

ABOUT DOOMED QUEENS:

Illicit love, madness, betrayal--it isn't always good to be the queen.

Marie Antoinette, Anne Boleyn, and Mary, Queen of Scots. What did they have in common? For a while they were crowned in gold, cosseted in silk, and flattered by courtiers. But in the end, they spent long nights in dark prison towers and were marched to the scaffold where they surrendered their heads to the executioner. And they are hardly alone in their undignified demises. Throughout history, royal women have had a distressing way of meeting bad ends--dying of starvation, being burned at the stake, or expiring in childbirth while trying desperately to produce an heir. They always had to be on their toes and all too often even devious plotting, miraculous pregnancies, and selling out their sisters was not enough to keep them from forcible consignment to religious orders.

From Cleopatra (suicide by asp), to Princess Caroline (suspiciously poisoned on her coronation day), there's a gory downside to being blue-blooded when you lack a Y chromosome. Kris Waldherr's elegant book is a chronicle of the trials and tribulations of queens across the ages, a quirky, funny, utterly macabre tribute to the dark side of female empowerment.

Over the course of fifty irresistibly illustrated and too-brief lives, *Doomed Queens* charts centuries of regal backstabbing and intrigue. We meet well-known figures like Catherine of Aragon, whose happy marriage to Henry VIII ended prematurely when it became clear that she was a starter wife--the first of six. And we meet forgotten queens like Amalasuntha, the notoriously literate Ostrogoth princess who overreached politically and was strangled in her bath.

While their ends were bleak, these queens did not die without purpose. Their unfortunate lives are colorful cautionary tales for today's would-be power brokers--a legacy of worldly and womanly wisdom gathered one spectacular regal ruin at a time.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Kris Waldherr is an author, illustrator, and designer whose art has been exhibited in the National Museum of Women in the Arts. She is the author of *The Lover's Path* and *The Book of Goddesses*, and creator of *The Goddess Tarot*. She lives in Brooklyn, New York.



Learn more at KrisWaldherr.com and DoomedQueens.com.

*For Theresa Park, a queen among women—
with affection and appreciation*



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INTRODUCTION

[The executioner] shall not have much trouble, for I have a little neck.
I shall be known as *la reine sans tête*.

~ ANNE BOLEYN



Welcome to your favorite dream—and worst nightmare. You are cosseted in silk, crowned with gold, and bowed to. Courtiers laugh at your jokes and compliment your beauty, even when you know you're having a bad hair day. All envy you, but things change. Just years later, even those who admired you steer clear of your path. Your influence is on the wane for any number of reasons. The fault could be yours—maybe you weren't as clever as you thought in the scheming department. Or it could be that others are scheming against you.

When the end finally comes, it arrives with the stroke of an ax at noon—a topsy-turvy Cinderella tale—or with a drumrolled march to the scaffold. The battlefield may provide you with a convenient grave. Or you might lose your crown as you labor to bring forth an heir to the kingdom. Biology becomes destiny. Best case scenario: You will survive a coup and be allowed to live out your days in awkward exile, where opportunistic stragglers will still suck up to your royal majesty, just in case.

No matter how your end finally arrives, one truth remains: Your fall from grace is not your call, though your actions may encourage it. It is your fate. After all, you are a doomed queen—and, if one is to go by the lessons of history, the only good queen is a dead one.

For too many royal women throughout history, the scenario I've sketched here was their dark reality. The members of the doomed queens club—a club I suspect few would care to join—are legion, stretching from biblical times to the present day. Their names range from the infamous—Cleopatra, Anne Boleyn, Marie Antoinette—to those whose deaths are hidden within footnotes, such as Blanche of Bourbon and Thessalonike.

Within *Doomed Queens* I've presented fifty of these lives from around the globe and throughout the ages. While each queen's final destiny may differ, one fact remains consistent: Despite the perks of royalty, it's usually not good to be the queen.

