

King Henry VIII's other great matter

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First marriage

The divorce of King Henry VIII from his first wife, Catherine of Aragon, has, over the centuries, produced a positive paper storm of academic books and popular works, examination papers and essays. As a subject it has also inspired a number of films and TV documentaries.

King Henry posed an argument that his marriage to Catherine of Aragon was cursed because he had broken canon law evidenced in the biblical quote “thou shalt not uncover thy brother’s wife’s nakedness”. Henry had married the widow of his elder brother, Arthur, who had died and Henry took his crown and also his place in Arthur’s bed. The whole period of negotiations with Rome to allow divorce was known in court and wider society as “The King’s Great Matter” and great it was, in every sense when one considers what would follow.

There is, however, another matter that may also be considered great, relating to the King and one of his marriages that is not much considered. It relates to King Henry’s last marriage to his sixth wife, Catherine Parr.

Final marriage

Henry married Catherine Parr on 12 July 1543 in Hampton Court, London, not many months after the death of her second husband. How they met is not clear, but we do know that Catherine was an extremely well-educated woman, a rare commodity at the time. Her upbringing had been scholarly and pious, in fact highly respectable, as were her family. Catherine Parr was in almost every way opposite to Henry’s fifth wife, the apparently wanton Catherine Howard, who was also poorly educated and brought to the royal marriage a sexual scandal that would cost the Queen her young life.

The comparison between the two queens provides a first and obvious reason for Henry to choose Catherine, as they stood together on that summer day, a much-married middle-aged couple. Henry is described as making his wedding vows *hilari vultu*

meaning “with joyful countenance”. History does not record whether Catherine was joyful in any way but we do know she was a Reformist and passionate about her faith so perhaps she hoped this leap in power would enable her to move England closer to her way of thinking, in time.

Legitimate heirs

King Henry VIII was a man who was keen to show off his sexual prowess and strength as evidenced by his bejewelled codpiece and his commissioning portraits from painters such as Hans Holbein who give us a sense of the immense power and even brutality of the Tudor monarch. It would be unthinkable for him not to have a woman in his bed and let all of Europe and his people know he was ready for more.

Consider, however, the fruit of this public spectacle of male virility. By 1543 Henry had two daughters, Elizabeth and the considerably older Mary, and both had been declared bastards. He had another bastard of Bessie Blount, the Duke of Richmond. Finally, he had a legitimate son, Edward, born of the tragic Queen Jane. So in real terms he had one legitimate male heir. With the mortality rate so high across the population for various reasons from plague to consumption, King Henry would know that more legitimate sons were essential for the Tudor line to remain strong.

Marital problems

With this background, consider, if King Henry VIII was prepared to marry a woman who was not a virgin, in fact, married and widowed twice before, why did he not pick a previously married woman who had produced sons for her husbands or any children at all for that matter? There is no record of an example of fertility in any form recorded for Catherine Parr up to her marriage to the King. Despite the brutality and humiliation the King had shown to most of his wives he still was the king of England and would have a wide choice of aristocratic women in this country and abroad to marry. Power and ambition were the order of the day and families would be

perfectly happy to promote their daughters or sisters to the attentions of one such as King Henry VIII for the rewards for the whole family would be enormous.

By the time of his marriage to Catherine Parr, King Henry VIII was in such ill health, grossly overweight and unfit, that it begs the question as to whether he was suffering with erectile dysfunction. It is of course possible, but it is not recorded nor proved; however, any document suggesting the King was suffering with erectile dysfunction would no doubt be quickly followed by a death warrant.

If after the King's marriage to Catherine Parr there were any questions posed about why the queen was not yet pregnant, there was the perfect answer to hand: she had not borne children in two other marriages so it could not be the fault of the King. The King's reputation as a lusty and powerful king would remain unsullied.

Aftermath

As a final point for consideration, when King Henry died, Catherine Parr remarried for the fourth and final time to the man she had loved and given up when the King had declared he wanted to marry her: Thomas Seymour. Catherine died from a fever, a few days after giving birth to their child. That child was a girl.

Future articles

The next article in this series will consider "Homosexual crimes in medieval Europe".

About the author

Lesley Smith is currently a postgraduate student in the Centre for the History of Medicine of the University of Birmingham, where she is developing a PhD in obstetrics and gynaecology in early modern Britain. She holds an honorary degree for "services to history". She makes 200–300 public appearances a year and also works as a TV historian in the UK and abroad including the USA. Lesley is also Curator of Tutbury Castle in Staffordshire and is a member of the Society of Apothecaries of London and the Society of Medical Writers. She has recently been appointed a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland.

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