lose him. He asks her how she could lose him, since she never sees him. He tells her that she can't hold him back forever. Eleanor responds that she can delay him a bit, and then any new child would be murdered after he died. Eleanor says that she wants a son for a king.

Henry plans to leave to meet with the Pope in Rome. Eleanor warns him not to leave the country: everyone is against him, and if Henry leaves, his sons will take over. Henry says that he will lock up both her and the boys. She begins to talk about his father's body, torturing him with the thought of their alleged affair. Henry runs out. After falling to the floor, Eleanor says, "Well, what family doesn't have its ups and downs?"

Henry wakes William Marshall and his troops. He has his sons captured and imprisoned in the dungeon and then tells Eleanor to begin packing for a sunrise departure. Henry packs up his castle and prepares to leave for Rome with Alais. Alais is happy but skeptical when Henry tells her they will be married by the Pope. Henry officially proposes to her, but Alais says that he will never be able to release his sons because both she and their potential child will be murdered. She says she will not live to see that day, and Henry says he will keep his sons locked in the dungeon forever.

Before Eleanor leaves, she visits her children in dungeon a final time. Her man and the guard fight; her man wins. In the dungeon, the men are waiting for Henry to appear. They are surprised to see Eleanor, who has brought each of them a sword. She tells them that there is chaos outside, so they may be able to simply walk out. As they plot to kill Henry, Eleanor tries to leave to warn him. Her sons keep Eleanor from leaving, but the door suddenly opens again as Henry and Alais arrive. All of the main characters are now congregated in the dungeon.

As they talk, Richard grabs one sword and Henry takes the other two. Richard and Henry begin to fight. John comes at Henry with a hidden sword, and Henry pins him to



the floor. Eleanor tells Henry to kill their sons, because they are assassins. Henry sentences them all to death, but he only hits Richard with the blunt of the sword and falls to the ground. Their sons run out of the dungeon, and Henry tells Eleanor that he just couldn't do it. Then he tells Alais that he wants no more women in his life; they have ruined him.

Henry and Eleanor have a final discussion about their lives. She tells him that "If you're broken, it's because you're brittle." She claims to have already suffered much and can take it because she has lost him, the only man she ever wanted. She cries out, "I want to die," and he holds her. He tells her that he is a match for anything except her. Then he says, "We're in the cellar and you're going back to prison and my life is wasted and we've lost each other... and you're smiling." Eleanor tells him, "It's the way I register despair. There's everything in life but hope. " Henry says, "We're both alive... and for all I know that's what hope is." Henry walks Eleanor to her boat and promises to let her out for Easter. He calls out, "I hope we never die." She responds, "So do I!" He asks, "Do you think there's any chance of it?" As her ship sails away, they both wave and laugh heartily.



# Characters

## Henry II, played by Peter O'Toole

### Description

Henry II was the king of England from 1154-1189. In 1183, Henry calls his family together to try to settle the question of who will be his successor to the throne. Henry refuses to make a decision until all of his sons are gathered together. Despite his obvious capability in ruling a country, Henry cannot seem to control his own family.

Henry is a powerful man who has imprisoned his wife, Queen Eleanor, in a castle for plotting against him. He has also taken his son's future wife, Alais, to be his mistress, and he has raised his youngest son, John, on his own. Henry is partial to John and expects to bestow the crown on him.

### Analysis

Henry is a manipulative, powerful man. He is self-centered and focused to some extent on the preservation of his kingdom, but he has also become rather soft in his old age. He has put aside his common sense and has decided that his beloved son John should be the next king. However, he does call in the rest of the family before officially making his decision.

Although Henry is a strong man, he becomes worn down by his family's antics. Everyone in the family is plotting against him to manipulate who will get the crown. Both John and Geoffrey want John to get the crown; Geoffrey wants John to get it so that Geoffrey can control the country through John. Similarly, Eleanor wants Richard to be the successor so that she can gain her freedom. Henry loses his temper when he discovers the depths of their betrayal, and although he wants to kill them, especially Richard, he cannot bring himself to do that. In the end, Henry does love his family and shows that love by letting them live.