What was it about being royal that made so many women so vulnerable to losing their lives for power? Let me count the ways—here is an admittedly abbreviated overview of the doomed queen:

BED, BIBLICAL TIMES, AND BEYOND: It has always been obvious that the female of the species holds the keys to the kingdom—the kingdom of life, that is. Without the fruit of the womb, humanity would crash and burn. Boo-hoo, what's a power-loving man to do? To solve this problem, mating and relating is safely confined within the institution of matrimony and becomes sanctified with religious rites. The power of female fertility is harnessed, thus creating dynastic succession. Royal women who get uppity with the system get offed. Watch out, Olympias and Cleopatra!

YO, LET'S GET CIVILIZED: Power isn't enough—there's money, too. The Dark Ages roll in, disquieting queens everywhere. Men try their darnedest to hold on to property beyond the grave, despite that whole can't-take-it-with-you dilemma. Salic law, which sprang from the Frankish empire, becomes institutionalized. An excerpt: *The whole inheritance of the land shall come to the male sex.* But if women can't inherit property, can they inherit thrones? Over time, Salic law leads to lots of territorial fighting when a male heir isn't available.

MARRIAGE MAKES THE WORLD GO 'ROUND: No male heir? No problem! To avoid war, the powers that be send their daughters to sleep with their enemies and bear their children, keeping it all in the family. But are these queens royal consorts or royal hostages? The Austrian Hapsburg dynasty, whose rise to power peaks during the Renaissance, is especially adept at this clever little maneuver. Their family motto? "Leave others to make war, while you, lucky Austria, marry." Like chess queens, women are moved about the game board but are sacrificed first to protect the king—especially if their wombs prove infertile or if they become too power hungry.

POWER TO THE PEOPLE: With the start of the Age of Enlightenment, blue bloods shake in their boots. Power has shifted to the people, as



DOOMED KINGS?

or

Why Ladies Only

The sad reality is that the threat level leaps from ecru to red when the head wearing the crown is missing a Y chromosome. Why are male rulers less doomed?

While kings were also vulnerable to political upheaval—just ask Louis XVI, Marie Antoinette's headless husband—for the most part men pulled the strings at court. Therefore any woman blocking the way to power was a threat to be eliminated. Common ways to bump off an inconvenient consort included beheading, burning, drowning, poison, stabbing, strangling, starving, and forcing suicide.

The justifications for their deaths were usually based on underlying issues such as religious differences, infertility, or dynastic struggles. And when there wasn't an easy way to dump a queen, the men got creative. For example, in order to gain the right to slice off Anne Boleyn's comely head, Henry VIII accused her of treason with a side of adultery.

Women were also more vulnerable to the travails of the flesh. While they usually didn't go to war, potential royal brood mares were often sent on treacherous journeys to wed. After marriage, childbirth was a dangerous rite of passage many did not survive.

embodied by the press, who no longer respects the sanctity of royalty. *Vive la révolution*—or not, if your name happens to be Marie Antoinette. Later in history, the media can make or break a reign, as in the cases of Caroline of Brunswick, a nineteenth-century queen of England, and Diana Spencer, a twentieth-century queen of hearts.

And now we have reached the twenty-first century. Are there still doomed queens among us? Certainly! Though we have moved on from the guillotine (which was last used by the French government in 1977), the doomed queen still lives and dies. These days, she might not be as easily recognizable as she once was. She may not have royal blood either. Tiaras are de rigueur for red carpets, but today's doomed queen is more likely to be attired in business best or haute couture. She could be part of a political dynasty, wield the wealth of a global corporation, or bear overwhelming celebrity.

Recognize her now? Just in case, here are two more examples ripped from news headlines. At the time of this writing, Benazir Bhutto, the first woman ruler of an Islamic nation, was assassinated after returning to Pakistan to reclaim the power she once wielded. Meanwhile, rumors fly that Pakistan's current president or his supporters could be responsible for her death. In the United States, former first lady Hillary Clinton has lost the democratic nomination for the presidency. Did first mate Bill muscle her into oblivion on the campaign trail?

Whatever your opinion of Clinton or Bhutto, there's one point we can all agree on: Their femaleness was—and is—considered a liability in their quest for power.

Like it or not, it's still a man's world. As such, the doomed queen reflects our uneasiness with women of power, even in these advanced times. The not-so-subliminal message at hand is that women who strive upward do so at their own risk.

