




IN BED WITH THE
TUDORS



*Naked boys striding,
With wanton wenches winking.
Now truly, to my thinking
That is a speculation
And a meet meditation.*


– ‘Colin Clout’ by John Skelton

IN BED WITH THE TUDORS

The sex lives of a dynasty from
Elizabeth of York to Elizabeth I


AMY LICENCE

AMBERLEY




for Rufus and Robin

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Introduction

It is not convenient to be a man when women go into labour.

– Joseph, from the Coventry Mystery Cycle

To push or not to push? Home or away? Boy or girl?

While giving birth isn't quite that simple, the modern, Western mother has an unprecedented degree of choice when it comes to her experience. Even if the delivery does not go quite to plan, and few do, she retains a measure of confidence and ownership of the event beyond the reach of previous generations. Encouraged to write a detailed 'birth-plan' and opt for an active labour, she can deliver her children in the comfort of her own home, or in birth pools at midwife-led units or warm, safe hospital wards, with her partner by her side. Every stage of a pregnancy is monitored, with carefully written notes and recorded tests; she has the option to hear her unborn child's heartbeat, discover its gender and see it wriggle in 3D. Midwives are only at the end of a telephone, day or night; various forms of pain relief are available on request and, following the delivery, she is encouraged to return home, happily breastfeeding, as soon as possible. Following her maternity leave, she may resume her career, confident that her child will be cared for by well-trained and regulated professionals.

In these aspects, motherhood has changed greatly in the last 500 years. Yet birth is unpredictable. Even now, every woman's experience is different. The duration and circumstances surrounding any new arrival can defy even the most careful planning. Babies rarely appear on their due date and tend to take as much or as little





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time as they need. Birth plans often get adapted or abandoned; perhaps their value lies more in exercising some advanced control over an unknown quantity. For the first-time mother, the reality can form a surprising contrast with the mental image her planning has inspired. She has this in common with mothers of all eras.

For the Tudor mother, there were far fewer guarantees. Birth frequently proved to be a life-threatening occasion, in which the Church and popular superstition played a significant part. Pain relief was illegal, with one midwife being burned for using opium to assist labours in 1591, while the customs of centuries were being challenged by immense religious and cultural change. A woman expecting a child had little choice but to put her trust in the hands of other women and the remedies that had been passed down by word of mouth through the generations, even when these had been outlawed. As her time approached, she might rub her belly with powdered ants' eggs and tie a piece of wild ox skin about her thigh. She might call out to her favourite saints and sprinkle her bed sheets with holy water, while closing the chamber door upon daylight for several weeks together. Problems arising during the birth may be caused by lurking devils or ignored superstitions; she may have rolled up her mat the wrong way, gazed at the moon or tiptoed through the May dew. As her contractions intensified, she would rely on herbs and the panacea of prayer; interventional surgery was only performed in extreme cases and usually resulted in maternal mortality. Assuming she was one of the lucky ones and her baby was born healthy, it would be washed in wine and rubbed with butter so the harmful air could not enter its pores. She would not emerge from her chamber for a month, after which she would process, veiled, to be purified and then perhaps undertake a pilgrimage to leave offerings of eggs and herbs, or money and jewels, at the shrine of the Virgin Mary. Does this make her experience of birth vastly different from that of women in the twenty-first century? In her time-specific context, yes; birth customs and gynaecological understanding varied greatly in the Tudor era from those of today. Yet, in her reasons for performing these strange rites, little has changed. While much of this may seem like lunacy, the Tudor mother also experienced the hopes and fears of women of all time, regardless of whether they are depending on





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an epidural or the milk of a red cow to get them through. Facing such life-threatening circumstances, it is no surprise that a successful lying-in would become the cause of female celebration.