## Eleanor of Aquitaine, played by Katharine Hepburn

### Description

Eleanor is Henry's wife and the Queen of England. She is living in captivity at a separate castle because of her plots against Henry in Richard's favor. Richard is Eleanor's favorite son, and she is willing to do anything to see him on the throne. She realizes that Richard will give her freedom and make a good ruler for the country.



Since being put into prison, Eleanor has been replaced by Alais, Richard's betrothed and Henry's mistress. Eleanor is bitter about the relationship, but she realizes that she and Henry could never get along.

## **Analysis**

Eleanor is a feisty, demanding woman. She knows what she wants, and she will do whatever it takes to get her way. Eleanor makes quick decisions and handles pressure well. She is also an excellent actress. Eleanor pretends to be in love with Henry and treats him kindly at different times during the film in an effort to convince him to do as she wishes.

Eleanor's obvious strength has been passed on to her children, especially Richard. Of all the sons, Richard seems to be the most intelligent and most capable. Eleanor has truly trained Richard to become the King, and she is not willing to give up the throne without a fight. Eleanor is a woman to be feared, and she makes her wishes known to the King and seeks to use all her womanly powers of persuasion.

## **Richard, played by Anthony Hopkins**

### **Description**

Richard is Henry and Eleanor's oldest son and feels that he is the rightful heir to the throne of England. Richard has led scores of successful military campaigns for Henry, and he has proven himself to be a strong and faithful soldier. However, Richard has a past that haunts him. As a young man, Richard seduced King Philip of France and had an affair with him. Even in these later years, Richard begs Philip to tell him that he loves him, but Philip ends up exposing his secret to his father and brothers.

### **Analysis**

Richard is strong and noble. He is a brave warrior who instills courage and confidence in his soldiers. Richard's mother has raised him to have her iron will, but Richard has his own weaknesses. Richard fell in love with King Philip of France, and he is unable to control his feelings even after many years.

When Philip exposes Richard's dark secret to his family, Richard is ashamed and terrified. However, he believes that he is the best king for England, so he promises to fight his father and his brothers until he rules England. Although we do not see the outcome in the film, Richard does go on to conquer his father and become the King of England.



## **Geoffrey, played by John Castle**

### **Description**

Geoffrey is the conniving middle son of Henry and Eleanor. Like Richard, Geoffrey has fought for his father and has led many successful military campaigns. However, Geoffrey does not work to get the crown in a straightforward manner; rather, he tries to manipulate the other members of the family so that he can gain control of the country.

### **Analysis**

Geoffrey does not want to be king himself. Instead, he wants John to become king so that Geoffrey can control the country through John. Geoffrey is manipulative and possibly the most dangerous of the sons. John is foolish and Richard is strong and intelligent, but Geoffrey is backhanded and manipulative. His plots are thick and difficult to follow; he strives to stay on the good side of everyone so that he will have a role in the kingdom no matter who wins the crown.

## **John, played by Nigel Terry**

### **Description**

John is Henry and Eleanor's youngest son and was raised solely by Henry. After Eleanor was imprisoned, Henry took over John's care and trained him as he wanted. Thus, John has become Henry's favorite. However, John is a spoiled brat and his brothers, and everyone else, hate him.

### **Analysis**

John is the last person you would ever want to see in charge of a country. John is a spoiled brat who knows absolutely nothing about politics or diplomacy. The only thing recommending John for a place on the throne is Henry's fondness for him. John is manipulated by his brother Geoffrey and King Philip of France without ever being totally aware of what is going on. John is naïve and stupid, not a fitting king for England.

