

Katherine of Aragon

Every September, the clergy and congregation of Peterborough Cathedral devote a day to celebrating the memory of Katherine of Aragon, who is buried in the Cathedral. It is extraordinary that an Anglican cathedral should pay such respect to a Roman Catholic queen, the more so since it was Katherine's 'divorce' from Henry VIII that was in effect the signal for the separation of the Church in England from the Roman communion. But the annual commemoration is a tribute to the memory of a woman who, although a Spaniard by birth, became – and remains – one of the best-loved and most admired of English queens. This article will explore how Katherine earned that affection.

Marriage to Arthur

Katherine was the youngest of the children of Isabella I of Castile (1474-1504) and Ferdinand II of Aragon (1479-1516); she was born at Alcalá de Henares, just outside Madrid, on 16 December 1485. She had one brother, Juan, who was born in 1478 and three sisters: Isabella (1470), Juana (1479) and María (1482). The children were educated in a very modern fashion but were never in doubt that there would be no place for sentiment when their parents came to decide how they would be used to build up Spain's power in Europe. More than academic subjects, they studied the nature and exercise of power – how to use it and how to submit themselves to it.

The priority of Ferdinand and Isabella in foreign affairs lay in securing an alliance with the neighbouring state of Portugal. So important was this that they arranged three marriages with the Portuguese royal house. Princess Isabella married Prince Alfonso, heir to the throne (1490), but when he died she was forced, against her wishes, to marry his cousin, King Manuel. Isabella then died giving birth (1498), and Ferdinand and Isabella arranged for María to marry Manuel; she did so in 1500. Isabella and María therefore both married the same man – and both gave birth to children by him. The ease with which the papal dispensation was secured for María's marriage to her sister's widow was widely noted.

The three other children were married to further Spain's anti-French policy; Juan and Juana were married to Margaret and Philip, the children of the Emperor Maximilian, and Katherine to Arthur, heir to King Henry VII of England. But all the plans of Ferdinand and Isabella were thrown into jeopardy in 1497 when Juan died and his widow gave birth to a still-born child: the succession to Castile now passed into the female line, to Juana and her husband Philip.

In England, the house of Tudor also had deep anxieties about its security, for Henry VII's claim on the throne was weak and rested primarily on his success in defeating Richard III at the Battle of Bosworth Field in 1485. Henry was crowned king at once and married Elizabeth of York in January 1486, uniting the houses of York and Lancaster. Arthur was born in September and was followed by Margaret (1489), Henry (1491) and Mary (1496) – all of whom lived to adulthood – and by Edmund (1499-1500) and Catherine (1503), who did not.

Henry needed to further legitimise his dynasty by forging alliances with continental powers and in 1488 agreed with Ferdinand and Isabella to marry Arthur to Katherine. Katherine's dowry was fixed at 200,000 Spanish escudos, to be paid in two instalments, on her arrival in England and when the marriage took place. In return, Henry ceded one-third of the rents of the Prince of Wales as Katherine's portion. The treaty of Medina del Campo (27 March 1489) ratified the agreement; the marriage would take place when Arthur and Katherine were of age.

Still there were obstacles to the marriage, but the most important of these were removed in the decisive year of 1497, when Henry defeated a Cornish rebellion (May) and captured Perkin Warbeck, pretender to his throne (October). The Tudors were now all but secure, and the betrothal of Arthur and Katherine took place in May 1497. Two years later, the marriage was formally solemnised by proxy (19 May 1499). There remained one further, brutal, act to secure Tudor power: in November 1499, Edward Plantagenet, Earl of Warwick, who was a nephew of Edward IV and a claimant to the throne, was beheaded.

After many delays Katherine arrived at Plymouth on 2 October. Henry and Arthur met her in Hampshire: both seem

to have been enchanted by her. On 14 November her wedding with Arthur was solemnised at St Paul's Cathedral; ironically, Katherine was accompanied down the aisle by Prince Henry. Arthur and Katherine were formally bedded in accordance with custom and on the following morning Arthur boasted that he had consummated the marriage. There seemed no reason to disbelieve him, and on 29 November the first part of the dowry was paid.

In January 1501 the newlyweds took up residence at Ludlow Castle in Wales but, at the end of March, Arthur suddenly became ill. He died on 2 April, perhaps from tuberculosis but possibly from testicular cancer. His parents were truly desolate.

Marriage to Henry

Katharine's future now became a matter of international importance. Henry VII and Ferdinand and Isabella were determined to preserve their alliance and began to investigate the feasibility of marrying Katherine to Prince Henry. The problem that the monarchs confronted was simple enough: if Arthur and Katherine had consummated their marriage, then she would be debarred from marrying Henry by her affinity with him. It was agreed that the two royal families would ask the Pope to issue a dispensation to allow Katherine's remarriage. A treaty was concluded on 23 June 1503 and two days later the young couple were formally betrothed. Henry, Ferdinand and Isabella waited confidently on Rome's authorisation for the marriage to proceed.

