

Catherine of Aragon

Henry's Spanish Wife

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December 31, 2011- January 9, 2012

I recall from school that Henry VIII got tired of his old Spanish wife and desired instead a younger woman. He asked the Pope to get a divorce, and when the Pope refused he divorced her nevertheless and by this act of defiance he turned himself into the head of the English Church and thus effected the Reformation in England, which we were told was something of a half-measure, the Anglican church keeping much of its Catholic trappings. Of Anne Boleyn we learned that she was the love of his life and maybe as a consequence had her head chopped off. But as a vindication her daughter (a true love child?) Elizabeth became Queen and in fact the last great regent on the English throne (all others either having been disasters or non-entities).

This is of course an over-simplification, but as with many over-simplifications not too far from the truth, and in fact presenting a more transparent picture than an overextended account with too many details. The biography by Tremlett provides a lot of detail, but not in such a numbing detail as makes the account by Starkey in his 'The Six wives of Henry VIII'¹ so tedious. In fact the plot unfolds dramatically, with a lot of possible digressions resisted in order to make it move smoother. It would make wonderful soap-opera and if it has not already been produced by the BBC it is only a matter of time before it will do so (or ought to do so). It once again poses the perennial question of what is more preferable in history writing, a somewhat fictionalized account or a strictly factual. The latter is bound to be 'dry as dust', while the former might be too breezy. Ideally both kinds of accounts are needed, maybe even further purified as to their ambitions. The first encounter should be with the fiction, to engage and seduce, while the other kind, should be even more factual and dry, and provide a corrective to the excessive flights of fantasy indulged in the former.

The leading role is played by Catherine, the fourth daughter of the royal couple Isabel of Castilien and her husband Ferdinand of Aragon at the helm of a rising power - the emerging Spanish empire. As a fourth daughter her chances of inheriting the crown are minuscule but nevertheless there are plenty of opportunities to make a good match. One such opportunity presented itself through a marriage to the Crown Prince Arthur of England. Henry VII the victor of the civil strife, known as the war of roses, had a problem of legitimacy and a Spanish match would certainly stiffen the moral of the Tudor dynasty. Thus the two were formally engaged by proxy while they were still toddlers. But the finalization of the match was somewhat marred by haggling over the dowry, but the brides father and that of the bridegroom were hard bargainers.

Anyway the Spanish princess was discharged and sent on a perilous sea journey to

¹ Reviewed in Reviews VIII b

England, a trip that took several months. She was in her early teens and travelled with a large contingent of Spanish retinues and would never return back to Spain. She knew no English but some French and definitely some Latin, having been as the custom was, well educated at home. She married Arthur with great pomp and were later to join him at his estate Ludlow in Wales. Teenage marriages were considered a threat to the health, especially of the young bridegroom, due to the seduction of sexual overexertion, so when the prince died a few months later, the cause of death was rumored to be just that. However, Catherine would later claim that the marriage had never been consummated. Being a young widower her status was greatly reduced to one of a dowager princess, unless she married the younger brother. This was considering the political motivations of the match a logical thing which both parties (i.e. Ferdinand and Henry VII) were desirous of achieving, although only at the price of further haggling. It would also require the dispensation of the Pope as marriage to the widow of a brother was considered incestuous.

Now enter the character of Henry VIII. While his older brother Arthur may have been weak and sickly, that could not be said of Henry himself. Well over six feet he towered over his contemporaries. His appearance was striking, with a broad face, strong features, fair hair of a reddish tint, and indeed still instantly familiar to the English Public. Furthermore he was of an athletic build and temperament and loved nothing better than to hunt and joust. Needless to say he was immensely popular with his subjects as he ascended the throne in 1509 on the death of his father. He was not yet eighteen as he as a king made good on an earlier promise to wed the widow of his brother. Catherine was six years older but still a young woman.

He had everything going for him. His father had filled the coffers of the state, he enjoyed popularity as far as that could have been reliably gauged, and was free to pursue his pleasures unbridled by the minutia of governing, having relegated those things to Wolsey. Wolsey deserves some mention. He was a commoner who had risen to eminence. Eventually he would become a cardinal and enjoy great riches. Henry VII had made sure that the influence of the nobility be reduced as well as taking advantage of the pool of talent residing among the common people. In other words stirring the demands of a meritocracy, a phenomenon not unusual in the chronicles of European power-politics. The one who takes care of the small details eventually gain power. So did Wolsey becoming next to the King the most powerful person in the kingdom, but his power was at the discretion of Henry, because even if Wolsey governed while the King played, the King ruled, although there was no need for him as yet to show his teeth, partly because due to his youth and immaturity he may not yet have been aware of having them. To the pleasures of the King belonged not just tournaments and jousts but also something of the real thing - war. He fought an inconsequential war across the channel with the French, while the Queen defended a Scottish invasion at Floggen that led to the death of James IV, Of course the Queen was not personally involved not even present at the site, but in view of her position she was free to take ultimate credit. Her main duty though was to provide the dynasty with a male heir. She went through many a pregnancies and did indeed produce a few male babies, but none which survived for more than a few weeks. The only success (of sorts) was the daughter Mary. Now in those days giving birth was a risky business indeed for a woman, statistically comparable to engage in battle, and child mortality was high, even in

the wealthiest circles. The inability to sire a male heir worried the vain King. It was an affront as to his fecundity and maybe even his potency. The King was indeed vain. Vain of his athletic prowess (when the young Francis I ascended the French throne the King asked an ambassador whether the new French King had as good a calf as he Henry himself), and also of his appearance. We are being privy to the fact that at one celebratory hunt the King was dressed in green, literally from head to foot².

