

The King and His Queen: Henry VIII's Verse and Katherine of Aragon as Center of the Chivalric Court

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Abstract

This essay examines the ways in which Henry used poetics and performances to establish the iconography of his court and the relevance, within this context, of Henry's specific choice of Katherine as queen to preside over his chivalric court. Though analysis may now often interrogate the possibility of underlying insecurities motivating Henry's actions, the king's consciousness of his own power and belief in his own ultimate sovereignty are equally important elements of almost every such analysis. However, the court over which a not-yet-eighteen year old Henry ascended in 1509 was a very different animal. Henry may have already begun to conceive of his sovereignty as unimpeachable, but he was a fair distance from being able to enforce that conception. How he handled the problems arising from this gap between desire and action determined many of the more defining elements of his reign, for in these first moments Henry intentionally created, in contrast to his father, and through verse and performance, a court invested in the ideals of courtly love, chose as the subject center for that court the regal Katherine, and began the drive towards absolute monarchy in its most ambitious sense that would make everything that followed possible. In the decisions he made in transitioning the court from his father's to his own and in establishing his own royal identity, Henry VIII created, by example, the definitions of masculinity, courtiership, and chivalric behavior which he expected to be followed in his court and to define his court in history.

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The images of Henry VIII with which modern audiences are most familiar and most comfortable are all ones of strength and swagger. However, the court over which a not-yet-eighteen year old Henry ascended in 1509 was a very different animal. Henry may, at this relatively young age, have already begun to conceive of his sovereignty as unimpeachable, but he was a fair distance from being able to enforce that conception. How he handled the problems arising from this gap between desire and action would determine many of the more defining elements of his reign, for it was in these first moments that Henry intentionally created, through verse and performance, a court invested in the ideals of courtly love, chose as the subject center for that court the regal Katherine of Aragon, and began the drive towards absolute monarchy in its most ambitious sense that would make everything that followed possible. In the decisions he made in transitioning the court from his father's to his own and in establishing his own royal identity, Henry VIII created, by example, the definitions of masculinity, courtiership, and chivalric behavior which he expected to be followed in his court and to define his court in history.

Almost the first of these decisions was to claim as his future wife Katherine of Aragon. Many motivations are possible, of course, from military ambitions in France, wherein an alliance with Spain might be of use, to the claimed deathbed promise to his father. However, whatever the acknowledged reason, the choice of Katherine is equally linked to the other projects in which Henry immediately engaged in establishing the tone and power of his kingship. Even as her innate regality bolstered Henry's royal image, Katherine's maturity and self-assurance might have struck a familiar and comfortable note for Henry, whose rather domineering grandmother, Margaret Beaufort, had necessarily made a strong mark on the young Henry. Katherine's six years of experience over the young king might have later worked to her detriment, but at the time of his father's death, followed relatively quickly by the death of this same commanding grandmother, these years instead underscored her stability and maturity. Additionally, though royal birth would hardly be a requirement for Henry's later queens, his first wife was attractive not least because of the dynastic stability and nobility she represented. Katherine of Aragon had been, and would be, for every minute of her life, every inch the princess, by her own concept and consciousness of self.

Unlike Henry, pushed into the role of heir by tragedy, Katherine could likely not remember a time in her early life when she was not referred to as Princess of Wales. The marriage of Katherine to Arthur, Prince of Wales, had been contracted when the princess was three years of age. Following Arthur's death, Katherine was quickly pushed into contracting an arrangement with the new Prince of Wales. During the extended arguments between Henry VII and Ferdinand regarding payment of the dowry, the original marriage between Arthur and Katherine itself came into question, and Katherine successfully defended herself in that quarter. This steadiness reflects Katherine's consistency in her self-conception, as well as the ways in which that consistency could become entrenchment. As Antonia Fraser phrases the results of this incident, "If Catherine as a girl could summon up her courage, friendless in a foreign country, to tell Henry VII that her marriage was 'irrevocable', and be proved right, she was not likely to change her mind on the subject in the future" (1993, p. 57). The very certainty of her own worth and regality that made Katherine an attractive choice to a young king desiring to establish his own legitimacy would be the quality that made her such a burden to an established king looking to disentangle himself. At the

time of her marriage to Henry, though, this determination made Katherine only more attractive. Striving to establish his own kingship, Henry was likely drawn to the kind of statement made by marrying a princess of thoroughly noble lineage, one who had thought of herself as the future Queen of England for longer than he himself had been alive.

