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Sister Queens: Katherine of Aragon and Juana, Queen of Castile

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SISTER QUEENS

*Katherine of Aragon and
Juana, Queen of Castile*



JULIA FOX



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Preface

Over the centuries Katherine of Aragon has become an icon: the Betrayed Wife, the Perfect Queen, the Devoted Mother, a woman callously cast aside by a selfish husband besotted by his strumpet of a mistress. While much of this may be true, it turns a woman into a cardboard caricature. By endowing her with almost saint-like attributes, we not only lose sight of the real Katherine, we strip away her basic humanity and we demean her. Her sister, Juana, is also a woman of myth. She is 'Juana the Mad', the wife so in love with her husband that she could not bear to be parted from him even by death, keeping his coffin with her for year upon year, sometimes opening it to gaze lovingly at his decaying corpse, and driving herself mad in the process. Or so we are told.

When I began this book about three years ago, I wanted to peel back the legends to reveal the flesh and blood women behind them. And I became convinced that the only way to do this was to place them squarely back into their family and Spanish contexts and, crucially, to try to recreate their interior worlds. Only then would I have any chance of getting to know them, of discovering what made them tick and how they gained the values by which they lived and died. And they lived in a turbulent age. It was one of religious warfare, of heroism, of family honour, of vast wealth and grinding poverty, of suffering, of ambition, of romance, of beauty, of ideas, of Machiavellian intrigue. Above all, it was one in which women, especially royal women, were readily sacrificed upon the altar of dynastic politics.

Katherine's downfall as a consort came because she failed in that most basic of female functions, that of bearing a son and heir for her powerful husband. Juana produced children with apparent ease, but that was still not enough to ensure success as a sovereign queen. To rule in her own

right, she needed the consent of the men around her; it was her tragedy that in her father, her husband and her son, she faced opponents not allies. She deserves to step forward from their shadows, just as Katherine deserves to step forward from that cast by Henry VIII.

The more I delved into the lives of these two remarkable women, the more I realised that looking at their stories together enriches our understanding of both, even though Juana's long years of incarceration inevitably prevents a totally equal allocation of space within the pages of this book. The sisters complement each other, they epitomise their era. They are linked not only by blood, but by their fight against the forces ranged against them, for they were born female in a male-dominated society. I hope I have done them justice.

As ever, I stand on the shoulders of giants, to all of whom I owe an immense debt. Among them are some I must single out. Although written more than sixty years ago, Garrett Mattingly's biography of Katherine began the process of bringing her back to life. David Starkey's extensive work on Henry VIII and his refreshing re-appraisal of Katherine provide an unrivalled exemplar of the best of thoughtful, insightful modern scholarship. Peggy Liss and Felipe Fernández-Armesto have cast eagle eyes over Isabella of Castile and her family; their studies are indispensable to anyone interested in this amazing dynasty. And in her ground-breaking work on Juana, Bethany Aram has presented a compelling picture of this unfortunate princess.

I would also wish to express my gratitude to so many other people who have helped and encouraged me in the writing of this book. I must thank my agents, Peter Robinson in London and Christy Fletcher in New York, for their unswerving support and confidence. My editors, Alan Samson and Susanna Porter, were generous with their time and advice; I could not have attempted this project without them. Emma Guy's patient, painstaking deciphering of my scribbled handwritten notes has resulted in an impressive family tree. I am very grateful to my former student, Dr Jessica Sharkey, for permission to refer to her unpublished doctoral thesis. I must commend too the staff of the various record offices and at the London Library for their courtesy, professionalism and help. To my dear friend, Glenys Lloyd, whose critical judgment and analysis are second to none, I am extremely

grateful. It is through Glenys that I had the good fortune to meet Dr Dafydd Wyn Wiliam, who introduced me to the Welsh poetry and literature of the Tudor age, and who so willingly gave of his time to transcribe and translate the beautiful and relevant examples which grace the pages of this volume. I would also like to give special thanks to Margaret Riley, with whom I spent many a happy hour discussing Katherine and all her activities. And to my other family members and friends, who strove to keep me sane over the past few years, I can only offer my sincerest thanks and appreciation. But, as always, my deepest gratitude and my love must go to my husband who has welcomed Katherine and Juana into our hearts and into our lives. He has read every word of this book and offered invaluable comments and advice. I owe him an immense debt.

