

## **Excluded From Power?**

### **Joanna the Mad, Patriarchy and a Charge of Insanity**

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Joanna of Castile was a pretty child. She had an oval face and a long delicate nose. Her skin was felt to be attractively light in colour as was her hair. Fiercely intelligent, the basics of Latin came easily to her. She possessed a great aptitude and fondness for music, something which would become one of the few consolations in her increasingly tragic life. Joanna's destiny at birth seemed to be that of most royal princesses. She was expected to be little more than a brilliant wifely ornament at the court of a great European prince. The chances of her inheriting her parents' crowns seemed slim to say the least. She had two older siblings. The second of these was a male, Prince Juan. He was expected to inherit both Aragon and Castile from Ferdinand and Isabella. More children were to follow, and if any of them was a male his claim to the thrones of Spain would automatically trump the claims of any of his older sisters. In fact, Joanna's future seemed likely to be similar to what would befall her younger sister, known to history as Katherine of Aragon. First Katherine was despatched to England to wed the Prince of Wales, the ill-fated Prince Arthur; after his premature death in Ludlow and she was obliged to wed, after some years in marital limbo, his younger brother, Henry VIII. Fifteen or so years after that she was cast off in

favour of Anne Boleyn and separated from her only child, Mary Tudor. So, when Joanna was born in Toledo on 6 November 1479, no one imagined that this middle daughter would one day inherit the kingdoms of Castile and Leon and the quickly expanding empire in the New World, not to mention all the realms of the Crown of Aragon and its many territories in the Mediterranean, Italy, and North Africa.

Just as with her sister Katherine, Joanna's future seemed to lie in northern Europe. As part of the Catholic Kings' mistrust of France and their dream of uniting the whole of the Iberian peninsula under one dynasty, the Trastámaras, each of their children was allotted a place in a grand matrimonial policy. Her elder sister, Isabella married twice into the Portuguese royal family. Along with her elder brother, Joanna was part of a plan to surround France on her northern borders by marrying into the House of Austria, which was by then already ruling the Low Countries. Prince Juan married Margaret of Austria in April 1597. Margaret had arrived in Spain in the same fleet which had, the previous year, delivered the 17-year-old Joanna to her future husband, the Archduke Philip the Handsome of Austria, the heir to the house of Burgundy as well as Austria.

Joanna had set out for the Netherlands in August 1496, accompanied by a fleet worthy of *two* royal brides. Well over a hundred ships were in attendance with some 15,000 men prepared to defend their precious cargo in case of a French attack. On 10 September 1496, Joanna arrived at Arnemuiden, just outside the Netherlandish port of Middelburg. Curiously no one of importance was there to meet her. In fact, she only met her husband over a month later, on 17 October, with no time to get to know him before they were immediately married in ceremonies that commenced the following day.

Philip's month-long absence was odd. So much so that a richly illustrated book commissioned by his father, the Emperor Maximilian, attempted to alter history. It contains a wholly fictitious engraving showing the Archduke Philip almost wading into the sea to greet his bride at Middelburg. Joanna's lonely arrival in the Low Countries did not indicate a lack of warmth in their marriage. Philip grew to be

inordinately fond of his wife, despite their many violent arguments and his own penchant for other people's wives. They had six children, and the astonishing fact is that each became a queen or an emperor. Even during their second and troubled visit to Spain, they continued to live as husband and wife. Their sixth and last child, Catalina was born in Torquemada on 14 January 1507, some four months after her father's death in Burgos.

Joanna's destiny was altered by a concatenation of deaths. After only five months of marriage, her brother died suddenly on 4 October 1497. Family tradition maintained that the 19-year-old prince's death was caused by sexual indulgence at too early an age. Almost fifty years later, Joanna's son, the Emperor Charles V, warned his son, the future Philip II, not to overindulge in the first few years of marriage. This, he said, was what had killed Prince Juan and had led the House of Austria to rule over Spain. A further tragedy was the death of Joanna's elder sister, Isabella, now the wife of King Manuel of Portugal. She died just under a year later in August 1498. At least the Catholic Monarchs could take comfort in the fact that her son, Miguel de la Paz de Avis y Trastámara, was heir to all the Iberian kingdoms. One day he would surely unite the whole peninsula. Instead the royal infant died before his second birthday, on 19 July 1500. This was the tortuous route by which Joanna became heiress to Castile and Aragon.

