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The Six Wives of Henry VIII

Written by Antonia Fraser

Published by Phoenix

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The Six Wives of Henry VIII



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PHOENIX

A PHOENIX PAPERBACK

First published in Great Britain in 1992
by Weidenfeld & Nicolson
This paperback edition published in 1993
by Mandarin Paperbacks

Reissued in 2002
by Phoenix Press,
an imprint of Orion Books Ltd,
Orion House, 5 Upper St Martin's Lane,
London WC2H 9EA

10

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A CIP catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-1-8421-2633-2

Typeset in Monotype Garamond by
Selwood Systems, Midsomer Norton

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

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CHAPTER ONE

Arthur's Dearest Spouse

My dearest spouse ... truly those your letters have rendered me so cheerful and jocund that I fancied I beheld your highness and conversed with and embraced my dearest wife.

Arthur Prince of Wales to Catherine of Aragon, 1499

The story begins in Spain. On 16 December 1485, a few months after the historic battle of Bosworth Field at which Henry VII secured the throne of England, a princess Catherine (or Catalina) was born. She had an unusual parentage. Catherine was the daughter of not one but two reigning monarchs, Isabella of Castile and Ferdinand of Aragon – the ‘Catholic Kings’ as they would be designated by the Pope.¹ There would be many princesses born in Europe around this time, the daughters of mighty kings and dukes of strategically placed territories, whose marital destinies would weave and interweave with Catherine’s own. But to Catherine and her three elder sisters had fallen a special fate. Their mother was Queen of Castile in her own right, as well as the consort of the King of Aragon.

Catherine was the youngest child of Isabella and Ferdinand. For the first fifteen years of her life (half the life expectancy of a woman of that time, and as it turned out nearly one-third of her own life) she lived under the tutelage of her remarkable mother. For Isabella’s unique position as a queen regnant was matched by that combination of a pious character and military achievement which had made her by the 1490s the wonder of Europe. In 1497 a mere queen consort – Elizabeth of York – referred to the ‘eminent dignity and virtue by which your said

The Six Wives of Henry VIII

majesty so shines and excels that your most celebrated name is noised abroad and diffused everywhere'.² As contemporary Europe was indelibly impressed by the image of Isabella the Catholic, so too was her daughter Catherine.

As a result, Catherine grew up conscious from her earliest years of the dignity to which she had been born as a daughter – an infanta – of Spain; it was an awareness of being a true royal princess (compared to those of lesser or less established title) which never left her. By the time Catherine was born, the civil war faced by Isabella on her accession to the throne in 1474 was long forgotten. Catherine's childhood image therefore was not only of a king and queen working in harness, but of a flourishing royal family.

Her three elder sisters, Isabel, Juana and Maria were born in 1470, 1479 and 1482 respectively, but the key birth was that of the Infante Juan, born in June 1478 and thus seven years Catherine's senior. Handsome, light-hearted and seemingly robust, it was no wonder that the Infante was adored by his sisters. To his parents also, the birth of the Infante Juan after an eight-year gap was a symbol of God's kindly providence. In Aragon, unlike Castile, the Salic law operated by which a female could not succeed; but Juan could inherit the kingdoms of both his parents. The whole family picture was suffused with the golden glow of a hopeful future.

In the spring of 1485 Queen Isabella found herself pregnant once more. She had already been engaged for four battling years in the so-called '*Reconquista*' of southern Spain from the Moors. Animated in part by crusading Catholic zeal, in part by a different kind of zeal – for territorial aggrandizement – Isabella, no less than Ferdinand, had flung herself into the rigours of campaigning (miscarrying at least one child as a result). Nor did the Queen allow her condition to impede her active involvement in the enterprise on this occasion. High summer saw the capture of Ronda from the Moors. It was not until the autumn that Isabella turned north with the intention of resting at the main Spanish base of Cordoba. But the flooding at Cordoba defeated her – it was an exceptionally wet autumn – and it was finally at Alcalá de Henares, in a castle belonging to the Archbishop of Toledo, that

Isabella gave birth to what would prove to be her last child.

The name chosen was significant. Although the Spanish form of Catalina would have been used in Catherine's childhood, she was nevertheless named for an English princess: Catherine of Lancaster, Isabella's grandmother.³ To the Spanish and Portuguese royal blood which flowed in the veins of Isabella's children was added a strong dose of Plantagenet. (See family tree 1) Isabella herself was descended twice over from John of Gaunt, both from his first marriage to his cousin Blanche of Lancaster and his second to Constance of Castile. (Ferdinand also had a Plantagenet inheritance, descending rather more remotely from a daughter of Henry II.)

The early years of Catherine's childhood were adventurous, and sometimes arduous as her mother's pregnancy had been. Isabella's court was still more than half a movable camp. There were alarms such as an outbreak of fire in the siege-camp, either accidental or the result of a small raid. And Catherine was present on the occasion of another Moorish raid known as 'the Queen's skirmish' when the royal ladies, young and old, knelt in prayer for safety. Nevertheless, whatever the checks, the progress of the *reconquista* was inexorable. Catherine grew up against a background of military success. As a contemporary observed, in a play upon the word Granada: 'the pomegranate is being eaten, grain by grain'.⁴ It was shortly after Catherine's sixth birthday that the final triumph came.