This self-assurance and maturity, perhaps natural to Katherine, were bolstered by her exceptional and highly specific education. Katherine's education in Spain created her consciousness of her duties as queen and wife. Fraser provides a useful catalogue of the skills Katherine acquired, acknowledging that:

Katherine'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...her daughters were taught to spin, weave and bake... (1993, p. 12)

Fraser goes on to point out that these skills “provide[d] a domestic counterpoint to the regality which [Katherine] brought to the English court” (1993, p. 12). Both her regality and her domesticity were only facets of a personality with another striking aspect: Katherine was a thoroughly educated woman. In marrying Katherine, Henry began a trend he followed in most, though not all, of his marriages to come: he chose for his wife an educated woman with the confidence to articulate her own ideas. In choosing how to define his kingship and his court, Henry VIII chose for his first consort someone with the potential to be a partner, even a leader, inasmuch as the basic misogyny of the age would allow.

Alongside these various attractive qualities, Katherine also presented Henry VIII with a subject for his performances of chivalric imagery and poetry. Katherine's queenly air legitimized Henry's kingly boasts; her domestic skills ensured his comfort and legitimized his ideas of special masculine privilege; her intelligence guaranteed an appreciative audience for his art, wit, and argument. In defining himself through verse and performance, Henry privileged certain characteristics and practices as noble, manly, or kingly; in crafting so much of his performance as homage to Katherine, he made statements about what ought to be privileged in courtly women. Katherine's own performance of femininity encompassed domestic skill, courtly pageantry, and no little humanist education, and Henry chose to elevate that particular performance above all others, using his queen as an element in his creation and projection of self.

At the beginning of his reign, Henry needed to distance himself from the iconography of his father and, in so doing, create an iconographic identity of his own. This identity needed to promote the Tudor dynasty in general, but also needed to privilege Henry's own specific traits, turning his youth and his aggression into admirable aspects of the ideal king rather than drawbacks. Just as Henry's choice of wife made a statement about the masculine personality he wished to project, so his poetry clarified his own vision of his self and his power. Herman concurs with this argument, arguing that “Henry VIII used verse at the start of his reign to establish his royal identity and to defend himself against his critics” (2010, p. 3). He further argues that, in the process of establishing his poetic and monarchic identities, Henry was also implicitly answering and defending against threats against those identities. As Herman argues, “Defenses respond to attacks...and Henry's asserting his right to live as he would strongly suggests the presence of an unignorable “they” who wanted to restrain the king's liberty” (2010, p. 37). In this case, the “they” likely represents not only the

elderly advisors Herman identifies, but also the external perceptions of kingship generally and of this king specifically.

Herman identifies this thread in the self-defensive tone of “Though sum saith that yough rulyth me.” The lyric seems to answer some specific source of critique, offering such specific self-defense as “I hurt no man, I do no wrong / I love trew wher I dyd mary” (Lines 13-14). In response to these attacks, the lyric not only expressly delineates the virtues of the speaker, but also points to royal prerogative through two gestures. The first of these is in a clear reference to Henry’s royal motto, referenced in the line “God and my ryght and my dewtye” (Line 3). The second of these is more subtle, lying in the informed audience’s response to the repeated theme “Though sum saith that yough rulyth me” (Lines 1, 5, 10, 15, and 20). The lyric, after all, is written by a king: thus, there is, to Henry, an inherent absurdity in the idea of any being, physical or metaphoric, ruling him. Indeed, as would have been becoming increasingly clear, in Henry’s construction of his kingship, nothing at all, save God, ought to rule him, and even that limitation was to be defined by Henry’s term. The force of the royal voice reverses the conventional, subordinate position of youth, clarifying that the king has become an embodiment of youth who will use his force and energy to rule all others.