Joanna is almost universally known either as *Joanna the Mad* or to Spanish speakers as *Juana la Loca*. Yet in 1500 the immediate question was not whether she was fit to govern but rather *how* she would govern. Queen Isabella was widely acknowledged as a powerful ruler, yet no one doubted - not least Isabella herself - that much of her success was due to her personal and dynastic union with that wily old fox, Ferdinand. For a hundred years or more some form of union between Castile and Aragon had been on the cards. Ferdinand and Isabella were cousins and members of the same royal house of Trastámara. A king of Aragon ruling in Castile did not seem so out of place.

This was not true of Joanna's husband. Philip knew nothing of Spain. Would he expect to rule in his own right? Would Spain be ruled by absentee monarchs? Would the new-found peace between Castile and Aragon even survive?

This last question was particularly pressing. No one could usurp Joanna's claim to be her mother's heiress, but if Ferdinand were to remarry and have a son, then the precedence given to male children at the time would once more come into play. Any male child would automatically supplant Joanna as the next Aragonese sovereign. In fact, Ferdinand wasted no time in remarrying after Isabella's death, but that future marriage produced no heir. But for the moment, his first wife was very much alive. Queen Isabella implored Joanna to return to Spain at once.

In 1502 what was not at issue was Joanna's personal fitness to rule. She was known for her fierce temper but that was something inherited from her formidable mother, who was herself prone to bouts of melancholy. Praise for Joanna's abilities was generally high. In 1501, the bishop of Cordoba reported back from Flanders that she was "very sensible and well balanced". Earlier that year, the resident Spanish ambassador had gone so far as to say that "I do not believe anyone has seen such good sense in one so young". What everyone did pick up on was the tempestuous relationship between Joanna and Philip.

No one yet thought for a moment that Joanna was unfit to rule let alone mad. In a patriarchal world, her repeated pregnancies were regarded as a sign that she was fundamentally healthy in body and in mind. She was fulfilling her duties as a wife. Certainly she had moods but this was understandable. She found herself to be in a court that was less than friendly and the climate of what is modern-day Belgium could hardly have been to her liking. The marriage had been arranged by Philip's father. The emperor was far more anti-French than his son. But Philip ruled in the Low Countries in his own right as his Burgundian inheritance came from his mother. The young archduke preferred to maintain good relations with France -

which largely defeated his father's purpose in finding him a Spanish bride. Joanna was in the unenviable position of having been sent to Flanders in order to ensure that France was surrounded by enemies, just as her sister, Katharine, had been dispatched as a bride to London to do the same.

Joanna's very presence at the Court of Burgundy became a reproach to the Francophile policies of her husband. This was something not helped by her preference for the de Berghes brothers, who were known for their hostility to France. Steps were taken to diminish her influence. She had brought with her a household containing almost a 100 Spanish men along with at least 11 Spanish women. Within six months only 16 of the men remained and her private apartments were dominated by Burgundian ladies.

The political tensions with her husband were made manifest when in November 1501 they finally set out for Spain to claim their position as heirs to Ferdinand and Isabella. Joanna wanted to sail directly to Spain, but Archduke Philip insisted on travelling through France in order to visit Louis XII. He had agreed to become the French king's vassal for the counties of Flanders and Artois in return for several fortified towns. By all accounts, the heiress of Spain acquitted herself admirably. The French king graciously intervened before she might be required to perform the second genuflection which her husband had already done. At mass, she modestly declined to distribute alms at the behest of the French queen and made a point of delaying before following her out of the chapel.

Once her daughter and son-in-law had made it safely crossed the border into Spain, Queen Isabella made arrangements for the *cortes* - as the Castilian parliament was called - to acknowledge Joanna as heiress in her own right. Archduke Philip was ignominiously relegated to the rank of a consort. Six months later he abandoned Spain, leaving his wife pregnant with her second son, who was named Fernando after his maternal grandfather. Isabella intended for Joanna to reign in Castile as proprietary queen, with or without

the Archduke's assistance. What Isabella was unable to resolve was whether either Philip or King Ferdinand would accept this.

The Cortes of Toledo of May 1502 proved a defining moment of Joanna's public life. From that moment on, questions about her fitness to govern began to materialise. By the time Queen Isabella wrote her last testament, shortly before her death on 26 November 1504, serious doubts had arisen about Joanna's mental condition. Although Isabella confirmed Joanna as heir to her kingdoms, she added that, if Queen Joanna, being in her realms neither wished nor was capable (*o no pueda*) of governing them, then her father, Ferdinand, was to rule on her behalf. In a further attempt to exclude Philip from usurping his wife, Isabella noted his status as a foreigner and expressly forbade aliens from being appointed to civil or church office. It does not matter whether the phrase "o no pueda" was an afterthought by the queen. It is the strongest possible indication that Joanna's mother now doubted her daughter's capacity to govern.