In January 1492 Granada, the redoubt of the Moorish kingdom, fell to the Spanish monarchs. Ferdinand and Isabella, their children at their side, rode to the great palace of the Alhambra and took possession of it. The Catholic thanksgiving which followed, where once the ceremonies of Islam had held sway, presaged the most triumphant years of the Spanish monarchy.

These were also the years of Catherine's education. Isabella herself had come to the throne unexpectedly thanks to the accident of her half-brother's death without a legitimate heir. She had been raised in a secluded convent without any of the skills needed by a statesman – male or female – on the European stage. In particular she knew no Latin, and since this was still the language of international diplomacy, had therefore been obliged

The Six Wives of Henry VIII

to learn it as an adult: a traditionally painful task. Thereafter Queen Isabella's own interest in and patronage of learning led to a general revival of classical studies in Spain, while other scholars including Peter Martyr of Anghiers were imported from Italy. Women were not excluded from this renaissance. There were female lecturers in rhetoric at Alcala and Salamanca.

Martyr later boasted: 'I was the literary foster father of almost all the princes, and of all the princesses of Spain'.⁵ Celebrated humanists such as the poet Antonio Geraldini and his brother Alessandro also took part in their education. For, where her daughters were concerned, Queen Isabella was determined that they should be given the advantages that had been denied to her. In this she acted not only as a prudent mother but also, in agreement with Ferdinand, as a prudent monarch. Once the male succession was assured, the birth of a princess who through a powerful marriage could act as the ambadress of her parents, was not seen as a disaster. 'If your Highness gives us two or three more daughters', wrote the Spanish chronicler Hernando de Pulgar to Isabella in 1478, 'in twenty years time you will have the pleasure of seeing your children and grandchildren on all the thrones of Europe.'⁶ The birth of Catherine meant that Isabella now had four of these potential envoys. She was determined that they should be well trained.

As a result Catherine studied not only her Missal and the Bible, but also the classics such as Prudentius and Juventus, St Ambrose on St Augustine, St Gregory, St Jerome, Seneca and the Latin historians. She ended by speaking good classical Latin with great fluency. Then a knowledge of both civil and canon law was thought appropriate, as well as of heraldry and genealogy – how important both of these latter were to a Renaissance princess who would take her place in an elaborate world where panoply often symbolized power! The point has been made that Catherine of Aragon in England displayed 'a quality of mind ... which few queens have seriously rivalled'. That was not in itself surprising.⁷ She had, after all, been raised at a court where both women and men acknowledged that it was 'a universal condition of mankind to want to know'.⁸

Catherine's intellectual attainments apart, music, dancing and

drawing – the traditional and graceful spheres of Renaissance feminine accomplishment – were naturally not ignored. But Queen Isabella also passed on to her daughters another more universal feminine tradition of basic domestic skills, all the more poignant perhaps, since the wives who practised them would be married to kings and archdukes, not merchants and farmers. It was said that the Queen insisted on making all King Ferdinand's shirts. Certainly her daughters were taught to spin, weave and bake: Catherine in turn would see it as both her duty and her right to embroider her own husband's shirts. And Catherine's constant preoccupation with the material side of her husband's comforts – his clean linen while away campaigning, a sudden need of a late night supper of meat provided in her apartments – provides a domestic counterpoint to the regality which she brought to the English court.

There was another personal legacy which Isabella passed to her daughters which had important emotional consequences. It was true that on her accession, Isabella had declared herself – not herself jointly with her husband – *la reina propietaria*. That is, the 'proprietorship' of the Castilian throne was vested in her own person, even though Ferdinand always acted in effect as co-ruler. Isabella also refused to alter the succession laws in Castile which allowed her eldest surviving daughter to succeed her if she died without a male heir; although in this event Ferdinand, as her second cousin, would actually be the male with the best claim to the throne. But with this strength of public purpose (originating perhaps in the Castilian nobles' irritable refusal to bow to the Aragonese) went a private wifely submission to the husbandly authority of Ferdinand and a profound belief in the divinely ordained nature of all marriages – and hers, which had brought about the fruitful union of two countries, in particular.

A husband was sent by God. 'It is he, it is he', Isabella is supposed to have cried on her first meeting with Ferdinand, selecting him unerringly from a group of other young gentlemen.⁹ A wife, whatever her royal rights, submitted to her husband and was of course bound to him for life; but the same God-given chain which bound her also bound *him*. Two of Isabella's daughters – Juana as well as Catherine – were to show, in their

very different ways, an absolute obsession with the husband given to them in the first place for reasons of state, but surely also by the will of God.