October 2010

PART I

Isabella's Daughters

A Triumph of Faith

The snow-covered mountains of the Sierra Nevada were clearly visible from the high, castellated red walls of the citadel as the slight figure of Boabdil, the last king of Granada, slipped out of its gates for the final time. Mounted on his mule and accompanied by fifty of his most trusted soldiers, he slowly made his way down the steep, icy paths formally to surrender the keys of the city. Its conquerors, Ferdinand, King of Aragon, and his wife Isabella, Queen of Castile, were waiting with their children by the banks of the Genil River in the fertile valley below. The date was 2 January 1492. To Boabdil, the day marked the loss of a kingdom and the beginnings of humiliation and exile. To Ferdinand and Isabella, on the other hand, it marked a triumph of faith; faith in the destiny of their country, in their dynasty and, above all, faith in the Holy Catholic Church and the God who was the core of their existence.

For Boabdil was a Moor. The Moors were Muslims who had first invaded the Spanish peninsula from North Africa back in the eighth century and who had quickly dominated much of it. Christian Spanish kings had fought against them over the centuries, gradually winning city after city and mile after mile of hotly disputed territory. The Moors had slowly been pushed back so that by the time of Isabella's birth in 1451 they were concentrated only in the south of Spain. But they had never been completely defeated until that cold January day when Boabdil was forced to give up their last stronghold: the city of Granada itself.

The formalities of surrender had been agreed in advance. Resolutely refusing to face further humiliation despite his defeat, Boabdil had already declared that he would not kneel to the victorious monarchs. Isabella was equally determined that he should show due respect to herself and her husband, for this was the day of which she had dreamed

since her wars against the Moors had begun ten years earlier. Too much Christian blood had been spilt, and she was very conscious of the malnourished and overworked Christian prisoners languishing in chains in the circular well-like subterranean dungeons of the Alcazaba, the main fortress contained within the walls of the Alhambra, Boabdil's palace and administrative complex. The captives would soon be freed, but their plight, and the sacrifices of the Christian armies, could not go unrecognised; Boabdil would be treated fairly but he could not expect to get away scot-free. Nor would he.

As arranged, Boabdil turned his mule towards Ferdinand and ostentatiously pretended to dismount and remove his hat. Boabdil, after all, was the supplicant not the victor. Ferdinand, equally ostentatiously, courteously indicated that he should remain in the saddle. Before handing the keys of the city to Ferdinand, Boabdil then rode towards Isabella who, glitteringly dressed and sitting upon a great white horse, also received him graciously. Knowing his wife as he did, Ferdinand immediately passed the keys on to her. Íñigo López de Mendoza, Count of Tendilla, the new governor of the city, and Hernando de Talavera, the gentle, ascetic cleric who had served as the queen's confessor and whom she had appointed its archbishop, then rode up the hill and away from the rejoicing crowds towards the Alhambra itself. The city, complete with its citadel, was now part of Spain. Moorish control was over, and Ferdinand and Isabella's crusade against them concluded, if only for the moment.

Boabdil left behind his lands and his palaces to settle on the estates allowed him by Ferdinand and Isabella in the Alpujarras, an area lying to the south of Granada. He was to stay there for only one year. In 1493, he sailed to Africa, much to Isabella's delight. He died shortly afterwards. Ironically, his half-brothers and his mother, sensibly bowing to reality, were baptised, the young men marrying Castilian noblewomen and settling comfortably into Christian society.

Four days after Boabdil handed them the keys to Granada, Ferdinand and Isabella entered the city for the first time to make their way up the path so recently trodden by Boabdil and then into the amazing world that was the Alhambra. Their royal standards, together with that of St James of Compostela, the patron saint of the enterprise, flew proudly

from the battlements of the Alcazaba and the huge silver cross, which had been in the vanguard of the armies since the wars had started, shone out from the Tower of the Winds. The banners would be lovingly preserved and can still be seen today, a little faded but otherwise intact, in the museum of the Royal Chapel of Granada's cathedral, just a stone's throw away from where Ferdinand and his queen now lie.