In closing, I leave you with a story that originated in Vienna, land of the marriage-happy Hapsburgs. In olden times, a masked ball was held to which all of society was invited. During the ball, a queen danced with a handsome gentleman, whose identity was concealed by a red mask. As the night wore on, she fell madly in love with him, not realizing that he was the executioner on a break—royalty and death waltzing together in an intimate *danse macabre*. So it has been since the first crown was donned.

Before we commence our *danse macabre* through queenly history, here are a few notes to help you enjoy the ride.

The queens' stories are arranged chronologically according to date of demise or dethronement; when the exact year is uncertain, I've used the last date they were noted within history's annals. During my research, when confronted with contradictory information, I've striven to present that which appeared most historically persuasive. However, when all things were equal, I allowed the scales to tip toward the more colorful version.

The art and graphics presented within *Doomed Queens* are adapted from numerous sources. The full-page portraits are my original drawings, some of which were inspired by famous paintings. Many of the other decorative elements were adapted from Victorian-era ornaments or portraits of historical personages.

While some of these doomed queens' lives are certainly tragic, others are so over the top that they invite disbelief or humor. Whether you find yourself laughing or crying, I hope you will consider their examples cautionary tales for modern women who yearn to avoid the sharp edge of the sword. Humor aside, what's revealed here is serious stuff: the shadow side of feminine power in all its unsavory glory.

May you read and beware.

GRAPHICS KEY



*assassinated or
cause of death
unknown*



died of illness



beheaded



imprisoned



burned to death



poisoned



death by paparazzi



*sent to
religious orders*



deposed



stabbed



died in childbirth



strangled



divorced/annulled



starved to death



drowned



committed suicide

Cleopatra



30 BCE



leopatra ruled as queen of Egypt for more than two decades—an astonishing feat for a woman born into a dysfunctional, inbred family headed by an alcoholic pharaoh. During her reign, Cleopatra became famed for her charm and unusual intelligence; the historian Dio Cassius wrote that “she captured all who listened to her.” Though Greek by blood, she identified wholeheartedly with her country’s heritage; of her family, she was the only member to learn Egyptian.

Cleopatra was seventeen when her father, Ptolemy XII, passed on to the next world. He chose her to corule Egypt with her ten-year-old husband-brother, Ptolemy XIII. Despite her father’s wishes, the queen was soon ousted into the desert by Ptolemy Junior’s supporters—so much for spousal loyalty. But years of familial scheming taught Cleopatra how to survive. She used her time in exile to amass a large army. However, Ptolemy refused to tango with her forces. There was little Cleopatra could do. As the months passed, it became harder and harder to keep her army fed and frisky.

Fortunately, Julius Caesar arrived in Alexandria just as it seemed all was lost. Cleopatra knew that the middle-aged warrior would take her side. She also knew that if she went strolling back into town to meet with him, her body would arrive at the embalmers before noon. She took advantage of her diminutive size and smuggled herself to Caesar within the rolls of a rug.

Caesar was wooed by her cleverness and beauty. He immediately confirmed their alliance in the bedroom; most likely the queen was a virgin because Ptolemy was too young to consummate their marriage. Virgin or not, she was willing and able. Caesar was famed for his voracious sexual appetite—Cleopatra was apparently sensual enough to fulfill it.

The following morning, Ptolemy stumbled upon his sister in flagrante delicto with the Roman conqueror. A famous story relates that the boy king threw down his crown and whined, “It’s not fair!” Ptolemy did not survive long. Under the guise of offering military advice, Caesar insisted Ptolemy lead his Egyptian subjects in battle. The boy’s body was found later that day at the bottom of a river, weighed down by his gold armor.

The throne restored, Caesar returned to Rome. He left Cleopatra with a parting gift: a son she named Caesarion, or Little Caesar. Caesar was already married and unable to formally acknowledge his only son. Nonetheless, four years later he invited Cleopatra and Caesarion to Rome. By now, Caesar had conquered much of the world, like Cleopatra’s distant relative Alexander the Great. Their love affair reigned, scandalizing Rome. Caesar even installed a statue of Cleopatra as Venus, which did not win him fans. Many thought Caesar would eventually name himself king and marry Cleopatra, thus creating an empire where West would meet East.