Then there was Isabella's personal piety: rigorous, humble, sincere, listening always to the voice of her religious advisers, her confessors, as though to atone once more, as with her husband, by submissiveness in that direction for the august position so unusual in a female which she occupied. Nevertheless it is significant for Catherine's future that the humanist ideal, to be propagated by Erasmus, and later by Catherine's fellow Spaniard Juan Luis Vives, did not call for abandonment of that august position in favour of a convent or monastery. It was considered perfectly possible to lead a truly Christian life within the world, as another kind of vocation.¹⁰

It is hardly surprising that such a pious woman as Isabella was also chaste. Indeed, it is noticeable that among the princesses of Europe who were descended from Isabella, personal chastity like wifely submission was another characteristic: not for them the hot-running blood of the Tudors – Catherine's future sisters-in-law – who on several occasions allowed their hearts or physical appetites to rule their heads.

Personal chastity, on the other hand, was not the watchword of Catherine's father, Ferdinand, whose deviousness would rapidly become proverbial in Europe (Machiavelli praised his statesmanship in *The Prince*). His amours angered Isabella – as such things generally do – without diminishing her devotion, let alone her feeling for the divinely instituted nature of her marriage. In this respect, of course, Isabella did not offer a unique role model to her growing daughters; on the contrary, she merely followed the accepted pattern of queens, consort or regnant (Isabella being of course both). She might be furious at such things, jealous too on a purely human level; but she would never consider that the position of mistress could or would be converted into that of wife. That to Isabella – or her daughter – was quite unthinkable.

As for Ferdinand himself, his intelligence and his ability to survive were probably his greatest legacies to Catherine. (Although he too was deeply religious, an aspect of his character sometimes ignored in view of the more celebrated piety of Isabella.) There

was a streak of unbalance in Isabella's family, coming from her mother, a Portuguese princess, which may have had its origin in depression following childbirth.¹¹ This would emerge tragically in one of Catherine's sisters, but in Catherine such hysterical feelings were for the most part kept well under control; through all her tribulations she retained Ferdinand's fierce sanity. Catherine, with that strong sense of family inculcated by her upbringing, greatly admired her father: his constant hostility to France, for example, based on the geographic position of his own kingdom of Aragon, was one of his attitudes which certainly formed her own. His deviousness she was trained to see merely as suitable regard for his national interests.

It was to be expected that the marital alliances planned by King Ferdinand for his children would reflect his preoccupation with the neutralization – or better still the encirclement – of France. The key players in this game of dynastic chess, with all Europe as its board, were Burgundy and Austria. In 1477 their houses had been joined by the marriage of Marie of Burgundy, heiress of Charles the Bold, to Maximilian of Austria. The convenient birth of a son and daughter to this royal Habsburg couple, of an age to be matched with a princess and a prince of Spain, put Ferdinand within reach of his most brilliant *coup*. In August 1496 – three years after Maximilian had been elected Holy Roman Emperor – Catherine's sister Juana, not quite seventeen, departed for the Burgundian court to marry the Archduke Philip of Austria; in April the following year her eighteen-year-old brother the Infante Juan was married to the Archduchess Margaret who had been brought to Spain.

But if the Habsburgs were the most august players, they were not the only players in the game. The first marriage arranged by King Ferdinand – that of his eldest daughter Isabel to her cousin, Don Alfonso of Portugal – reflected another perennial preoccupation. As Scotland was to England, so was Portugal to Spain: a neighbour whose geographical proximity made it ever a potential ally or a potential enemy; hence the series of hopefully emollient royal marriages arranged between the two pairs of countries during this period. Nor was the early death of Don

Alfonso allowed to prejudice the Portuguese connection: in 1496 Isabel was induced to marry his cousin, King Manuel of Portugal.

Then there was England. At first sight England was a minor power compared to the mighty trio of Spain, France and the Hapsburg Empire (as it became); her population, combined with that of Wales, made up a mere two and a half million, compared to the seven and a half million of Castile and Aragon, the fifteen million of France.¹² Nevertheless England enjoyed certain natural advantages in any diplomatic or military game. Apart from the earlier Anglo-Castilian matches already mentioned, there had once been a question of Queen Isabella herself marrying an English Yorkist prince – Edward IV perhaps or the Duke of Clarence. Once again it was a question of geographical position. Spanish merchants wishing to reach the Netherlands, Burgundian merchants or travellers heading for Spain, needed the protection of English ports if France was barred to them. Furthermore in the 1480s – not so very long after Agincourt in terms of folk memory – France was the hereditary foe of England. Although only Calais remained of the English possessions in France, ancient English claims to French territory and the throne of France itself were still maintained and bellowed forth on appropriate occasions.

