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### Review of Theresa Earenfight, Catherine of Aragon: Infanta of Spain, Queen of England

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**Earenfight, Theresa. *Catherine of Aragon: Infanta of Spain, Queen of England*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2021. xii + 251 pp. + 24 ills.**

Scholars of women and gender tend to avoid the phrase “golden age” when framing a historical era. The past decade and a half have, however, been a sort of golden age for the *historiography* of early Iberian women in general, and of queenship in particular, as researchers have explored the various ways, gendered and otherwise, that Iberian queens ruled not just as adjuncts to institutionalized male power but also as powerful political actors in their own right. The specter of Iberian exceptionalism has, however, sometimes kept these historians’ arguments out of the mainstream: the Iberian example can seem different enough to be comfortably set aside as irrelevant to what was happening in the rest of medieval and early modern Europe. The English queenship of Catherine of Aragon is one example of this tendency: her life and career have generally been read backward through the lens of her (gendered) failures in childbearing and marriage; her eventual divorce and the derogation of her daughter have served as reasons to view her as passive or, at the very least, ineffectual. Theresa Earenfight’s new study of Catherine challenges this portrait: by emphasizing her dual identities as “Infanta of Spain, Queen of England,” Earenfight reads Catherine’s life not backward from her end but rather forward from her beginnings as a young girl growing up in the tradition of Iberian queenship, and specifically as the daughter of a queen who was a powerful ruler in her own right. In Earenfight’s hands, Catherine becomes both an active figure in her own life and a bridge spanning the historiographic gulf that has too long divided the rich recent historiography of Iberian queenship from other scholarship on medieval and early modern European queens.

One of the challenges faced by any potential historian of Catherine’s life and career is the relative paucity of sources that examine how Catherine saw her own role as queen. Earenfight gets around this problematic gap in the source material in two ways. First, she exploits the wealth of contextual sources—both about Catherine’s upbringing in the Spanish court and about how English people responded to her—to draw the outline of the woman herself. Earenfight then shades in the interior of this Catherine-shaped outline by analyzing the many objects that Catherine or people closely associated with her left behind, weaving the techniques of anthropologists and art historians together with a historian’s more usual document-oriented methods in order to understand how this Spanish *infanta* and English queen approached her relationships and her rule.

This creative combination of methodologies allows Earenfight to present the reader with a fuller portrait of Catherine as both a queen and an individual. The early chapters of this book cover Catherine’s upbringing as a Spanish *infanta*

in a peripatetic court, where she learned the value of personal presence, symbol, and ritual displays of legitimacy. Catherine's transformation from Spanish *infanta* to English queen is presented as a series of crossings: literal crossings of borders and oceans; a crossing into Englishness during her rituals of welcome and of her first wedding to Arthur, England's heir-apparent; her eventual crossing of status borders from virgin to bride to widow, and again to wife and queen. In none of these crossings does Catherine fully pass out of one state and into another. Yet the figure we come to know in these early chapters seems to recognize her liminal state as a source of power as much as it was a position of vulnerability: here, and during her subsequent marriage to Henry and her later struggles to maintain her position as queen and her daughter's position as heir, we see Catherine weave a visual and material rhetoric of Spanishness together with her burgeoning identity as an English princess, making the tension between Englishness and "Other" a platform from which to secure for herself a unique place within the English court.

As the second half of the book moves into Catherine's marriage to Henry, her attempts to bear a living child, the disintegration of her marriage, and her struggles to maintain both her position and that of her young daughter, we might expect to find ourselves in the familiar story of Catherine-as-doomed-queen. But even here, Earenfight surprises the reader. Using material culture, the author draws Catherine from out of Henry's shadow—and from the shadow of her own eventual fate—so we can see her as an active political player, forging and/or reaffirming connections between herself and her husband, as well as with the women, both English and Spanish, who formed her court. Her personal emblem—a Spanish pomegranate entwined with the Tudor Rose beneath a crown, signifying alliance, fertility, unity, and the future of the dynasty—was not only a part of her personal presentation but also adorned some of the gifts she gave both to her husband and to the political and personal network of women she bound to herself, many of whom remained loyal to her even as it became too dangerous for their husbands to do so. The fact that so many of these emblems have been scratched out or, in the case of embroidery, unpicked is also significant, in that it demonstrates the power that resided in these images. The Catherine whom we meet in this part of the book is neither passive nor entirely tragic. Instead, she uses the tools she always had at her disposal—her hybrid English/Spanish identity, and her ability to forge and maintain networks that were simultaneously personal and political—in an effort to maintain her position. That her struggle was ultimately in vain (at least for her; the lessons her daughter learned are another matter) emerges as less important than what her efforts teach us about her approach to queenship.

Woven throughout this book is the work that gender does in politics. Earenfight neatly sidesteps the historiographic trap of "hard power = male/soft power = female," looking instead to Catherine's many models of active

queenship, especially her mother, Isabella of Castile, and her mother-in-law, Elizabeth of York. The women of her court—and her gradual isolation from them over the course of her conflict with Henry—serve as tangible representatives of her connections both to her homeland and to power centers in England. In Earenfight's careful analysis, Catherine's position as daughter of one realm and queen of another takes on new significance: she is not just a passive link between kingdoms but an active participant in diplomacy (at one point between her two marriages serving as Europe's first officially appointed female diplomat) and a valued political advisor to Henry early in their marriage. Even gendered activities like embroidering the collar and cuffs of Henry's shirts, or choices of clothing at a ceremonial event take on a new political meaning in Earenfight's hands. Conversely, Earenfight invites us to step back from politics when considering Catherine's pregnancies, miscarriages, stillbirths, and the death of her firstborn to consider the emotional impact of these life events, humanizing chapters of her life that have often been portrayed primarily in terms of their political import.

Throughout the book, the author presents us with tantalizing hints of the interplay of two versions—Iberian and English—of gendered queenship. There are a couple of points in the book where this is more implicit than explicit, leaving this historian of gender hungering for more. For instance, the author's detailed attention to Catherine's upbringing in the Spanish court invites speculation as to whether a Spanish princess destined to become an English queen would have been educated more for marriage or for active governance, and what the balance between those two says about the way these traditions were expected to merge. Likewise, Earenfight points out that while a handful of women from prominent court families were present at Catherine's funeral, no men of the court attended. Although the context building up to this passage makes clear the gendered politics at work, a deeper dive into this particular moment would be welcome: what does it mean that noble women could get away with the small rebellion of being present for Catherine in life and in death, but their husbands could not?

These minor points aside, this is an excellent book, both for what it says about a queen bridging two worlds and for the methodology it employs to get there. In its pages, Catherine emerges not as an object of political debates but as a historical subject: intelligent, politically savvy, emotionally complex, and an active participant in her own life, career, and legacy. The book as a whole is written in a highly accessible prose style and features helpful chapter-by-chapter timelines that will make it useful to students. But the author's arguments also invite advanced scholars in the field to take up the challenge presented by this new portrayal of a Spanish princess who became an English queen, and what it inspires for our examination of medieval and early modern queenship as a whole.

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