Many have argued that Joanna's so-called *madness* was the result of a male political conspiracy. As an obstacle to Philip or Ferdinand's exercising control over Castile, it was in both their interests to say she was incapable of ruling. Her mental instability, it is alleged, was wilfully exaggerated so as to make her unacceptable as a ruler. It is further argued that her unacceptable behaviour was, in reality, a legitimate attempt to assert herself in a male-dominated world.

This line of argument makes Joanna into a representative of all those women who, during the course of human history, have on account of their sex unfairly been excluded from power. Atonement for such repression may well be necessary. Nonetheless there is simply too much evidence that suggests that Joanna really was too unstable to be entrusted with government. Even a nuanced version of this interpretation - the idea that she lost her mind only *after* her final incarceration in Tordesillas - is hard to square with the evidence of instability from much earlier on. Too much time has been spent arguing that she inherited her madness from her maternal grandmother, Isabella of Portugal. Though there is not enough

evidence to provide a clinical diagnosis, by confining ourselves to saying that Joanna was simply *too volatile* to rule, then the evidence for unacceptable behaviour – male or female – is overwhelming. Indeed, her comportment was so aberrant that, till her dying days, her family genuinely feared that she might be possessed by the devil.

It was in the months immediately after Philip's abrupt return to the Netherlands that Queen Isabella probably first became concerned about her daughter's ability to rule. Joanna's intense wish to be reunited with her husband clashed with her mother's desire that she should learn how to rule Spain. The arguments between the two had a grave effect on the health of both mother and daughter, with the queen suffering severe chest pains. Joanna was confined to the great brick-built castle of La Mota in Medina del Campo in north central Spain. A bizarre and disconcerting incident took place there. According to Isabella's own account, her daughter stayed in the castle's outer precinct, without hat or coat, on one of the coldest nights of the year until 2 o'clock in the morning.

Certainly it can be argued that Joanna had successfully forced her mother into granting a face-to-face meeting and ultimately allowing her to rejoin her husband in Flanders, but this misses the point: what she had achieved had been at the cost of her own dignity, a quality which was indispensable for any ruler, male or female. A similar incident occurred in June 1506. She and her husband had returned to Spain in April, some sixteen months after Isabella's death. On 28 June 1506 Philip told her he had reached an agreement with her father at Villafáfila. Echoing Isabella's testament, it was decided that, if the queen were unwilling or *too ill* to govern, Philip would exercise full authority and remain king after her death. Ferdinand promised to depart for Aragon but retained half of Castile's revenues from the New World as well as full control over the Military Orders. Joanna had previously been incensed by these negotiations but now she appeared to show no interest. Instead she asked to see the count of Benavente's gardens, which were famous for its collection of animals. After seeing the peacocks, Joanna galloped off until she came across the house of a woman who baked

cakes. She spent the next two days in a peasant's cottage, surrounded by hundreds of Philip's German soldiers.

These two stories shed light on Joanna's failure of judgement. From a 16<sup>th</sup>-century point of view, it is irrelevant whether we call her afflictions madness or a severe form of post-natal depression. Joanna had proven herself incapable of strategic thought. She could no longer think beyond her immediate circumstances. Her obsession was to be free, but free to do what? To govern or be governed? Neither the ramparts at La Mota nor the peasant woman's house near Benavente led anywhere.

The death of her husband in 1506 was undoubtedly an emotional blow to the pregnant Queen Joanna. Lurid stories about her constant re-opening of his coffin to view his body cannot be proven (and may anyway stem from a rational need to prevent its being lost or stolen). Instead it is important to concentrate on the political aspects of her reaction to his passing. The day after he died the president of the Royal Council went to see the queen. He was shocked when his sovereign lady opened the door to the house where she was staying. She told him to come back later. When the Council returned, they had to chase her through the house and finally conduct business through a grille that connected a chapel to her apartments. By refusing to conduct urgent business – regardless of whether it was through unwillingness or illness – Joanna had once more demonstrated an incapacity to govern.