The real problem with an English royal marriage, from Ferdinand's point of view, was the shaky nature of the new dynasty. In August 1485, Henry of Lancaster had established himself on the English throne as Henry VII, the first Tudor monarch. It was, in the final analysis, an accession secured at the point of the sword he wielded at Bosworth Field. For there were undoubtedly other individuals with a superior dynastic claim – not only the girl he married, Elizabeth, daughter of Edward IV, but other representatives of the house of York. (See family tree 2)

Even Henry's declared position as the male heir of the house of Lancaster was somewhat dubious on close inspection. It came through his mother, Margaret Beaufort, Countess of Richmond, a descendant of John of Gaunt from his third marriage to his mistress Katherine Swynford (unlike Catherine of Aragon who descended from his first two 'royal' marriages). Margaret's grandfather John Beaufort had actually been born before this Swynford marriage, although subsequently legitimized. Nevertheless Henry

VII was careful to make it clear that he did not base his claim to the throne on that of his wife, who as the eldest daughter of Edward IV might be assumed to have inherited the rights of her vanished brothers, known to history as 'the princes in the Tower'. This marriage between Lancaster and York, in the words of the Pope's dispensation, 'willing all such divisions to be put apart',¹³ was deliberately delayed until January 1486; and Henry VII did not have his wife crowned for nearly two years, by which time she had given birth to a son and heir.

It was incidentally never suggested that Margaret Beaufort, a strong-willed and formidably learned lady, alive and well in her forties, should actually ascend the throne herself, let alone the younger and more passive Elizabeth of York. Margaret Beaufort's right had simply been transformed, with her enthusiastic support, into that of her 'dearest and only desired joy in this world ...', her 'good King ... and only beloved son'.¹⁴ England was not Castile, and the English had no precedent of a queen regnant. Although both the houses of York and Lancaster had passed at different points through the female line, the claim of Matilda, daughter of Henry I, to rule in the twelfth century had brought about a civil war with her cousin Stephen. The eventual succession not of Matilda but of her son as Henry II (during her own lifetime) was inconclusive on the subject of female rights.

Henry VII's vulnerability about the real nature of his title to the throne was understandable. But it had awkward consequences for those claimants, particularly those of Yorkist blood, who might fancy that they had a better one. A series of judicial executions of such possible claimants took place – while the King's insecurity was a bloodstained legacy which he would hand on to his son. One must however bear in mind that in addition to genuine Yorkist rivals, Henry VII had also dealt with two pretenders, Lambert Simnel and Perkin Warbeck, early in his reign. With hindsight, it is easy to dismiss the falsity of their claims to represent various Yorkist heirs such as the two princes in the Tower, Edward V and Richard Duke of York, and Edward Earl of Warwick, son of the Duke of Clarence. At the time Duchess Margaret of Burgundy, sister to Edward IV, and thus the putative aunt of these young men, acknowledged them in

turn. Warbeck in particular was always termed 'the Duke of York' in English official reports.¹⁵ Worst of all, predatory neighbours, including France and Scotland, backed the pretenders in military action, seeing in the situation something of advantage to themselves. These things were not so easily shrugged off.

As circumstances made Henry VII suspicious, even paranoid, about possible rivals, so Ferdinand of Aragon retained a watching brief towards the Tudor monarchy. The first overtures concerning the marriage of Henry's son Arthur Prince of Wales to Ferdinand's daughter Catherine probably came as early as 1487 when Arthur (born in September 1486) was under a year old, and Catherine not yet two.¹⁶ On the surface there was steady progress. In April 1488 a commission was given to Dr Roderigo Gonzalva de Puebla, a middle-aged Castilian with a decent record of government service in Spain, and an excellent grasp of languages.¹⁷ Together with an assistant, he was to draft a treaty of marriage with the commissioners of the English King.

There was also much courtly rejoicing – particularly on the English side. In July, for example, Henry VII was to be found congratulating Ferdinand and Isabella fulsomely on their latest success against the Moors and hoping that 'the ties of blood' would soon render the friendship which already existed between them even stronger. From London, de Puebla reported that the English King broke into a spontaneous *Te Deum Laudamus* when the subject of the match – and the alliance – came up.¹⁸

The Spanish reactions were somewhat cooler. It was no part of the policy of Ferdinand, known for good reasons as 'the wily Catalan', to marry one of his well-trained ambassadors into 'a family which might any day be driven out of England' as he himself wryly put it. Besides, the recent civil wars, the killings after Tewkesbury, had left an impression of English barbarism in the continental mind. When the English began to quibble about terms – matters such as the dowry to be given to Catherine by her parents, or her rights of succession to the throne of Castile – the Spanish commissioners suggesting that 'bearing in mind what happens every day to Kings of England, it was surprising that Ferdinand and Isabella should dare give their daughter at all.' De Puebla was confident that the remark had been made 'with great

courtesy' so that the English 'might not feel displeasure or be enraged'.¹⁹ But one suspects that they were at least a little put out by such a marked reference to their recent turbulent history.

Nevertheless, for Henry VII, the value of the marriage was sufficient to make it well worth swallowing a polite insult or two. The Treaty of Medina del Campo, which followed in March 1489, was his first major breakthrough in terms of a European alliance. It was of the essence for Henry that Yorkist pretenders would no longer find refuge on Spanish soil; and both Ferdinand and Henry were relieved to be united against the French in the matter of the struggle over Brittany. Furthermore Henry had secured the promise of a bride for his son, grander than any English consort since that French princess whom Henry V had wed, Catherine de Valois.