All this came to an end in 44 BCE on the infamous ides of March. Caesar’s will did not acknowledge Caesarion; instead he left his empire to his grand-nephew Gaius Julius Caesar Octavianus, better known as Octavian. Power struggles soon divided the empire between Octavian and Mark Antony, Caesar’s right-hand warrior.

Though Cleopatra fled with her son, Rome soon came a-knockin’ at Egypt’s door. The savvy queen decided to repeat history, this time with Antony. If she allied with him, their forces could triumph over Octavian to rule the world, which Caesarion would inherit when he came of age.

Like Cleopatra’s father, Antony was of a Dionysian bent; like Caesar, he was older and susceptible to the queen’s charms. She invited Antony to dinner upon her barge and appeared dressed as a goddess. Locals whispered that Aphrodite was mating with Dionysus. Aphrodite overwhelmed Dionysus with luxurious sensuality: a carpet made of rose petals, a banquet of the finest wines and foods, all served on bejeweled gold plates while guests reclined on embroidered couches. Cleopatra capped the evening by dissolving an expensive pearl in a goblet of vinegar, which she appeared to drink. This spectacle served to illustrate the overwhelming wealth of Egypt that would be at Antony’s disposal—if he gave in to the queen’s will.

The two lovers brought out the worst in each other. Antony initiated Cleopatra into his Society of the Inimitable Livers, which involved much

alcohol, food, and gambling. Cleopatra took advantage of Antony's natural generosity and loyalty. He helped her win new territories, alienating him from the Roman Empire, and agreed to marry her. To do so, Antony abandoned his pregnant wife, who happened to be Octavian's sister—not a smart move. Plutarch wrote that Antony was "besotted with the woman as well as with the wine" and that she controlled him with love potions, a claim that reveals more about the charms of Cleopatra than the truth of the matter.

To create a dynasty of their own, Cleopatra spawned three children with Antony. Antony acknowledged Caesarion as Caesar's son, undermining the legitimacy of Octavian's rule. Not surprisingly, Octavian declared war on them. Fate was not kind: It took time, but Rome's forces thumped Cleopatra and Antony. Their allies abandoned the couple like rats off a sinking ship.

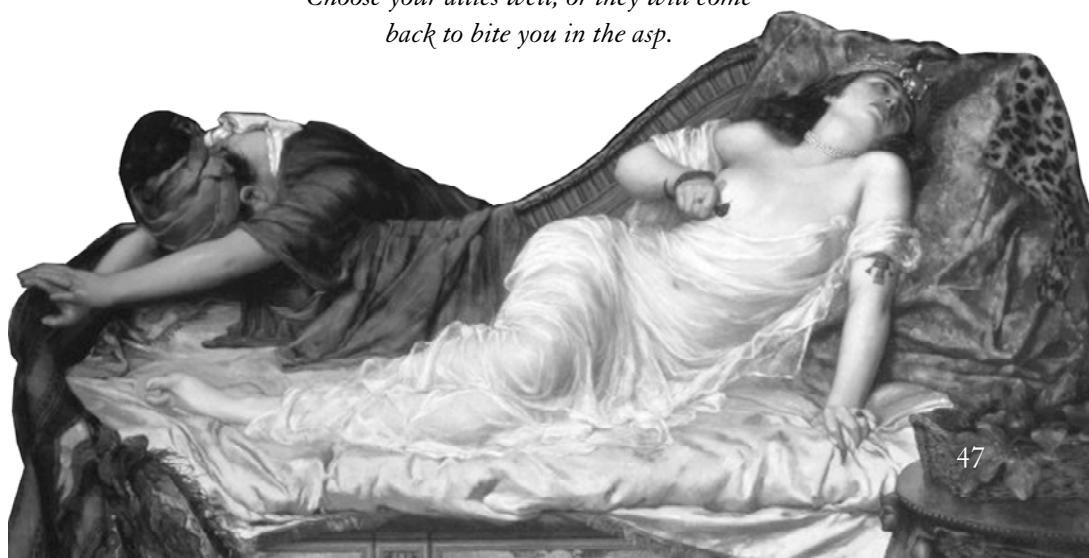
Trapped, Cleopatra and Antony huddled down in Alexandria to await the worst; the Society of Inimitable Livers became the Society of Those Who Die Together. To avoid capture by Octavian, Antony stabbed himself. One legend claims that on the night he died, a strange clamor of horns sounded, then faded away—Dionysus abandoning his own. Cleopatra chose a more elegant method to dispatch herself. She arranged for a basket of figs to be smuggled to her, with two poisonous asps hidden within it.