And so the King eventually fell in love. That a King strayed and fathered bastards was of course commonly accepted, even by his spouse. It was the prerogative of a King, maybe even a duty, to exhibit his manliness. He had gone through the Boleyn family, but apparently denied that he had known the mother as well. Anne, however, refused to let him into her bed, unless he married her and made her a queen. She is the third party to enter and thus to make a triangle. In the book Catherine is playing the heiress, while Anne Boleyn is a rather shady figure serving her own malicious agendas. But her playing at being hard to get worked well. The King was forced to transcend a mere carnal passion into a truly romantic one, and it might well be true that Anne was the only woman he felt a real sexual passion for.

Just to dump his wife of almost twenty years was of course unthinkable, some good reason had to be thought of. The King came up with one which at first sight seems ridiculous but which by virtue of the Kings determination, not least in persuading himself, became publicly acknowledged resulting in somewhat perverse discussions to be pursued in full earnestness and greatest seriousness among people whom one would believe had more important things to engage them. The King simply claimed that the marriage had never been legal, that the dispensation the Pope had given was void, and hence that he and the queen had lived in sin. He thus demanded that his vastly exaggerated scruples had to be taken seriously, and that they should be acknowledged by a court in England to be headed by Wolsey.

Now what did Catherine do? She either had to submit to the whims of her spouse and quietly resign or she had to defy them. It is on this point the entire drama rests and which provides the cautionary as well as exemplary tale which has inspired the writing of this book almost five hundred years later. She chose to defy him. She then becomes a feminist hero and hence very much if not an ideal at least an object of passionate sympathy for our times. Why does she defy the wishes of her husband? Hardly because of sexual possessiveness, even if there naturally is some element of that, because why should she desire still to be his wife if he shows such a disregard for her. Obviously the matter is one of principle. His scruples are ridiculous. It is the sense of divine injustice that enrages her. This is a very common human reaction. We can accept that injustice is done to us, if it is admitted at such. We can accept a lie if the liar acknowledges that it is one. The passion for justice shares many aspects of the passion for truth. Hence we are ultimately willing to die for them.

What follows now is in many ways a farce. The Queen in addition to have justice

² Such seemingly irrelevant details have survived into posterity due to the existence of extensive lists of wardrobes available to study. Once again illustrating what finds its ways into historical accounts very much depends on what was deemed worthy of documentation and what of that accidentally has survived the onslaught of time.

acknowledged is very keen upon maintaining her status as a queen, which after all is part of the justice she is entitled to. She claims that she was a virgin when she married the King and thus that her marriage with his brother never really took place. This is, as it will transpire, an unfalsifiable claim, and hence will ever know whether she lied or not. She has a confidante, an ambassador from the court of her powerful nephew Charles V of Spain. He keeps her continually informed, and allows her always to be privy to the machinations of the opposition and hence be a few steps ahead. She can play some strong cards. One being the sympathy of the common people, who react incredulously to the claims of the King. The other is the support of her nephew, the most powerful Monarch in Europe, and whom the King cannot cross lightly. The King preserves relations with her out of decorum, while maintaining contacts with Anne, be they not frustratingly of the carnal kind. In order to get to a speedy decision he sets up a court in London to be headed by Wolsey and an Italian Cardinal. To that court both the King and the Queen should submit themselves as commoners. Something unprecedented indeed. The Queen who is well prepared plays her part with aplomb. In an act of mock submissiveness she falls to the ground at the feet of the King and pleads with him with that combination of subservience and defiance she was to perfect. The King relents and permits her to take the case to Rome, which she has already done clandestinely. After that admission to the King she simply walks out of the court never to return. This might be a risky game, as ignoring the pleads to attend the court she has no control over its course, in particular she cannot stall matters.

The King's court having been rendered impotent what matters now is to convince the Pope. There is nothing more the Pope Clement detests than to pass judgement on the matter. His political power is limited. His capital Rome was sacked by the troupes of Charles V with impunity. The reformation in northern Europe had gone underway further eroding his power-base. He does not want to antagonize the English King fearing to lose him as well, on the other hand he cannot afford to cross the Emperor Charles either, so he stalls, even going so far as to suggest that the King marry two wives, if that is what he wants, as a Pope he is able to provide any number of excuses and dispensations. But this suggestion is not taken kindly to. The easiest thing would be for the Queen to simply resign and retire into a nunnery. Great pressure is brought on her, in the classical carrot and stick manner, but she resists. She is right to do so, because after all as long as she maintains her status as a Queen she cannot easily be disposed of. Once she steps down she will be entirely at the mercy of her superiors. Someone with the power to give a gift also has the power of taking it back. She is right not to trust such promises. As long as she resist them, she entertains power. As a reader you cheer her on.