No one can escape from the times in which they were born; we are all conditioned by a complex interplay of personal, social, cultural, national and spiritual factors that shape our identities in the times in which we live. While basic human emotions do not change, the ways in which people explain them, the ways they make sense of their immediate and wider experiences, do. Tudor women were born into a world which placed little value on their gender and expected them to conform to a limited range of roles. While some women broke the rules, either through courage, failure or accident, the transgressors of strict sexual and social codes were frequently punished and rarely lauded. Acts of rebellion, self-assertion and individuality were not valued as they have been in subsequent, post-Romantic centuries. Tudor mothers' experiences of marriage, sex, pregnancy and birth were an illustrative function of their world, as are those of modern women. Their life expectancy and consequently their expectations of life, were limited by factors of inequality and health that would be rejected or easily treated today. Common infections could kill and frequently did; gynaecological health was poorly understood and prone to misdiagnosis; doctors were almost exclusively male and expensive. Women could only own property or goods if left it in their own right; marriage meant the immediate transfer of all they owned, including their own person, to their husband. Few were literate, although this was progressing among aristocratic circles, yet a vast oral tradition of maternal wisdom was the average Tudor woman's inheritance. The importance of female communities cannot be underestimated and is reflected in the exclusivity of the birth chamber. While a considerable number lived in a household with at least one servant, apprentice or peripatetic support, the daily routine for most was frequently domestic and gruelling. Friends, relations and neighbours were vital to women of all ranks.

The status of motherhood was high during the sixteenth century. It was most women's ultimate ambition, although this was overdetermined by the dominant male culture. This is partly because the general status of women was lower; becoming a mother



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topped the list of the most desirable options available, reinforced by religious, cultural and legal doctrine. At all stages, issues of female fertility were rife with paradoxes. The act of birth could be a woman's making or undoing. Delivery could be dangerous but also offer protection. A woman's moment of greatest weakness was also her empowerment, extending to all those closeted within the freedom of the lying-in chamber. Outside the church, virginity was seen as a threat by men collectively and individually; even within, only relatively small numbers of conforming female divines were tolerated. This is by no means to suggest that wives and mothers were necessarily venerated or respected, although in some degrees their lives were easier than their spinster sisters. They fitted more easily into social boxes. Even after decades of female monarchy, the court records of litigious late Elizabethans illustrate the dangers incurred by women living outside the prevailing codes. Most decisively, the Church shaped the rites of passage of a woman's life through its ceremonies and rituals. These marked every stage of her being, from birth to death, offering a range of supports and comforts during the childbearing years. Personal faith, set against the upheavals of the English Reformation, played an important but hitherto neglected part in the story of Tudor childbirth.

Then, as now, the union between a woman and a man was a matter of unquantifiable personal inclination. Raw human emotions have changed little over time: sixteenth-century wives hoped for happy lives and successful pregnancies just as much as their modern counterparts, although they could ultimately exercise less control over this. In Tudor times, aristocratic marriages were usually arranged for dynastic benefit, while those of the middle and lower classes were equally dependent upon financial restraints at the opposite end of the scale. Yet, even without the romantic notion of a companionate marriage, all relationships are shaped by the behaviours and mores of those involved. For a Tudor wife, from the queen down to her scullion, their husband's authority was law. There was little escape from mental or physical cruelty; expectations were that a man would not beat his wife too loudly or too late at night. Divorce was equable with treason; separation and sexual or maternal failure would be blamed on the wife, usually as divine judgement for their immorality. Yet women still broke the







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rules, frequently and publicly. The lower down the social scale, the less they often had to lose. The higher up they found themselves, the more dangerous their illicit and challenging behaviour could prove. For England's queens, their public role sometimes conflicted with their private inclinations but those who acted on their desires could find retribution to be swift and decisive.