Those watching the royal cavalcade snake through the narrow streets filled with tiny houses on 6 January 1492 said that the couple appeared 'more than mortal, and as if sent by Heaven for the salvation of Spain'. It was a momentous day, a never-to-be-forgotten day. For the defeated Moors, peering through their latticed windows as their new masters rode by, it was terrifying; the monarchs had promised to allow them to continue their traditional way of life and to practise their religion, but the brutal treatment Ferdinand and Isabella had meted out to the citizens of the Moorish port of Malaga, where most had been enslaved, hardly encouraged confidence in the future. In contrast, Isabella and her husband were ecstatic. Even before Granada's capitulation Ferdinand had been quick to trumpet his exploits against the Moors. Having captured an outlying town, he wrote to Elizabeth of York, Henry VII of England's wife, to let her know because, as he said, his 'victory must interest all the Christian world' so it was only his 'duty to inform' her. With the fall of Granada itself, letters almost flew around European courts announcing it. On receipt of his, Henry VII ordered a special *Tē Deum* to be sung in St Paul's Cathedral in London. Another of Ferdinand's letters reached Pope Innocent VIII proclaiming the city 'won to the glory of God, the exaltation of the Holy catholic Faith, and the honour of the Apostolic See'. Innocent died a few months later, but his successor, Alexander VI, gave the title *los Reyes Católicos* – the Catholic Monarchs – to Ferdinand and his wife.

When they entered Boabdil's palace of the Alhambra, the royal couple were accompanied by their five children: Isabella, Juana, Maria, Katherine and Juan, their only son who, although not yet fourteen, had been knighted by his father before the walls of the city. Theirs had been an itinerant life: during the conflict's many campaigns, the queen had kept her offspring at her side whenever possible so that she could supervise their education and upbringing.

This had not been entirely without risk. One night, as the Christian armies slept peacefully in their camp near to the besieged city of Granada, the queen's tent had suddenly caught fire. Perhaps a candle or lamp had been left too close to the hangings but, whatever the cause, the flames swiftly took hold and spread with alarming speed. Juana, who had been sleeping soundly with her mother, found herself roughly woken up and dragged through the dense, choking smoke to safety. The noise, the shouts and the thick smoke roused the entire camp. Soon soldiers were running everywhere to check if they were under attack, for the besieged defenders had a nasty habit of riding out in sorties to take the offensive. The fire was eventually extinguished, although not before it had caused massive damage and left Juana with an exciting, if frightening, memory. Ferdinand, who had rushed to don armour and join his soldiers to defend the camp, was so alarmed that he ordered the swift building of what went on to become the town of Santa Fe, so that his family could rest within firm walls rather than diaphanous pavilions.

Isabella, scorning danger, had shrugged it off and carried on with her usual activities. A small matter of a fire was not going to stop her. Although never taking part in the fighting, she had frequently ridden with her armies, organising supplies, arranging for medical aid for the wounded and exhorting her troops to deeds of courage and valour for the sake of their God. A retinue of priests accompanied her wherever she went and would join her in praying for victory. Indeed, when the shining silver cross was raised high on the battlements of the Alcazaba, the Spanish armies sank to their knees for a *Te Deum*; Ferdinand and Isabella's monumental undertaking appeared to have come to a magnificent finale. As they explored their new palace, taking in the vibrantly painted and tiled rooms, the intricately carved ceilings, the gently playing fountains of the Court of Myrtles and the Court of Lions, the royal children had every reason to feel proud of their parents. And yet it could all have been so different.

When Isabella had been born deep within Castile at Madrigal de las Altas Torres (Madrigal of the High Towers) in 1451, no one had seriously thought that she would become a reigning queen in her own right, nor that she would be the instrument through which the disparate regions of Spain would become consolidated. For Spain was not then a united

country: the Moors dominated the south; Castile, Isabella's homeland, was the largest province, consisting of Castile itself, León, Toledo, Galicia, Murcia, Jaén, Cordoba and Seville, and controlling about two-thirds of the lands we now think of as modern Spain; the kingdom of Aragon, which also comprised Valencia, Mallorca and the principality of Catalonia, controlled the rest.