Where such royal marital bargains were concerned, however, a promise was a very long way from performance. The great heiress Marie of Burgundy, for example, was betrothed no fewer than seven times before she married Maximilian of Austria. Her daughter the Archduchess Margaret had actually been brought up at the French court as the bride of Charles VIII, before he humiliatingly abandoned her for the sake of another heiress, Duchess Anne of Brittany. This left the high-spirited, witty Margaret able to observe, as she sailed for Spain and the arms of the Infante Juan, that if she perished on the journey, they would be able to record on her tomb that she had been married twice and still remained a maid (*'encore est pucelle'*).²⁰ In the great dynastic game, formal betrothals, even proxy marriages which theoretically allowed a princess to sail for a foreign country already with the status of a wife (as Archduchess Margaret had done) were none of them foolproof moves. Nothing was which allowed an opening through which one of the participants might deftly slip away – if it suited the convenience of his or her country at the time.

Catherine of Aragon was just over three at the time of Medina del Campo. When she learned about the history of her English ancestors – the adventures of the Black Prince, John of Gaunt, from whom she was doubly descended, the great victory at Agincourt – these were not misty legends, but elements in her consciousness of what her own future might be, as Princess of Wales.

Then there were the romantic tales of the court of another Arthur, the legendary king (Queen Isabella's library contained a Spanish version of these stories). Latterday English knights came to the Spanish court on their way to the crusade, just as English archers under Lord Scales had fought during the *reconquista*.²¹ All of this – for Catherine could barely have remembered a time before the treaty – contributed to a strong feeling of an English destiny.

At the same time, negotiations for the actual betrothal of the young pair, as provided for at Medina del Campo, were not begun until late 1496, shortly before Catherine's eleventh birthday. At this date, given the various twists and turns of the international situation in the intervening seven years, the marriage currently suited both parties to the treaty. Moreover Dr de Puebla was impressed by the growth of internal stability in England (he would be happier still when Edward Earl of Warwick was executed three years later and he could gleefully report that 'not a drop of doubtful Royal blood remains in England').²² So that Catherine also grew up with her allegiance to the interests of Spain, those of her own family, strongly implanted. If one accepts the celebrated dictum of the Jesuits, that order founded by Catherine's contemporary (and fellow Spaniard) Ignatius Loyola, concerning the importance of the first seven years of life, then a sense both of an English destiny and of a family allegiance was there virtually from the start.

In January 1497 the young infanta commissioned Dr de Puebla to treat on her behalf for her betrothal. As a result, in the following August Arthur and Catherine were formerly affianced at Woodstock, with de Puebla 'standing in' for Catherine. Despite the practical caveats about royal betrothals already mentioned, in theory this was a solemn and indeed binding ceremony. If such a betrothal *per verba de praesenti* (i.e. one with immediate present effect, as opposed to a betrothal *per verba de futura*, for some future date) was actually consummated, it had the force in church law of a marriage. Of course there was no question of such a consummation with Arthur in England, and Catherine in Spain. But from now on Catherine was officially termed the Princess of Wales.

The betrothal also resulted in a renewed outbreak of affectionate letters between the four royal parents concerned. In December 1497, Henry VII, in thanking Isabella for her recent expressions of love, replied that he simply could not imagine any affection which was deeper or more sincere than his own. The marriage of their respective children would merely secure the everlasting continuance of this splendid friendship. Elizabeth of York, for her part, rejoiced graciously in 'the affinity' as she called it, which made Catherine 'our common daughter'.²³

One of the vexed questions raised by treaties of marriage between the young royals concerned when, and at what stage of development, the betrothed princess should set out for her fiancé's country. (This in turn related to the matter of the delivery of her dowry – another perennially vexed question, especially where parents such as Ferdinand of Aragon and Henry VII were in dispute; if the one was rapidly becoming a byword for diplomatic trickery, the other was gaining a similarly distasteful reputation for inordinate meanness.) A series of instructions about life at the English court were despatched to the 'Princess of Wales' from her future mother-in-law and the woman who was Queen Mother in all but name, Margaret Beaufort Countess of Richmond. Catherine should attempt to learn French by speaking it with her French-educated sister-in-law, the Archduchess Margaret, in order to be able to converse in that language when she came to England.

The next request was for Catherine to accustom herself to drink wine. 'The water of England', wrote Elizabeth of York sadly, 'is not drinkable, and even if it were, the climate would not allow the drinking of it.'^{*} Meanwhile the King, according to de Puebla, loved to speak, even drool over his little daughter-in-law, in which connection Isabella's pre-eminent reputation received a tribute: 'He said he would give half his kingdom if she [Catherine] were like her mother.'²⁴ But while Henry was anxious for Catherine's arrival, Dr de Puebla still counselled a diplomatic delay.