On 26 December 1503 Pope Julius II duly obliged, issuing a dispensation which ruled that the marriage between Arthur and Katherine had not been consummated. Confusingly, the Pope then hedged his bets, allowing that 'perhaps' the marriage 'might' have been consummated: nevertheless, he gave permission for Katherine to marry Henry. That Julius's dispensation was loosely-phrased did not seem a matter of especial importance to either royal house: they had got what they wanted.

Unfortunately, Henry VII soon had reason to doubt whether he really wanted Katherine to marry his son, for Queen Isabella died in November 1504 and the succession to Castile devolved upon Juana, who was (at the least) mentally unstable. Moreover, it seemed probable that the union of Castile and Aragon might now break up. Accordingly, Katherine was no longer a valuable bride for the King of England's son. On 27 June 1505 Prince Henry himself secretly renounced his engagement to Katherine, claiming that he had not given his consent and was 'completely opposed to it'. The possibility of him marrying Katherine appeared dead.

These were miserable years for Katherine. Ferdinand refused to settle her dowry while Henry VII not only insisted that it had to be paid but refused to provide for her support. Katherine lived a life of penury and humiliation in the years after 1505 and even had to pawn some of her silverware and jewels to maintain herself and her household. Even her clothes began to fall apart.

A brief respite came when a storm in the Channel blew the fleet that was carrying Juana and Philip to Spain on to English soil at the beginning of 1506. Henry VII took advantage of their enforced stay in England to negotiate an alliance with them. Katherine was given some new clothes and was allowed to meet her beloved sister but – cruelly – only for a few hours. It was the last time they met.

Once again, all diplomatic plans were undermined by death; Philip died unexpectedly in Spain in September 1506. His demise finally tipped Juana into a complete breakdown and it became evident that the throne of Castile would devolve upon her six-year-old son, Charles (known to history as Charles V). Henry VII now decided that Charles was a much better catch than Katherine: he agreed to marry his daughter Mary to him.

At the lowest point of her life, Katherine was redeemed by the death of Henry VII (21 April 1509). To the astonishment of his advisers – and indeed of much of Europe – the new king decided at once that he would marry Katherine: they were married on 11 June and their coronations took place on 24th June in sumptuous splendour at Westminster Abbey.

Better still, Katherine immediately became pregnant. Unfortunately, in January 1510 she gave birth to a stillborn girl. It was the beginning of a dreadful odyssey for her in childbed. She and Henry were devastated and kept the news secret for some months, probably in the hope that Katherine might quickly conceive again. She did so, and gave birth to a son on New Year's Day 1511: he was named for his father. But again joy was short-lived: Prince Henry died on 22 February.

Henry was patient and gentle with his wife, still confident that she would present him with a male heir. He involved her fully in court life and in 1513 appointed her as Governess of his realms while he led an invasion of France. Katherine was brilliantly successful; she countered a Scottish invasion by sending an army that shattered the Scots at Flodden Field, killing King James IV. Triumphantly, Katherine sent James's bloodied shirt to her husband. Henry himself won a great victory (as he somewhat grandly proclaimed it) by capturing Théroutane ('Battle of the Spurs'). So both King and Queen had the laurels of warriors: it was perhaps their happiest time together.

Still, Katherine was unable to produce a live son. She miscarried in September 1513 and gave birth to a stillborn son in December 1514. But then came a triumph of sorts: on 18 February 1516, after seven years of marriage, Katherine was delivered of a child who would reach adulthood. Alas, it was a girl: she was named Mary. The tragic pattern soon resumed. Katherine may have suffered another miscarriage in 1517 and in November 1518 gave birth to a stillborn child. It was the last of her pregnancies.

Europe Transformed

The European situation began to change when in 1515 the newly-crowned king of France, Francis I, invaded Italy and conquered Milan. Europe took fright, for surely no single state would be able to withstand French power. Spain was in disarray: Ferdinand had died in January 1516 and bequeathed his territories to Charles of Habsburg, who now became *de facto* king of Castile and of Aragon. When the Emperor Maximilian died in 1519, Charles won the imperial throne for himself by dispensing bribes of historic proportions. But the imperial title conferred prestige rather than power; the 365 or so states that comprised 'the Holy Roman Empire' created more problems for the emperor than they provided resources. Charles also had little power as 'king of Spain', for his arrival as a foreign king in 1517 was bitterly resented. When he left the country, to be crowned as Emperor in 1520, Castile was on the verge of revolt; this duly broke out and was repressed only with great difficulty ('revolt of the Comuneros', 1520-21). True, in 1519-21 Hernan Cortes conquered Mexico for the throne of Castile but it would be years before any tangible financial benefit actually accrued to the crown.

