Catherine of Aragon

Humble and Loyal

BORN: 16 DECEMBER 1485; MARRIED: 11 JUNE 1509; DIVORCED/ANNULLED: 1533; DIED: 7 JANUARY 1536

*There has probably been more interest in the wives of Henry VIII than in the King himself, although it is impossible not to wonder about the man that brought these six women together in history. Their lives were all unique, yet all had fates ultimately decided by the same man. Two were divorced, with one getting a much better deal than the other. Two were beheaded, one falsely accused, the other probably not. One died shortly after giving birth to the male heir Henry so desperately longed for. One survived as his widow.*

Catherine of Aragon was the youngest surviving child of Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain. As was common for princesses of the day, her parents almost immediately began looking for a political match for her. When she was three year old, she was betrothed to Arthur, the son of Henry VII of England. Arthur was not even quite two at the time.

When she was almost 16, in 1501, Catherine made the journey to England. It took her three months, and her ships weathered several storms, but she safely made landfall at Plymouth on October 2, 1501. Catherine and Arthur were married on 14 November 1501 in Old St. Paul's Cathedral, London. Catherine was escorted by the groom's younger brother, Henry.

After the wedding and celebrations, the young couple moved to Ludlow Castle on the Welsh border. Less than six months later, Arthur was dead, possibly of the 'sweating sickness'. Although this marriage was short, it was very important in the history of England, as will be apparent.

Catherine was now a widow, and still young enough to be married again. Henry VII still had a son, this one much more robust and healthy than his dead older brother. The English king was interested in keeping Catherine's dowry, so 14 months after her husband's death, she was betrothed to the future Henry VIII, who was too young to marry at the time.

By 1505, when Henry was old enough to wed, Henry VII wasn't as keen on a Spanish alliance, and young Henry was forced to repudiate the betrothal. Catherine's future was uncertain for the next four years. When Henry VII died in 1509 and one of the new young king's actions was to marry Catherine. She was finally crowned Queen of England in a joint coronation ceremony with her husband Henry VIII on June 24, 1509.

Shortly after their marriage, Catherine found herself pregnant. This first child was a stillborn daughter born prematurely in January 1510. This disappointment was soon followed by another pregnancy. Prince Henry was born on January 1, 1511 and the was christened on the 5th. There were great celebrations for the birth of the young prince, but they were halted by the baby's death after 52 days of life. Catherine then had a miscarriage, followed by a short-lived son. On February 1516, she gave birth a daughter named Mary, and this child lived. There were probably two more pregnancies, the last recorded in 1518.

Henry was growing frustrated by his lack of a male heir, but he remained a devoted husband. He had at least two mistresses that we know of: Bessie Blount and Mary Boleyn. By 1526 though, he had begun to separate from Catherine because he had fallen in love with one of her ladies (and sister of one of his mistresses): Anne Boleyn.

It is here that the lives of Henry's first and second wives begin to interweave. By the time his interest in Anne became common knowledge, Catherine was 42 years old and was no longer able to conceive. Henry's main goal now was to get a male heir, which his wife was not able to provide. Somewhere along the way, Henry began to look at the texts of Leviticus which says that if a man takes his brother's wife, they shall be childless. As evidenced above, Catherine and Henry were far from childless, and still had one living child. But, that child was a girl, and didn't count in Henry's mind. The King began to petition the Pope for an annulment.

At first, Catherine was kept in the dark about Henry's plans for their annulment. When the news got to Catherine, she was very upset. She was also at a great disadvantage since the court that would decide the case was far from impartial. Catherine then appealed directly to the Pope, which she felt would listen to her case since her nephew was Charles V, the Holy Roman Emperor.

The political and legal debate continued for six years. Catherine was adamant in saying that she and Arthur, her first husband and Henry's brother, did not consummate their marriage and therefore were not truly husband and wife. Catherine sought not only to retain her position, but also that of her daughter Mary.

Things came to a head in 1533 when Anne Boleyn became pregnant. Henry had to act, and his solution was to reject the power of the Pope in England and to have Thomas Cranmer, the archbishop of Canterbury grant the annulment. Catherine was to renounce the title of Queen and would be known as the Princess Dowager of Wales, something she refused to acknowledge through to the end of her life.

Catherine and her daughter were separated and she was forced to leave court. She lived for the next three years in several dank and unhealthy castles and manors with just a few servants. However, she seldom complained of her treatment and spent a great deal of time at prayer.

On January 7, 1536, Catherine died at Kimbolton Castle and was buried at Peterborough Abbey with the ceremony due for her position as Princess Dowager, not as a Queen of England.