In death, Cleopatra became Egypt's last pharaoh. Caesarion did not survive to inherit his mother's throne—Octavian decided that two Caesars were one too many and arranged for his murder.



CAUTIONARY MORAL

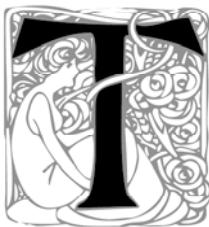
*Choose your allies well, or they will come
back to bite you in the asp.*



Amalasuntha



535

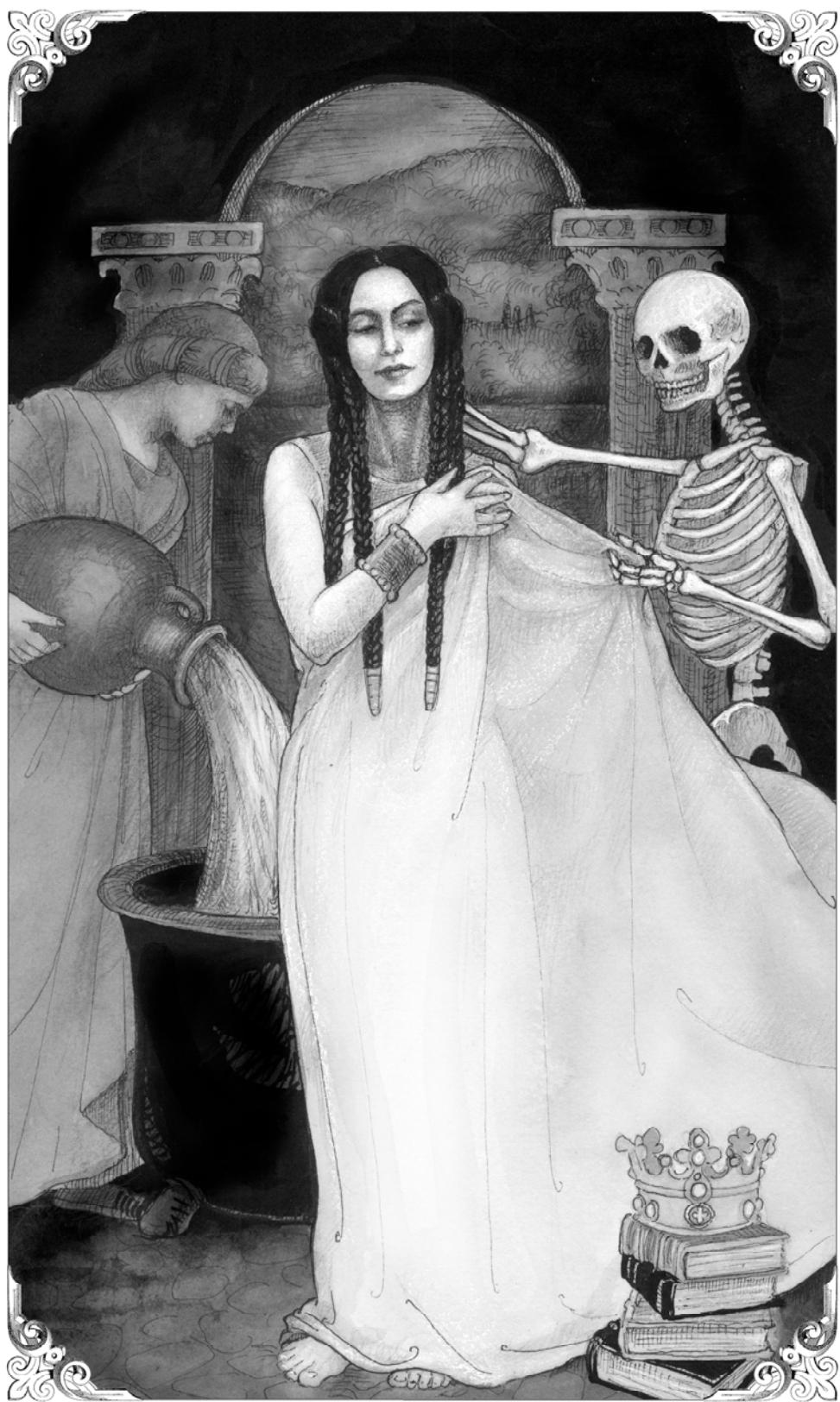


ucked within a scenic corner of Tuscany, Lake Bolsena lies inside the crater of a dormant volcano. It is a large lake—expansive enough to host several islands, and filled with pristine waters that plunge some five hundred feet down. The legends associated with Lake Bolsena are as dark as the lake is deep. One tells of the fourth-century martyr Christina who, after suffering the usual array of imaginative tortures necessary for beatification, was thrown into the lake while wearing a heavy stone necklace. She instantly bobbed back to the surface cradled within the arms of an angel. Two centuries later, the Ostrogoth queen Amalasuntha was exiled to one of Lake Bolsena's more remote islands. Alas, no heavenly visitor manifested to save her life when she was strangled in her bath one spring morning.

It was a brutal end for a monarch whose main sin was an attempt to import the enlightenment of Roman culture to the war-loving Goths. Consider Amalasuntha a victim of Dark Ages anti-intellectualism.

Amalasuntha was the only daughter of Theodoric the Great, king of the Ostrogoths, and Audofleda, a Frankish princess. By all accounts, Amalasuntha's education was extraordinary. She was educated in Ravenna, where the best of the Byzantine and Roman empires mingled in a high-culture cocktail party. She spoke fluent Latin and Italian as well as her native language. Besides being notoriously literate, the princess was noted for her political acumen and great beauty.