Europe was saved from the imposition of a French hegemony by two accidental events in 1525-27. First, in 1525, Francis badly overreached himself: he was captured at the Battle of Pavia, 15 February 1525, and taken to Madrid as a prisoner. Although he was released in 1526, French power was checked, at least for the moment. Second, in 1527 the imperial army vented its rage on Charles V for not paying it by pillaging Rome and obliging Pope Clement to take refuge in the Castel Sant Angelo. That the Emperor's army should have sacked the Eternal City was a dreadful humiliation for Charles but, paradoxically, it redounded to his advantage: Europe was now more terrified of his army than it was of the French army, and the Pope was effectively his prisoner.

The Divorce

It was exactly at this juncture, in 1527, that Henry began to be seriously worried about the legitimacy of his marriage. At the core of his anxieties was a text in the Old Testament Book of Leviticus which stated that 'if a man shall take his brother's wife ... they shall be childless' (20: 21). Now clearly, since Katherine had given birth to one daughter Henry had not been subjected to the full rigour of the Levitical prohibition, but his theological advisers conveniently re-translated the text into 'they shall not have male heirs'. Moreover, it was evident that Katherine's childbearing years were now over. Henry was therefore stuck in a marriage which was perhaps theologically invalid and which would most certainly not provide him with a male heir. Since it was axiomatic that females could not rule in their own right, Henry could not contemplate having his daughter Mary succeed him. Moreover it was now that Henry fell lustfully in love with Anne Boleyn, a lady at court. He had to end his marriage so that Anne could provide him with the male heir that Katherine was manifestly incapable of giving him – but Anne would only do so if he made her his queen.

It fell to Cardinal Wolsey, as the king's chief minister, to resolve the dilemma. Wolsey was confident that he could persuade the papacy to accommodate Henry as it had done so often with other monarchs. But times had changed; the outbreak of the Reformation – Martin Luther had published his celebrated theses in 1517 and the primacy of Rome was now under widespread attack – meant that the papacy could not be as pliable as it had been even in the recent past. Also, Charles V's triumph in Italy meant that Clement VII was effectively his prisoner and dared not insult him by allowing Henry VIII to humiliate his niece. Charles's power over the pope effectively

ended Henry's hopes of a resolution in Rome to his 'Great Matter'.

On 22 June 1527 Henry told Katherine of his scruples and demanded a formal separation; furiously, she insisted that she had come to Henry as a virgin and refused to countenance a separation from him, much less an annulment. In July, Wolsey was sent to France to attempt to conjure up a meeting of cardinals who would run the Church during the Pope's imprisonment (and give Henry his divorce); it was a hopeless task, and in his despair he had England join with France in a war on Charles ('League of Cognac', 1528). It was a futile effort.

While Henry and Wolsey played power politics, Rome played for time; in October 1528 Cardinal Lorenzo Campeggio arrived in England, ostensibly to investigate the legitimacy of Henry's marriage (in conjunction with Wolsey) but with instructions to prevaricate endlessly and under no circumstances to grant the annulment. The cardinals suggested to Katherine that she resolve the king's dilemma by retiring to a convent, but she would have none of it. When Campeggio heard her confession, she authorised him to tell the pope that she and Arthur had slept together on seven nights but that she had remained a virgin. Spanish documents suggest that this was the truth. A fortnight later she played her trump card, showing Campeggio the transcripts of two papal bulls of dispensation of 1503-04 (of which the English did not have copies).

Katherine's production of the papal documents undermined the basis of Campeggio's decretal commission and she proceeded to publicly destroy its viability. After Henry had set out his case against his own marriage, Katherine responded. In one of the great scenes of English history, Katherine spoke powerfully of the justness of her cause and then dramatically knelt down in front of Henry to vow for all to hear that she had for 20 years been his lawful and faithful wife. Henry was used to dominating all with whom he had dealings, and yet confronted by his furious wife in this extraordinary scene he was as perplexed as he was apoplectic – and quite lost for words. Katherine stormed out of court. She had trounced her husband.

Campeggio's court was a disastrous failure. On 16 July Clement VII revoked the case to Rome and in August – to his fury – Henry was summoned to appear in Rome. On 11 September the two cardinals formally ended their commission. Wolsey paid the price; he was dismissed in October. Within a month, Henry opened what became known as 'the Reformation Parliament' (3 November): over the next two years, Parliament was to give him the weapons to end his marriage and destroy papal power in England. Still, he tried to persuade Katherine to give way; on 30 November they dined together, but the Queen again subjected Henry to a furious tirade. She would not submit.