## **King Philip of France, played by Timothy Dalton**

### **Description**

King Philip of France is Alais's brother and Richard's former lover. He is invited to the castle for the holidays, and he tries to bargain with Henry's sons so that he can eventually get back Aquitaine, which are French lands that went to England when Eleanor and Henry wed.



## Analysis

Like Geoffrey, Philip caters to all parties. Philip simply wants to get the Aquitaine back or take his sister away from Henry. He assumes that Henry will not give up Alais, so he tries to use her to bargain for his lands. However, he also knows that he can destroy England if the foolish John takes the throne, so he tries to move events in a direction that will help him. He reveals the truth about his and Richard's relationship to Henry, because he knows that he could defeat John and Geoffrey in battle while Richard is too smart and cunning to lose to Philip.

## Alais, played by Jane Merrow

### Description

Alais is Henry's mistress but was once supposed to marry Richard. She is also King Philip of France's sister. Philip feels that the contract made for her to marry Richard has been broken, because Henry refuses to let anyone else have her.

### Analysis

Alais is an innocent girl who believes that Henry is mostly in the right and simply wishes that everyone could get along. Having been Henry's mistress for some time, Alais finds it difficult to be around Eleanor, but Eleanor, having raised Alais, treats her as her own child and tries to help her through the difficult time.



# Themes

## Corrupting Influence of Power

Power drives Henry's family to do anything in order to become more powerful. As we watch the family interact, we discover that each person is more corrupt than the last. Henry's sons will do anything possible in order to get his crown. John is youthful and foolish, and he and Geoffrey scheme to get the throne. John believes Geoffrey is trying to help him, but in reality, Geoffrey knows that if John succeeds Henry, then Geoffrey can control John.

Richard and Eleanor are both scheming for a place for Richard on the throne. Richard is by far the most capable of the three sons, but he realizes that his father's preference for John will likely keep him from the crown. All three sons try to buy King Philip of France so that he will help persuade their father. Richard is the most desperate of them all since he and Philip had a relationship at one time. Eleanor also schemes for Richard by professing her undying love to Henry and trying to convince him to do what she wants. The corruption of power seeps through the family until Henry realizes that the only love his family holds for him is love for his crown.

## Flexibility of Truth

The truth is anything but defined in *The Lion in Winter*. Instead, the truth constantly changes as each person tries to manipulate everyone else. When we first see Henry, we can tell that he favors John and plans to give John the crown, even though he has called the family to the castle to decide his successor. By making the others think they have a chance, he is able to see their true natures.

Each person manipulates truth to change events. Eleanor tries to convince Henry of her love while he tries to convince her that he might give Richard the crown. Geoffrey lies to John about wanting to help him become king. In reality, Geoffrey wants John to become king so that he can control the kingdom through John. Meanwhile, Richard tries to get Philip to say that he loves him and attempts to convince him to help Richard's cause. Henry is caught in the middle of these lies as he tries to discover which parts are truth and which fiction.

## Complexity of Family Relationships

Family relationships are not always as simple as they might seem, and this is apparent as we watch the interactions of Henry's family. Everyone has their own agendas that they are willing to do anything to meet. Eleanor has been put in her own small prison for many years so that Henry could have his mistresses and so that she will not plot against him.

Since two of their sons were raised by Eleanor, Henry considers the son he raised, John, to be the most competent successor to the throne. However, John is anything but loyal to Henry, beginning to plot with Geoffrey as soon as Geoffrey arrives at the castle. The family is complicated by royalty and power. The relationships are so complex that the viewer finds it difficult to discover and understand how the characters feel about each other.



## Style and Cinematography

*The Lion in Winter* has a vivid setting for the look and events that would have taken place during holidays in 1183. The photography of the film is impeccable and only a few small mistakes were made in the filming. Overall, the film produces a beautiful portrayal of 12th century life and attitudes. From the feasts to the sword fights, the action and looks are just what one might expect from life at that time. The realism of the scenes helps add to the realism of the story. Although it is a fictionalized story, the plot gains by being based on the true story of Henry, Eleanor, Richard, and the others.