In other words, Amalasuntha had the whole package, if you were a man not intimidated by erudite women. She won the approval of Eutharic, a prince from neighboring Spain; he wed the princess, thus uniting the two



branches of their tribes in holy political might. The contemporary historian Jordanes described Eutharic as “a young man strong in wisdom and valor and health of body.” Nonetheless, Eutharic died early in their marriage, leaving her the mother of a son, Athalaric, and a daughter, Matasuentha. A short time later in 526, Amalasuntha’s father joined her husband in the grave.

With the two big guys buried, eight-year-old Athalaric inherited the throne, elevating Amalasuntha as his regent until he reached maturity. It is here that most women of her era probably would have lain low to protect their assets—but not Amalasuntha. Instead, she decided to use her lofty position to refine the unwashed Goth masses. The best way to do this? Through King Athalaric, whom she determined would have the best Roman education available.

The public outcry was as if Amalasuntha had switched the channel from WWE to PBS mid-match—for their monarch, the populace wanted a va-va-voom warrior, not some la-di-da student. Her best intentions were criticized as an attack on Goth values. After all, the Goths had conquered the Romans, not the other way around.

Undeterred, the regent hired the most eminent scholars of her time to shape her son’s mind. As for Athalaric, he embraced his studies with spring break enthusiasm and drank himself to death by the age of sixteen.

