



***Catherine of Aragon: Infanta of Spain,
Queen of England***

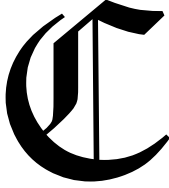
By Theresa Earenfight

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Reviewed by: Clodhna Condon



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atherine of Aragon was Henry VIII's Queen of England between 1509 and their divorce in 1533. Their marriage resulted in one child surviving to adulthood: the future Mary I. At the time of Mary's birth in 1516, a woman in power would surely cause social unrest and civil war and, after the tumult of the War of the Roses, England needed the apparent stability a male ruler would bring. It is through this lens that Catherine of Aragon's story is usually told. She is presented as the barren blockade for the formidable Anne Boleyn and the Reformation. However, this narrow scope has resulted in the depreciation of her merits and, as Theresa Earenfight states in this book, "[i]f we situate her among the other wives of Henry, we risk the fruitless game of comparing women by Henry's scale of worth" (94).

This biography is a passionate venture into the life of a mighty queen consort which is presented in an approachable yet meticulously researched way. There are detailed notes and an extensive bibliography. Maps are provided of both England and Spain with points of interest highlighted, and each chapter concludes with a timeline of the years discussed. The book opens with a discussion of the decision to study Catherine using material culture: the rabbit hole of research into the provenance of a pair of shoes. Earenfight continues with a close engagement with the available primary sources and shows how they have been interpreted inadequately or have failed to take into consideration an alternative form of power. The ensuing five chapters cover different aspects of Catherine's life: childhood, marriage and widowhood to Arthur, marriage to Henry, the breakdown of this marriage, and her divorce and subsequent life.

Earenfight takes great care in deconstructing how Catherine's life is usually discussed and makes her aims clear at the start. Unlike other accounts of her life, the focus is not solely on the "Great Matter." Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn are mentioned sparingly which serves to highlight the emotional texture of Catherine herself. Intimate time is spent with her family at a young age, and, instead of reproducing

primary sources verbatim, Earenfight gives a real sense of everyday reality for Catherine: what she wore, how she accustomed to each new culture, how she was educated, and particularly how she was educated for the approval of her future husband. Catherine learned Arthur's language, and studied English dress and English customs to prepare for her future throne. Her transformation from Infanta of Spain to Princess of Wales is stressed by referring to her as Catalina until she travels to England and becomes Catherine.

Women's stories are often told in the context of male history or through the records of male accomplishments. Earenfight must unearth Catherine from reports on the war in Granada and the marriage negotiations to Arthur. However, there is a clear attempt to maintain the focus on women throughout this book. We get details of Margaret Beaufort and Elizabeth of York's efforts to make Catherine more comfortable through the appointment of staff, for instance, but Earenfight makes sure to address the issues with sources not originating from Catherine herself. For example, her formal arrival in London in 1501 is relayed not through Catherine's words but retold by Thomas More who perfectly illustrates why material culture is so vital to female histories. Earenfight explains that "[t]he visual elements of her style signified foreignness" (63) as More describes Catherine's entourage as "hunchbacked, undersized, barefoot pygmies from Ethiopia ... refugees from hell" (63–64). This racist account of the ladies-in-waiting to the future Queen of England illustrates the weight placed on how a woman presented herself and how that denoted her worth. Earenfight highlights the perception of her presentation throughout Catherine's time as a queen consort as she adapted to English style with Spanish influences. More writes of Catherine again to Henry VIII in 1509: "There has been no other woman, surely, worthy to have you as husband, nor any other man worthy to have her as wife" (91).

Earenfight seems to allow no fault in Catherine or at least never alludes to a misstep. On the other hand, Henry's flaws are front and centre, and his transformation from loving husband to distant brute is sudden and harsh. However, this is in keeping with the tone Earenfight sets from the beginning: "Most often when we do hear Catherine, it is an act of ventriloquism, her words filtered through men's voices" (6). Catherine's story has always been told through the filter of the

disappointment of her second husband: her ultimate failure was not providing a living male heir. Henry's mighty tale of defying the Pope, building his own Church of England, and the slew of wives he obtains no longer takes centre stage here. The narrative is not presented as a forlorn tale of what could have been had their daughter Mary only been a boy.

This book guides its reader into the world of material culture as well as emphasising the importance of female power. Earenfight is meticulous in her approach to each item and takes care with her presentation. This is extremely evident in her concluding chapter as she details Catherine's life through the portraits discussed within the book. This proves to be very powerful in yet again emphasising how objects can speak to us. She maintains her focus on Catherine as the central figure, presenting even the end of her life as her most definitive and powerful stance against the might of the Defender of the Faith, Henry VIII, when "she forced Henry to make difficult decisions" (208) such as risking excommunication for his annulment. Earenfight is passionate throughout and critical of how other histories have simplified Catherine's narrative. Whether you have interest in this Queen of England or simply in material culture and its emerging importance, this book is an essential read.

CLIODHNA CONDON

University of Limerick