*The Lion in Winter* is pervaded by a dark humor. The film is about a dysfunctional family on a royal scale - literally! Every decision a character makes affects not only that person, but possibly the entire future of a country. However, all is done in good fun; even the extreme manipulation becomes amusing as Henry and Eleanor engage in their fascinating verbal sparring. Although at times the humor makes it difficult for the viewer to discern between fact and fiction, perhaps that is the point. The dark humor reveals to us that no one in the situation can truly be trusted, but at least since the family is going to fight, they generally have a good laugh while doing it.

Another important and often overlooked part of the film is its musical score. John Barry created the original music for the film, and the music fits seamlessly into the plot. Unless viewers are paying close attention, they might not even notice music. Even so, much of the emotion and foreshadowing comes from the music playing in the background. Few soundtracks fit their films better than John Barry's fits *The Lion in Winter*; many would even consider this to be one of the best scores of all time.



# Motifs

## Holiday Festivities

Holidays can be a time of joy or a time of trial, depending on the family. Because everyone is gathered together for holidays, authors tend to use these times as a device to bring all the secrets into the open. That is exactly what happens in this film. Henry calls the family together for Christmas so that he can announce which son will be the heir to his throne.

The device works just as it should. As the family arrives, all their secrets are revealed - Richard's relationship with Philip, John and Geoffrey's plot, and Eleanor's conniving ways. The holiday festivities are the background on which the real story, the story of the family, takes place. We also see that when the family is publicly joining the festivities, they can all act as if life is wonderful and everyone is happy.

## Passing Down of Family Valuables

A son's inheritance was at one time the most important thing he would ever receive. The inheritance traditionally went to the eldest son, but some people chose to flaunt tradition and choose which son deserved the family valuables. In Henry's case, the family valuables are much more than herds or money or jewels: they are one of the most important kingdoms in the world.

Henry calls everyone together to decide who will receive the family valuables, even though he has already pretty much decided he will give the throne to John. Henry's wife and children begin plotting to convince the King to give each one the crown. As with most similar stories, the King ends up being disappointed in everyone when he discovers that they don't love him, but only his possessions.

## Family Feuds

Family feuds are a common problem. Most family feuds go back for decades, even centuries, based on problems from the past. This family may be royal, but they experience the same problems that all other families face. Henry and Eleanor have been separated for many years because she plotted against him. Locked in her own castle, Eleanor became angry and bitter as Henry had other mistresses and treated their son John with special attention.

The feud is not only the realm of the parents in this film. The children all fight each other based on past slights and the future prospect of gaining the crown. Philip turns on Richard and exposes their relationship to Henry, because he realizes that he can control John more easily than Richard. Geoffrey and John are supposedly working together because they both hate Richard.

# Symbols

Swords are an integral part of the life of a King and his knights. When the movie first begins, we see John practicing his swordsmanship with the King. Although he is getting better, he still does not have skill we see when the film shows Richard in war. Geoffrey also shows prowess and wisdom with his sword when he is leading campaigns on the beach.

In the end, Henry tries to use his sword to kill his son, Richard, but he discovers that he cannot hate his son enough to kill him. Henry shows a moment of weakness that will threaten his entire country. Swords in the film show both power and skill, and of Henry's three sons, only Richard can wield them both.



# Essay Questions

What is Henry's relationship with Alais and Eleanor?

Where does Eleanor reside?

How does Eleanor feel about Alais?

Why does Henry bring the family together at Christmas?

How do Henry's sons feel about each other?

What is the relationship between Richard and Philip?

Why does Henry favor John? Is his preference prudent?

What reasons can you think of that would make Henry not want to die, besides the human desire to be immortal?

What do you think will happen to Henry's crown?

What is the significance of the scene in the dungeon?

## Bibliography

<http://imdb.com/title/tt0063227>