Thereafter, Joanna's mental state worsened. Her world became smaller. We need look no further than her response to the leaders of the Comunero revolt, who visited her in Tordesillas in 1520. Pushed into rebellion by the exactions of foreign rulers, several Spanish towns rose up. Juan de Padilla and the other leaders hoped to legitimise their revolt by governing in Joanna's name, thus supplanting the rule of her son Charles, who was regarded as co-king alongside his mother. Joanna expressed sympathy for the *comuneros* and presided over an irregular meeting of the cortes, yet she would not sign any documents limiting her son's authority. Her world had

indeed shrunk to the limits of her own confinement. The rebels granted the temporary removal of her hated jailor, the marquess of Denia, Bernadino de Sandoval y Rojas, and all his female relatives, but when offered the chance to rule again she neither fully declined nor fully accepted, leaving everyone to wonder what she meant when she refused to compromise with her son. Everything that was hers was his, she said.

What was Queen Joanna's confinement like in the royal palace of Tordesillas? When she arrived on 16 February 1509, she still had her young daughter, the Infanta Catalina with her and she was not too far away from the body of her husband, temporarily placed in the adjacent nunnery of St Clare. Yet her first governor became increasingly agitated whenever she refused to co-operate. In 1516 Cardinal Cisneros removed him for mistreatment. Mosen Luis Ferrer was fearful she would die on his watch and admitted "that he had on occasion used violence when she refused to eat". Her second governor, Hernán Duque, was an educated man who treated Joanna with greater compassion. He wrote to Cardinal Cisneros that, with a degree of patience, the queen was occasionally capable of prolonged periods of lucidity, but admitted that she needed to be treated with a degree of love "because if you tried to bend her will through force everything fell apart".

Her most reviled governor was the marquess of Denia. His family controlled Joanna until her death in 1555. He was ordered by Charles to restrict access to any politically sensitive information. For four years she was not informed of her father's death in 1516. Denia supervised the brutal removal of the Infanta Catalina from her mother's care in 1525. Two years later he secretly removed King Philip's coffin for burial in the royal vault in Granada. In 1518 he let slip a comment that was to return to haunt the royal family as Joanna neared the end of her life, almost a generation later. She was obsessed with news about Martin Luther, the German friar who, a year earlier, had begun the Reformation in Germany.

If there is one reason which most eloquently argues against the idea of any form of male political conspiracy against Queen Joanna, it is the deep affection in which her bewildered family held her. Between

1535 and her death twenty years later, Bethany Aram has calculated that she received at least sixteen visits from her children and grandchildren, some of them lasting for several days. They genuinely believed she was afflicted. Might she even be *endemoniada*? In 1516 she had been subjected to exorcism. The English ambassador wrote that her physician, Dr. Soto, had offered to cure her within three months as "she is encumbered with spirits by witchcraft".

Towards the end of her life, her family began to worry lest the queen's soul might be in danger. She would not eat or comb her hair or even get dressed, and what was most concerning was her obstinate refusal to hear mass. From 1534 Charles had tried to make her confess to a priest. In 1554 the Jesuit and former duke of Gandía, Francisco de Borja, was sent by the future Philip II to enquire into her refusal to attend church. He reproached her for living without the mass or even holy images in her apartments. He tried to explain that her grandson, Philip, was now king of England by virtue of his marriage to Mary Tudor. The evident danger was that English Protestants might argue that their religion did not differ from that of the queen of Spain. She countered this by claiming that her religious life was being impeded by the women of Denia's family. Calling them "died in the wool witches", she demanded their investigation by the Inquisition. Borja went so far as to ask his sovereign if she believed that Christ had died to save the world. The Jesuit feared Joanna's afflictions might truly be the result of contact with the devil. In another form of exorcism, her rooms were filled with crucifixes and holy water. It was agreed that the Denia women should be removed to see if his grandmother still saw spirits. Borja ultimately told Philip there was no proof that the devil had possessed her, but neither could he vouch for her good sense.

Joanna died on Good Friday 1555, at the age of 76 after almost half a century of confinement. Borja said her last stumbled words were, *Jesu Cristo crucificado, ayúdame* - Jesus crucified, help me.

Whether Joanna was mad or merely clinically depressed is a question we can never answer with certainty. What is clearer is that her rivals for royal authority - all of whom were male - had a vested interest in denying her access to power. Once she had been deemed unfit to govern, there could be no recuperation. Too many men had a stake in her being *Joanna the Mad*.