Isabella, the only daughter of King Juan II of Castile and his second wife, Isabella of Portugal, was third in line to the throne. With two male heirs ahead of her – her half-brother, Henry (Juan's son by his first wife, Maria of Aragon), and her full brother, Prince Alfonso – the young Isabella was to be groomed for marriage not ruling.

Death changed all that. When she was three, her father died and her half-brother, Henry, took over the throne. Although married, King Henry IV sired no children; amidst rumours of his impotency, hopes that Alfonso would succeed him seemed well-founded. Or they did until, to the incredulity of the entire court, after seven years of marriage King Henry's queen gave birth to a daughter. Although no one dared say so officially just yet, courtiers gossiped that the little girl was not Henry's at all but was the result of an affair between the queen and a dashing handsome courtier, Beltrán de la Cueva. The child was even spoken of by the scandal-mongers as 'la Beltraneja' after her supposed father. To this day, we cannot be sure whether or not she really was Henry's child or Beltrán's but the murkiness was a gift to Isabella's brother Alfonso and later to Isabella herself. Neither was prepared to give way to a child they deemed, very conveniently, a bastard.

It was during Henry's reign that Isabella had revealed her remarkable courage and a grittish determination to go to any lengths to achieve her goal, characteristics which were later to be particularly apparent in her daughters Katherine and Juana. Henry, having managed to alienate several key nobles and powerful church figures, found himself facing demands to recognise Alfonso's claim to the throne and disinherit the little daughter he always claimed was his own. Realising the strength of the opposition, Henry did as requested but, a vacillator to his fingertips, changed his mind. The result was civil war. And then, in 1468, probably of plague but suddenly enough to give rise to talk of poison, Alfonso died.

Isabella's position had been radically transformed. She saw herself as heir-apparent. And this was when she played a master-stroke: she married. Rather than let Henry neutralise her by arranging her marriage himself, she took matters into her own hands and became the wife of Ferdinand of Aragon, King of Sicily, the son and heir of King Juan II of Aragon. Just as one day they would negotiate the weddings of their children with clinical practicality, so Isabella and Ferdinand negotiated their own. Undoubtedly a dynastic match, it brought the advantage of mutual support to both participants. In a male-oriented world, Isabella would have a husband who could lead her armies and give her children; Ferdinand, whose family in Aragon were also facing civil war, would have the backing of Castile in any future conflict. And while their marriage treaty did not formally join their lands into one country, mutual cooperation between Castile and Aragon could only strengthen both.

What started as a marriage of convenience quickly became loving and passionate. It was consummated immediately. To a fanfare of trumpets, flutes and kettledrums, the bloodstained bed-sheet was proudly exhibited the following morning. (The failure to do so after King Henry's wedding night had been widely noted.) 'To be well married', Ferdinand was to write to his daughter Katherine, 'is the greatest blessing in the world.' Isabella was eighteen, Ferdinand a year younger. Despite the eulogies of her chroniclers, extant portraits suggest that she was no beauty. Auburn-haired, petite but with a tendency to put on weight, she had a round face, plump cheeks, a small and rather pursed mouth, and eyes which were distant and cold. She also had a very slight double chin. But, as a modern biographer points out, she had a 'youthful freshness' and could certainly be charming and kind when she chose. Ferdinand came to love her, as she did him. Of middling height, he had full, sensual lips, dark hair and a slight cast in one eye. More to the point, he was an accomplished soldier and was soon to prove himself a courageous and resourceful commander.

He had needed to be, for when Isabella claimed the throne immediately after King Henry's death in 1474 and was crowned in Segovia, the couple had been forced to embark on a fierce battle for the throne. Dismissing the claims of Henry's own daughter, whom she insisted on

calling la Beltraneja, Isabella went so far as to allege that when the child was born 'certain taps were administered to her on the nose, in order to give it the form of the nose of King Henry IV, and so make her resemble him'. Isabella also had no qualms in repeating hearsay evidence that 'on the same day that the Beltraneja was born, another lady was delivered in the same town of a son'. When 'attempts were made to exchange the Beltraneja', the other mother 'refused to part with her child'. Or so Isabella maintained.