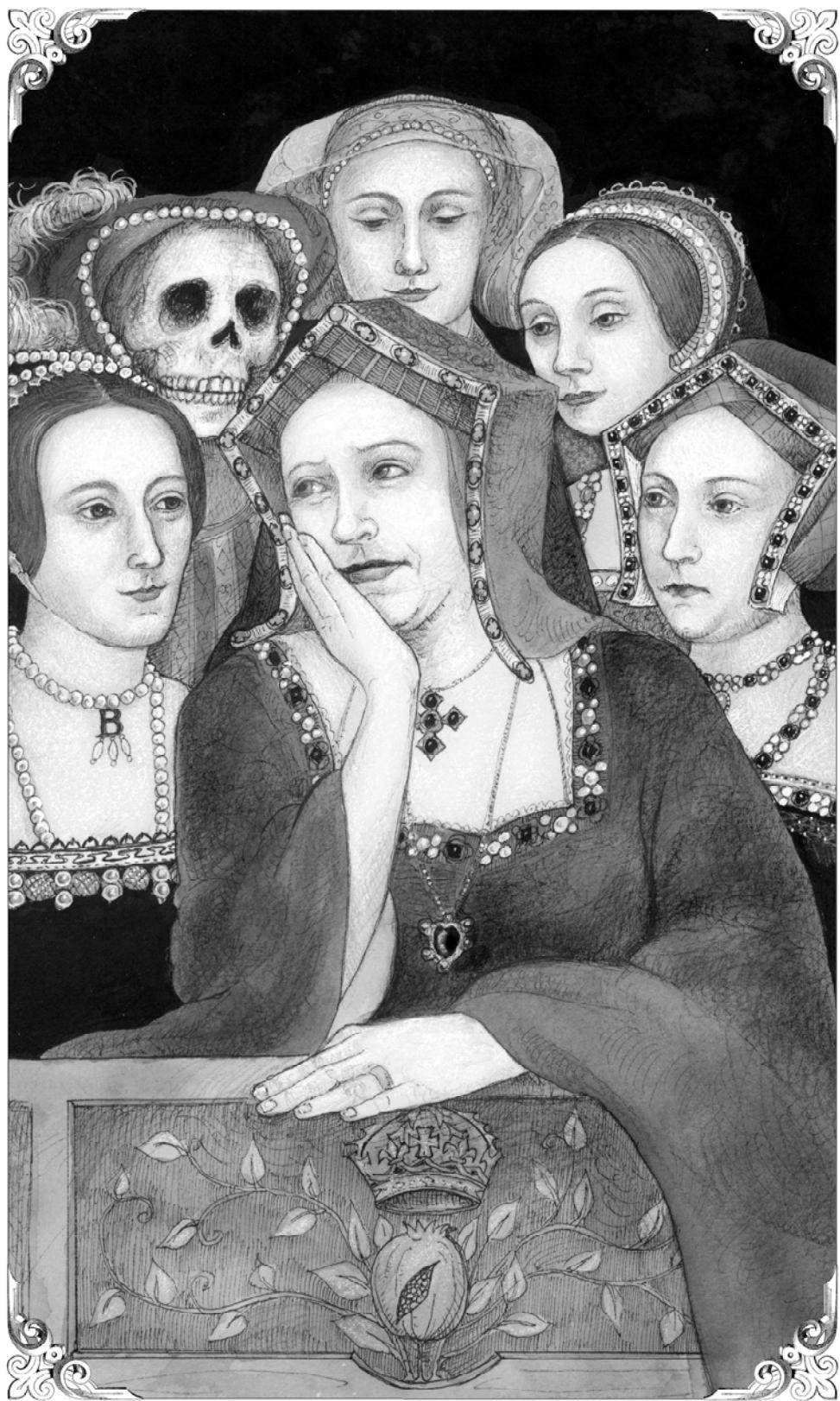
Amalasuntha was smart enough to read the writing on the wall; Jordanes wrote that she “feared she might be despised by the Goths on account of the weakness of her sex.” To protect her overeducated self, she arranged for three of her enemies to be murdered and invited her Tuscan cousin Theodahad to keep her company on the throne. This turned out to be a very bad move. Within several months, Theodahad pushed Amalasuntha off the throne and into exile in Tuscany.

Amalasuntha’s end arrived quickly. She lasted only a few days on that lonely island on Lake Bolsena before death visited as she bathed. After all, a clean corpse is a godly corpse.