Another rival Spanish envoy, Don Pedro de Ayala, a more worldly character than de Puebla, who was ostensibly credited to

* To drink water was considered to be a horrible fate. People who did not drink wine, drank beer – small beer – most houses having their own brewery.

the court of Scotland, but actually spent his time cutting a dash at the English court, believed on the contrary that Catherine should be despatched as soon as possible. His was a point of view of lofty chauvinism which illustrates the disdain in which rough-hewn England was still held. While acknowledging that 'the manners and way of life of this people in this island' would cause Catherine 'grave inconveniences', he feared that 'the Princess can only be expected to lead a happy life through not remembering those things which would make her less enjoy what she will find here. It would, therefore, still be best to send her directly,' he wrote in July 1498, 'before she has learnt to appreciate our [Spanish] habits of life ...'²⁵

On Whit Sunday – 19 May – 1499 the first of the wedding ceremonies that were to bind Arthur Prince of Wales and Catherine of Aragon took place about nine o'clock in the morning, after Mass, at Bewdley Palace in Worcestershire. Prince Arthur spoke 'in a loud and clear voice' according to the report of de Puebla, declaring that he was pleased to contract 'an indissoluble marriage with Catherine Princess of Wales'. He was acting not only out of obedience to the Pope and his father 'but also from his deep and sincere love for the said Princess, his wife'.²⁶ (The reference to the Pope arose from the papal dispensation that had been granted in order for Arthur to make his vows – he was not yet fourteen and thus below the age of consent.) De Puebla's own role, a conventional one by the standards of the time, was that of the bride; as such he not only took the prince's right hand in his own and was seated at the King's right hand at the subsequent banquet but also inserted the statutory symbolic leg into the royal marriage bed.

Once again there was an outward show of tender, even sentimental rejoicing. And this time the young bride and groom were allowed to play their part: Arthur began to write letters in Latin (their mutual language) to his 'dearest spouse'. There is something touching about these schoolboy missives, no doubt phrased for him, but copied out with evident care, and the elaborate superscription also in his own hand: 'To Princess Katerine [*sic*], Princess of Wales, Duchess of Cornwall, *me plurimi dilecte* [the most highly esteemed]'. It is as though, beneath the

stately language, the thirteen-year-old boy cannot help being excited at the idea of having such a grown-up relationship. 'Truly those your letters,' he wrote, 'traced by your own [hand] have so delighted me and rendered me so cheerful and jocund, that I fancied I beheld your highness and conversed with and embraced my dearest wife.'²⁷

But for Ferdinand's part, so little did he trust the bargain – or the bargainer – that he instructed another Spanish envoy in London to watch de Puebla like a hawk, fearing that the doctor had been suborned by Henry VII. He was to keep his ears open for rumours of another match being negotiated for Arthur with a princess of some rival country and at all times Catherine must be styled 'the Princess of Wales'.²⁸ A further precaution on which Ferdinand insisted, and which de Puebla negotiated for him in the autumn of 1500 was that of a second proxy marriage in England once Arthur had actually reached the age of consent (thus demonstrating Ferdinand's suspicion, not only of Henry VII, but also of the value of a papal dispensation).

In this way yet another 'indissoluble marriage' was contracted between the prince and de Puebla in person, Catherine in spirit, at Ludlow Castle on the borders of Wales, shortly after Arthur's fourteenth birthday. De Puebla reported once more on the high level of respect shown to him as the proxy of the Princess of Wales – 'more than he had ever before received in his life' – as he sat at table on the prince's right hand, and had all the dishes of the banquet presented to him first. Ferdinand and Isabella were equally overwhelmed (at least in public) by the sheer wealth of emotion which they felt for Henry. The usual courtly clichés flowed forth: 'we love him and the Prince of Wales, our son, so much that it would be impossible to love them better' etc, etc.²⁹ Meanwhile the jockeying for position over the delivery of Catherine's person to England, and the delivery of Catherine's dowry to the English King continued behind the scenes.

It was finally agreed in the course of 1500 that Catherine should commence her journey towards England shortly after her sixteenth birthday. But the royal family of Spain during this last year of Catherine's crucial girlhood was very different from the

confident unit in which she had been brought up. Ferdinand and Isabella had been stricken with a series of appalling tragedies no less grievous in personal terms because these family disasters also had the effect of wrecking Ferdinand's European policy.

The first of these was the worst. In October 1497 Catherine's adored brother, the Infante Juan, newly married to the Archduchess Margaret, died after a short illness. 'Thus was laid low the hope of all Spain,' wrote Peter Martyr.³⁰ Queen Isabella never recovered from the blow. She was forty-six. Her health, weakened by her arduous campaignings in the course of her frequent pregnancies, had never been robust. There was now no direct mail heir to Aragon, while the Castilian succession passed to Isabella's eldest daughter, Isabel Queen of Portugal. And fate had not finished with the 'Catholic Kings'. Isabel herself died in the summer of the following year at the age of twenty-eight, giving birth to a son Miguel, who for the short span of his existence, his position recognized by the Aragonese, stood to inherit both the thrones of Spain and Portugal.

After the death of the baby Portuguese Prince Miguel, the succession now passed on to the Catholic Kings' second daughter Juana, wife of the Habsburg Archduke Philip of Austria. Juana gave birth to a son, Charles, in February 1500. It became apparent that this infant Habsburg heir was the most likely candidate to succeed to the Spanish throne as well as the empire of his father Maximilian. Miguel's accession would at least have enabled Ferdinand's grandson to unite the Iberian peninsula. But now Ferdinand's son and eldest daughter were dead. And his brilliantly planned dynastic marriages, far from elevating the power of his own royal house, looked like handing over the throne of Spain to the Habsburgs.