Whatever the truth might have been, it took Ferdinand and Isabella five long years to defeat la Beltraneja and her adherents. In the end, she was immured in the Portuguese convent of Santa Clara in Coimbra, safely out of Castilian territory. She remained a nun until her death in 1530.

The bitter war of succession gave Isabella the opportunity to really prove her mettle. Ferdinand soon discovered that his bride was anything but the submissive stereotype of fifteenth-century womanhood. This was no figurehead but a queen in her own right, and she would rule through that right, proving that the concept of a woman sovereign was no oxymoron. Certain that her cause was just and showing the dogged spirit that her children would witness for themselves as their parents fought the Moors, Isabella not only used spin and propaganda on an epic scale to discredit her rival for the throne but, through sheer personal charisma, energised and inspired her soldiers and shrewdly bargained with her opponents to make them change sides and fight for her rather than against her.

That Ferdinand was with her every step of the way was crucial; she could not have done it without him. Theirs appeared to be a marriage of equals, ostensibly joining their respective lands. In some ways that was true, for both were monarchs rather than monarch and consort, their banners and seals bore both their arms, there were times when they sat together to administer justice. Visitors to Granada today can still see the arms of the Catholic Monarchs, with the arrows of Isabella and the yoke of Ferdinand entwined, firmly placed upon so many doorways, walls and gates to signify their ownership of this once Moorish city. But since Isabella's Castile was far larger, richer and more powerful than Ferdinand's Aragon, he was in a sense the junior partner, and the

two kingdoms were never officially joined to make one country. Even the currencies, despite being emblazoned with the heads of both of them, remained stubbornly separate. More importantly still, Ferdinand could not claim Castile for himself any more than his wife could claim Aragon. The union was fragile, depending on the lives of the two individuals concerned. Should either die, Castile and Aragon could break apart again.

But such a prospect was not in the forefront of their minds when they rode into the Alhambra and considered the impact of their victory. The epithet 'The Catholic Monarchs' was well earned. Isabella's Catholic faith was central to her being, and she did all in her power to ensure that the same was true of her children. Although less outwardly pious than his wife, Ferdinand too was devout. It was Isabella, though, who was most determined to convert or rid her lands of those she considered infidels. The true faith must be defended from the enemy within.

And she was quick to take up the challenge. When she appointed Talavera as the archbishop of Granada, it was on the clear understanding that his main task was to persuade his new flock to give up their own religious beliefs and become baptised Christians. As a man who respected the Moors' culture, learning and wisdom, he preferred kindness and example to torture and threats. Isabella, though, was not averse to the use of force in what she believed to be a good cause; in fact, to her, if the cause was good, the means really did justify the end. The establishment of the Holy Office, or the Inquisition, which brought so much fear and distress to those unlucky enough to fall into its hands, was very much the policy of the queen, who applied to Rome for papal permission to set it up in 1478. It would be used against her new subjects in Granada.

It would also be used against the Jews, despite Isabella's assertion at the beginning of her reign that her Jewish subjects were under her protection. Convinced that Jews who had converted to Christianity, the conversos, were being influenced to return to their old faith by those who had not converted, Isabella was incensed that souls were being lost and a mockery made of her church. So, in March 1492, and from Granada, the Catholic Monarchs issued an order expelling all those Jews who refused to become Christian. They were given until July to comply

or to leave Spanish shores. Those who remained and were now ostensibly Christian were subject to the pitiless control of the Holy Office.

Isabella had no doubts of the wisdom of her decision. She had made it for God and for the sake of Spanish unity. The lands ruled by herself and Ferdinand would be united under God, the souls of the righteous would be protected, there would be no toleration for infidels. And, as they sat with their parents and their siblings in the rooms and courtyards so recently enjoyed by Boabdil and his court, Katherine and Juana, the two sisters whose fortunes were to be so closely joined, understood that they too were committed to the service of Spain and, even more importantly, to the service of God.