As a public relations exercise, during 1529-30 Henry appealed to selected European universities for support; not surprisingly, French universities tended to agree with him while those of Spain rejected his plea. In practice, it meant nothing. More substantively, in 1530 Henry initiated an onslaught on papal power in England by having Parliament reinstate the 'Act of Praemunire' which allowed the crown to punish anyone who appealed to a foreign authority (namely, the papacy). Clement VII responded by issuing a brief (at Katherine's request) forbidding Henry from re-marrying until he had given his verdict. The pope's brief had the most alarming implications for Henry, for it raised the possibility of Rome excommunicating him – and thereby legitimising rebellion against him. It was the beginning of the end. In February, Henry obliged the bench of bishops to acknowledge that he was 'the Supreme Head' of the Church in England. Everything had changed. On 11 July 1531, Katherine met Henry for the last time.

During 1532, Henry VIII and Thomas Cromwell (who had replaced Wolsey as chief minister) pushed a programme through Parliament which began to give the crown practical control over the Church in England. The 'King's Great Matter' reached its climax early in 1533. On 25 January 1533 Henry married Anne, and on 9 April he ordered Katherine to stop using the title of queen. In May, Thomas Cranmer, the new archbishop of Canterbury, formally gave sentence against Katherine, judging that she and Arthur had indeed consummated their marriage and that therefore Katherine's marriage to Henry was invalid. Canterbury had replaced Rome as the leader of the Church in England. On 1 June Anne Boleyn was crowned Queen of England. Probably she was pregnant when she married Henry, for in September she gave birth – but to a girl, who was named Elizabeth. Once again, Henry was disappointed; once again he hoped for better fortune in the future.

Aftermath

Rome finally gave its verdict when on 23 March 1534 it declared that the marriage of Henry and Katherine was

indeed valid. It was far too late: England was already lost to the papacy. In November 1534 the 'Act of Supremacy' confirmed that Henry was indeed 'the Supreme Head on earth of the Church in England' and allowed him to demand of his subjects that they swear loyalty not only to this principle but to the legitimacy of the children of Henry and Anne as heirs to the throne. It was a terrifying weapon against opponents, for it equated support for Katherine (and for papal authority in England) with treason. Only the very bravest dared resist. Bishop John Fisher of Rochester and Sir Thomas More, formerly Lord Chancellor, were men of such calibre; so, too, were a few monks and friars. But all suffered death for their principles – the friars in truly barbarous circumstances.

Henry moved Katherine progressively far away from court until she reached Kimbolton in Huntingdonshire; she was denied visitors. In June 1534 Katherine refused to swear to the Act of Succession and shortly afterwards Henry forbade Mary to visit her mother. Katherine marked her fiftieth birthday in these wretched conditions. On the night of 6-7 January 1536 Katherine dictated letters to her husband and to Charles V, and at 2.00 pm on 7 January she died.

When the news reached court, Henry and Anne publicly celebrated Katherine's death. But still the king did not have a son, and Anne shortly miscarried. On 19 May 1536 she paid with her head for her failure. Modern medical research has tentatively suggested that Anne's miscarriage confirm a diagnosis from the study of Katherine's pregnancies – that Henry himself may have been positive for the 'Kell blood group': this meant that women who were negative for this group and who had multiple pregnancies with a man who was positive would suffer many miscarriages. Was the failure of Katherine of Aragon and Anne Boleyn to carry their children to term the King's fault? Ten days after Anne's execution, Henry married Jane Seymour; in October 1537 she presented Henry with a son, the future Edward VI. The birth cost Jane her life. Henry married three more times but had no more children; he died in 1547.

Katherine's splendid tomb in Peterborough now proclaims her as 'Queen of England'; it is a moving tribute to her extraordinary fortitude in the face of the most deeply personal grief that she suffered in childbed and to the dignity with which she confronted her brutal and unforgiving husband. Katherine lived with Henry longer than all his other wives combined; she knew him better than any of them – and she was ultimately the only person who was able to intimidate him. It is her simple decency – and her unbreakable will – that has so commended her to posterity.

Issues to Debate

- Why was the succession such a vital issue for Henry VIII?
- How significant a figure do you consider Katherine of Aragon to have been in English history?
- In what ways did Henry VIII's character change over the course of his reign?

Further reading

- Sydney Anglo, *Spectacle, pageantry, and early Tudor policy* (Clarendon Press, 1969)
- George W. Bernard, *The King's Reformation: Henry VIII and the Remaking of the English Church* (Yale University Press, 2005)
- Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England 1400-1580* (Yale University Press, 2005)
- David Starkey, *Henry Virtuous Prince* (Harper Perennial, 2009)
- Patrick Williams, *Katherine of Aragon* (Amberley Press, 2011)

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