The last months of Catherine's residence at her mother's side were melancholy. Even her sister Maria, her senior by three years, was gone: despatched in October 1500 to marry her brother-in-law, the widowed King of Portugal, in yet another effort to preserve this treasured connection. Catherine's stately journeyings north-west across Spain through the summer of 1501 were scarcely more cheerful. There were further delays. A fresh Moorish uprising threatened Ferdinand's farewell to his youngest daughter.

Catherine herself suffered en route from something described as 'a low fever',³¹ a phrase which covered a multitude of indispositions in modern terms from a form of influenza to a bout of (understandable) adolescent depression.

One of Catherine's last stops, before her embarkation at Corunna on 17 August, was at Santiago de Compostela, where she spent the night in prayer at the hallowed shrine of St James, as so many crusaders had done in the past. But her prayers did not serve to spare her yet another ordeal once she was aboard the ship. A vicious storm in the Bay of Biscay drove her back to the shores of Spain. It was not until the end of September that Catherine was able to re-embark for an England increasingly impatient for her arrival.

Afterwards there would not be wanting chroniclers who would claim that Catherine's troubled future was presaged by these ill-timed winds. Catherine herself was supposed to have observed, in view of the fate of her first marriage, that 'this tempest portended some calamity'. But since storms in the Bay of Biscay were not a rarity, Catherine probably suffered more from 'the fatigue caused by the furious sea', as Henry VII himself phrased it, than from the weight of omens.³² The second journey was not noticeably calm – the weather around the autumn equinox was always turbulent – but at least it was accomplished. On 2 October 1501 the little fleet designated to escort the Princess of Wales to England arrived at Plymouth Sound.

'The Princess could not have been received with greater joy had she been the Saviour of the World,' wrote a member of Catherine's Spanish entourage.³³ This reception began with the spontaneous welcome given by the people of the West Country, who were moved by the gallantry, as well as the charm and dignity, of the young princess. Immediately on setting foot on shore, despite the nature of her ordeal – she had indeed been horribly seasick – and without time to change her clothes, Catherine asked to be taken to a church to give thanks for her safe arrival. (Here was the spirit and training of Queen Isabella.) The English delight with their royal bride – not only the King of Spain's daughter come from across the sea but a princess with the true untainted

blood of the Plantagenets in her veins – continued during her progress eastwards towards the English court, currently residing near London at Richmond Palace.

After so many delays and frustrations, King Henry's own excitement equalled that of the subjects who were warming Catherine's heart en route with their loyal acclamations (if she could not understand their words, she could appreciate their sentiment). At the last moment, he decided not to await 'the Princess of Wales' at Richmond, as had been planned, but sally forth to meet her having first taken in tow Prince Arthur, coming from Ludlow. The palace of the Bishop of Bath at Dogmersfield in Hampshire, about forty miles from London, was to be the site of the first encounter. It would be pleasant to see the King's uncharacteristic impetuosity as being inspired by that well-nigh unbearable weight of quasi-paternal affection to which his letters over the years had borne witness. But something more calculating was in fact at the bottom of it all.

What did the Princess of Wales actually look like? Like Doubting Thomas, King Henry needed to see his son's bride with his own eyes, to make sure that she was healthy, nubile – so far as the eye could see, and appearances were held to count for a lot in this respect during this period – and preferably goodlooking as well. The King, who had sent off specially to Spain to request that Catherine's Spanish ladies-in-waiting should be beauties, was not acting purely out of lust of the eye (or mind). The connection between a fair appearance and a good character, like that between a healthy appearance and fertility, was something in which more or less everybody at this time believed. Sending for princesses from afar always brought with it an element of doubt for all the best efforts of ambassadors to inspect the goods (as Arthur had been shown to the Spanish commissioners years before as an apparently wonderfully healthy baby).

But at Dogmersfield, the cries of mutual rapture came to an abrupt halt. For the King was sharply told that at this point there was no question of Catherine being personally inspected. As a high-born Castilian bride, Catherine would remain veiled to both her husband and her father-in-law until the solemn benediction

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of the final ceremony had been pronounced.* For a moment there was an ugly impasse between the victor of Bosworth Field, the man who had helped himself to the English crown sixteen years earlier and not faltered in resolve since, and a redoubtable Spanish matriarch named Doña Elvira Manuel, whom Queen Isabella had put in charge of Catherine. Doña Elvira was named in the considerable list of Catherine's attendants (which went all the way down to two slaves – probably Moorish prisoners – to attend her as maids of honour) as 'First Lady of Honour and First Lady of the Bedchamber': she was not about to surrender her position now. King Henry on the other hand pointed out that, since Catherine was styled as his daughter-in-law, she was actually an English subject – so that quaint old Castilian customs were of little relevance.