A combination of the various facets that Henry saw as central to his identity, including this force and energy, can be seen in an analysis of “Thow that men do call it dotage.” The speaker privileges, at various points, youth, nobility, courage, and chivalric, devoted love. Henry writes “Love maynteynyth all noble courage / Who love dysdaynyth ys all of the village” (Lines 13-14), which, as Herman points out, privileges love by necessarily implying that “the person who disdains love...has lost his place in the aristocracy; his disdain marks him as a peasant” (2010, p. 29). Additionally, the poem provides further emphasis on the importance of the lover’s faithfulness. The poem closes with the lines “For whoso lovith shuld love butt oone. / Change who so wyll, I wyll be none” (Lines 19-20). The emphasis provided by placing this couplet at the end of the verse, combined with the repetition of devoted love as a motif in Henry’s verse, emphasizes the importance of Katherine to Henry’s court. For the first several years of Henry’s reign, Katherine represented the uncontested feminine subject center, and it was only after almost twenty years of marriage that any real threat to her supremacy was presented. The longevity of Henry’s first romance suggests the central importance, to a younger Henry, of stability, chivalry, and an enactment of the kind of love about which romances were written as elements of his court and of his kingship, even after the rather elusive, if not illusive, nature of all of these things must have become clear to him.

This chivalric image was not limited to the voice the king adopted on the page. In the tournaments he reveled in, “King Henry as Sir Loyal Heart or Coeur Vaillant jostled under the colours of his lady, and his Queen” (Fraser, 1993, p. 57). In the court entertainments he demanded, Henry assumed roles in the company of mythical, heroic, masculine figures like Hercules and Robin Hood (Anglo, 1969), assaulting or protecting “feminine” virtues and vices as befitted each respective occasion. However, these images revealed more of the edge that underlined the chivalric poetry the king wrote: each privileged love, yes, but each gave even greater privilege to masculine prerogative.

The general pattern of Henry's masques focused on precisely this: the reassertion of normative structures in the particular figuration of a return to masculine power, specifically represented by the group among which the king stood disguised.

In the early days of his reign, then, Henry adopted a chivalric stance, linked to the courtly love tradition. Henry's monarchic voice bent the conventions of such a stance to meet the demands of a royal speaker. This royal voice became stronger as Henry's reign continued and as his identity stabilized, and eventually Henry stepped away from poetry, apparently entirely, as something no longer necessary to buoy the performance of his power. This kind of adoption, appropriation, and manipulation became something of a pattern in Henry's policy as well as in his poetics, reflecting Henry's growing power to enact his extreme conceptions of power. At the beginning of his reign, Henry took for his queen an educated, deeply religious woman whose entire identity was bound to her role as Queen of England. This woman, though, could not give Henry the single thing he most desired: a male heir. Because Henry was basically incapable of doubting the legitimacy of his own desires, and equally unlikely to doubt his God's willingness to grant him the fulfillment of those desires, Katherine herself became, for Henry, the embodiment of a problem he could not solve and of obstacles which thwarted him. Adding to this anxiety, Katherine was increasingly a physical reminder of male powers that stood more immediately in Henry's way: first as daughter to the deceptive Ferdinand, then as aunt to Charles V. These men were, at least politically speaking, forgiven where Katherine was not, but that speaks to Henry's approach to gender. A threatening man might be forgiven; in theory, the other royal men of Europe were Henry's equals and so could be forgiven once they no longer stood directly in his path. The threat created by power in a woman, though, could not be neutralized. The damage was of a different sort entirely, and even if she gave into the will of the King, she had already done irrevocable damage through the very existence of her challenge. Since, then, the damage could not be undone, a threatening woman could not be forgiven. The subject of his courtly love traditions was useful only so long as she could remain a subject, and Henry's decision to end his marriage reflected his true investment; the imagery which bolstered his masculinity and his power had become more important to his performance of kingship than the chivalric constancy and devotion he had once expressed in his verse.

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