CAUTIONARY MORAL

*Don’t let your education
make you stupid.*



Catherine of Aragon



1536

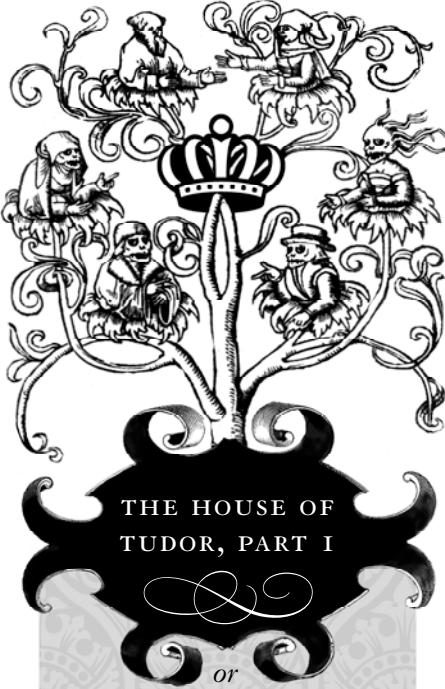


ity poor Catherine of Aragon. As soon as she was born in 1485, it was clear what her fate would be: an imperial womb for sale. Even her choice of royal badge not so subtly reflected this. Catherine selected the pomegranate, an ancient symbol of feminine fertility. The queen's fortunes would rise and fall based on the unpredictability of her menstrual cycles—as would those of countless others.

Catherine was the youngest and prettiest of the four daughters born to Isabella and Ferdinand, Spain's power couple. By the time Catherine was three, her parents had already decided her future: She would wed Arthur, the two-year-old Prince of Wales, to buy an alliance between England and Spain. Over a decade passed before the little princess journeyed to England to marry, accompanied by a dowry of 200,000 crowns; another 200,000 was to be paid later. Catherine was led down the aisle by Arthur's younger brother, Henry, who threw off his robe to dance wildly at the reception.

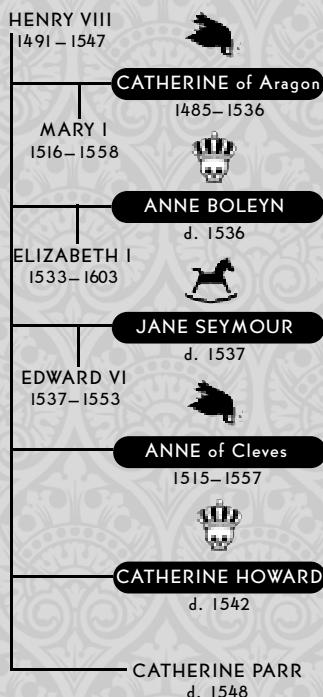
The joy at the wedding did not last long: Arthur died suddenly four months later. According to Catherine, since they were too young to consummate the marriage, the pomegranate remained untouched. At the age of sixteen, she was a widow in a distant land. Arthur's father took the opportunity to squeeze Ferdinand for the second part of Catherine's dowry; Ferdinand refused to pay, abandoning Catherine to genteel poverty. Seven years passed before Arthur's dancing brother, now King Henry VIII, stepped up to the plate and married her, rescuing her from royal limbo.

How was Henry able to marry his brother's widow? Church law prohibited it based on a passage from the Book of Leviticus: "And if a man shall take his brother's wife, it is an unclean thing . . . they shall be childless." But Henry took Catherine at her chaste word and received a papal dispensation. Scorning the public glitz of Catherine's first wedding, the slightly scandalous



When Love Leads to Death

Henry Tudor had more wives than most of his contemporaries had horses—and their horses had safer lives. Here's a diagram for telling those Catherines and Annes apart.



couple wed in private. Henry had saved Catherine from an uncertain fate to make her queen—she would always love him for this.

Initially, Henry and Catherine were happy. But though three royal sons arrived, none of them survived. Twenty-four years of marriage, many pregnancies, and one living daughter—Mary—later, Henry decided that Leviticus was right. Behind Catherine's back, he petitioned the pope unsuccessfully for another dispensation, this one to annul his marriage so he could wed again for a male heir.

Catherine caught wind of this. She confronted Henry with a tear-filled testimony: "I take God and all the world to witness that I have been to you a true, humble, and obedient wife. . . . I was a true maid, without touch of man." Henry did not refute her. But his mind was made up.

Henry offered Catherine the refuge of the convent as an easy out. But the heartbroken queen refused. She wasn't only fighting for herself—she was protecting Mary's royal claim, since if the marriage was annulled, the princess would be rendered illegitimate. Henry responded by thumbing his nose at Rome and called quits on the marriage himself. He moved Catherine to a faraway castle, where she remained a prisoner until her death three years later. Her autopsy revealed that her heart was as black and misshapen as a dried pomegranate.



CAUTIONARY MORAL
*Marrying your husband's brother
is dangerous business.*