In the end the dispute was solved in favour of Catherine's English future as opposed to her Castilian past (a pragmatic solution one must believe that Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand would have favoured, whatever the scandalized disgruntlement of Doña Elvira). The veil was lifted. Catherine curtsied deeply in a gesture of symbolic obedience to the English King.

How fortunate then that Henry was speedily enchanted by what he saw! There had been no trick, no dissimulation. With a mixture of relief and delight, the King was able to say of Catherine that he 'much admired her beauty as well as her agreeable and dignified manners'. The Princess of Wales obediently followed suit. He had never felt so much joy in his life, he wrote to his parents-in-law a few weeks later, when he beheld 'the sweet face of his bride'.³⁴

Even allowing for tactful hyperbole, it is clear that Catherine, now on the eve of her sixteenth birthday, did have the kind of youthful prettiness and freshness of appearance that charmed observers, not only the family into which she would marry. It was partly a question of her complexion: her naturally pink cheeks and white skin were much admired in an age when make-up –

* The use of the veil in this way, unknown in England, was part of the strong Muslim heritage rooted in Spanish culture; unaffected by the fact of a military conquest, grand Spanish ladies were in fact imitating the customs of the sophisticated Muslim courts of the south.

'paint' – was clumsy in execution, easy to detect and much scorned. Ambassadors abroad, describing princesses to their masters, generally emphasized the tint of the skin, carefully noting whether it was 'painted' or not. A fair complexion like Catherine's was thought to indicate a more serene and cheerful temperament than a 'brown' (sallow) one. Then Catherine's hair was also fair and thick, with a reddish-gold tint, her features neat and regular in a pleasingly shaped oval face.

Perhaps Catherine's fair colouring, so far from the conventional picture of a dark-visaged Spaniard, reminded onlookers of her one-eighth of English blood: Thomas More, eight years Catherine's senior, was one of those who derided Catherine's Spanish escorts as 'ridiculous ... pigmy Ethiopians, like devils out of hell' in true English xenophobic fashion. But of Catherine herself he wrote that 'there is nothing wanting in her that the most beautiful girl should have'.³⁵

If her complexion was her chief beauty, Catherine's chief disadvantage was her lack of height. All the grace of her bearing, inculcated over many years at the Castilian court, could not conceal the fact that she was extremely short, even tiny. Years later a loyal defender had to admit that she was 'in stature somewhat mean', while adding quickly 'but bonarly [bonnie] withal'. She was also on the plump side – but then a pleasant roundness in youth was considered to be desirable at this period, a pointer to future fertility. In contrast Catherine's voice was surprisingly low and 'big-sounding' for a woman; and that no doubt contributed to the impression of gracious dignity she left on all observers, making up for the lack of inches.³⁶

Catherine, for her part, might have been less enchanted by the sight of her bridegroom, had her royal training encouraged any but the most dutiful thoughts on that subject. Arthur Prince of Wales was now fifteen, but he was so small and undeveloped that he seemed much younger. He had been born prematurely – by at least a month, probably two – and had never quite recovered from that debilitating start in life. When it came to height, Catherine might be short, but Arthur was half a head shorter still; the longed-for male heir to the house of both York and Lancaster gave the impression of being a mere child – and a delicate child

at that.³⁷ He too was very fair-skinned like his bride, but, without her healthy pink cheeks, the result was a worrying pallor. The magnificent genes of his grandfather Edward IV, that blonde giant, which, coupled with those of his beautiful consort Elizabeth Woodville, would serve to make Arthur's younger brother and sisters the handsomest, most upstanding princes and princesses in Europe, had all passed by the sad little Prince of Wales.

The very name of Arthur, that of the legendary king, might seem to mock this frail youth; but the prince had not in fact been named for the most august of his mythical forebears. The Tudor manipulation of history in this respect was to come later. According to his tutor Bernardus Andreas, Arthur was actually named for a star prominent at his nativity – probably Arcturus, in the wake of the Great Bear.³⁸ At least the prince had received (like his bride) an excellent classical education. Andreas recorded that he 'had either committed to memory or read with his own eyes and leafed with his own fingers' such authors as Homer, Virgil and Ovid, such historians and Thucydides and Livy. As Latin had been the language of their correspondence, the shy young couple could at least talk in Latin to each other, since Catherine knew no English and Arthur knew no Spanish.

Unfortunately Catherine's pronunciation of Latin, however fluent, turned out to be different from that of King Henry and Prince Arthur, so that she still could not make herself understood.³⁹ Only the English bishops were able to persevere and make some sort of contact. Nor could the prince and princess even dance together. Their training in this respect – important as it was at any Renaissance court – was once again completely different. So Catherine was content to dance a Spanish dance, while Arthur danced in the English manner with some ladies of the English court.

None of this was felt to matter in the slightest, given that Arthur had at last successfully set eyes on his 'dearest spouse'. By the standards of a royal marriage at the time, it was really already a remarkably happy venture, with the couple roughly the same age, some of the dowry already paid up, the contract virtually completed. In an optimistic mood, King Henry swept his son and daughter-in-law towards London for the last, the very last wedding ceremony at St Paul's.