The King is now caught in the middle of two strong women. He does not relish his predicament. As his mistress Anne remarks, he should not get into argument with the Queen as she is bound to get the upper hand. Anne has her own agendas. Her family rises in power, and her Protestant leanings are strong. The King might secretly prefer the gentleness of his Queen to the abrasiveness of his mistress, an experience not uncommon to many men. The King strikes a rather pathetic figure, but his determination transcends his weakness. He is convinced both of the incontestable nature of his claims and that everyone else is bound to acknowledge them. This is a necessary component of the psyche

of a tyrant. Henry the playboy is hardening into a despot in his struggle against frustration.

As the Pope stalls and is unable to be persuaded into compliance the fate of Wolsey is doomed. Soon thereafter he is stripped of his position, his lands and possessions, but has time to die a natural death before being taken to the Tower and ultimate execution. It is clear that Anne Boleyn has had a major hand in engineering his downfall. He is supplanted by his underling Thomas Cromwell. Cromwell like his former master is a commoner. He is also worth a digression. He is not an uncommon character in power-play. A mousy administrator of little charisma, whom circumstances catapults into position of power and influence. A contemporary equivalent is Putin. But one should never underestimate the likes of a Putin and a Cromwell. They may seem submissive, but that is only part of a game. They know what they want, and they know how to get it, propelled by an icy logic. With Cromwell the policies of Henry VIII hardened considerably. He became more and more sure of himself. Resentment against the Church was rampant especially in Northern Europe and he understood, at least subconsciously how to take advantage of that to enhance his own position. The move against the Church which would soon lead to the breach with Rome was masterminded by Cromwell and the Boleyns. Relations between the King and his mistress became more and more blatant, and she was treated as a Queen. In fact she probably by this time felt so sure about her case that she allowed the King to bed her. When the few defiant voices among the bishops had been quenched, when a loyal Cranmere had been appointed Archbishop of Canterbury and the eminent Sir Thomas More had resigned and eventually been incarcerated in the Tower and executed, the King married his pregnant mistress. His wife he more or less sent into imprisonment and his daughter Mary he dethroned as a bastard fit only to serve her younger half-sister soon to be born. Things were getting dangerous indeed for Catherine and her daughter, and she saw no realistic alternative than death of Martyrdom. As Christian martyrs was of the distant past, such fantasies, a bit too close to reality, fascinated her. Now after the King had in effect broken with Rome and having the Parliament declare him the head of the English Church, the Pope having nothing to lose, made a prompt decision to the advantage of Catherine. But this was a Papal bull with no teeth as long as Charles V was reluctant to act upon it. Charles V was a man of 'Realpolitik'. He might have had some sympathy for his aunt, but such sentiments clearly would take second place to his real interests. He had in fact no desire to fight Henry VIII even if he was the most powerful player in all of Christendom. He was embroiled in other matters and hardly relished a combined English-French front. As to rumors that the English people were ready to rise against the King in support of the Queen, he probably took those with a grain of salt, although many of the Queens sympathizers entertained such thoughts.

The Spanish Queen eventually languished and expired in the early days of 1536. Anne Boleyn was not to savor the death too long, celebrated by her and the King with a dance. In fact a few months later she was sent to the scaffold on trumped-up charges. The King having finally possessed her, his previous ardor must have faded, If not his jealousy. He was aging well into his forties and most likely his new queens displeasure at his performance must have rankled him.

The radicalization of his reign continued even after the death of Anne. A male heir was to be born shortly thereafter, with his third young wife dying in childbirth. Cromwell was

doing his dirty business, employing as his tool the Parliament, something which ironically would cause this initially pliable instrument to gain independence and eventually overthrow a Monarch. It is part of the English prideful history, that it was the first European country of importance to hamstring the monarchy and make Parliament rule supreme, as it was always meant to do. This probably might have happened anyway, but would the Reformation have happened in England anyway? While the Lutheran Reformation in Northern Countries like Scandinavia had a profound aspect, and the Calvinist variety being even more radical, the actual structure and rituals of the Anglican Church do not differ that significantly from its Catholic roots. As far as Henry himself had any religious sentiments they are supposed to have been formal and sentimental and thus rather conservative and Catholic in nature. The fight against Rome was a political one, more so than in other countries of Reformation, and it is significant that the struggle between the emerging reformation and the papists were far more bitter in England than anywhere else and not fully resolved until after the so called glorious revolution, more than a century later.

January 10-11 2012 **Ulf Persson:** *Prof.em, Chalmers U.of Tech., Göteborg Sweden ulfp@chalmers.se*