The lives of Henry VIII's wives are already well known, as is his daughter Elizabeth's virgin state. I do not intend to repeat much of their histories already in print. In exploring the maternal and marital experiences of Tudor queens from 1485 through to 1603, I have focused on the specific gynaecological factors of their moment in time, from their sexual experience, fertility and conception, through to the pregnancy and circumstances of their deliveries. That is to say, the conditions of Elizabeth of York's first pregnancy differed from her second, third and subsequent ones, just as they did from those of her predecessors. Her delivery of a daughter is not comparable with that of Catherine of Aragon or Anne Boleyn, yet there are certain parallels, such as in the phantom pregnancies of mother and daughter in the 1510s and 1550s. In some cases this has concurred with existing material yet the wider context of their confinements and their implications can often shed new light. The balance of material is uneven also: Elizabeth of York and Catherine of Aragon were the most regularly pregnant queens, while astonishingly the birth of Edward in 1537 marked the last male royal arrival on English soil until that of Charles II in 1630. Of course other women gave birth during this period and I have drawn on their stories also. The experiences of Henry's childless wives as well as that of his daughters can also shed light on issues of marriage, fertility and inheritance. While my focus is predominantly on the Queens of England, I have juxtaposed these with examples of women from other walks of life, in order to better delineate the experience in its universality. The delivery of a queen in her luxurious chamber can hardly be equated with that of an unmarried servant girl giving birth in a church porch. In spite of the obvious advantages though, England's queens were less free and less able to be maternal than their poorer counterparts. The very intimate and private act of birth was, for them, a State occasion; their bodies were dynastic vessels for reproduction





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above all and their success or failure was international news. For at least two Tudor queens, childbirth undermined and ultimately destroyed their power while it was the cause of premature death for others. Fortunately times have changed. While twenty-first-century women will recognise much in the stories of Tudor mothers, they will also appreciate the advances in medical, social and cultural factors that have so significantly improved their lot.





1

Elizabeth of York & Arthur 1485–1486

The First Tudor Heir

*I tell you, masters, without lett
When the red rose so fair of hew
And young Bessy together mett
It was great joy, I say to you.
A bishopp them married with a ringe,
The two bloods of great renown.
Bessy said 'now may we sing,
Wee two bloods are made all one.'*¹

On 18 January 1486, a wedding was celebrated in London's Westminster Abbey. The bride, not yet twenty, was tall and slender and blonde. Her pink-and-white Plantagenet beauty would become legendary, celebrated in art and sculpture, verse and prose: chroniclers of the present and future would define her by her long flowing golden locks and regular features. The eldest child of notoriously good-looking parents, she would set the standard of beauty for an age. As Elizabeth of York approached the altar, feeling all eyes on her, she may have wondered about the man with whom her future lay: a man she scarcely knew; a man who had spent most of his adult life in exile, technically her enemy, who was about to become her husband. She knew it was no love match. If she was lucky, mutual respect might develop into something deeper. Despite her beauty, Elizabeth's attraction lay in her identity, her family line; she was fully aware of her role as a dynastic tool and this was the most important day of her young life so far. Perhaps she was proud, even triumphant that





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her family's reputation was being reinstated and their continuing position assured. Perhaps she was nervous, as she headed into a life she understood to be full of difficulties and suffering, beside the privilege of status and wealth; after all, she had witnessed her own mother's tumultuous ride as queen and knew that much depended upon the vagaries of fate and the disposition of her husband. He was a king, yet he was still also a man, whose personal, intimate rule over her would be complete.

Waiting at the altar, the groom was ten years her senior, with pale blue watchful eyes and dark hair crisply curled in the European fashion. Together they made an impressive pair: England's newly anointed king and the daughter of the popular Plantagenet Edward IV, uniting the country after decades of bloody civil war. Only six months before, Henry Tudor had been a nobody, waiting for the tide of fortune to turn in his favour on the battlefield, a thorn in the side of the ruling Yorkists. He was a man stained by the mud, sweat and blood of battle: a man who had gambled and taken the ultimate prize. Now he was Henry VII. History would record him as the progenitor of a remarkable dynasty, a wise and prudent figure who ruthlessly squashed his enemies, bringing a long-lasting peace to the nation; yet all this lay in the future. Elizabeth cannot have known the character, abilities or ambitions of her new husband, nor he hers. They were virtually strangers to each other and the directions of their lives were still to be determined. Nevertheless, their significance could not be underestimated: on this marriage rode the fortunes of their people. Around them blazed hundreds of torches, illuminating the rich tapestries and hopeful faces of the nation's decimated nobility. One contemporary foreign commentator wrote of the match that 'everyone considers [it] advantageous for the kingdom' and 'all things appear[ed] disposed towards peace'.² Later chronicles termed it a 'long expected and so much desired marriage'³ and recalled that harmony 'was thought to discende oute of heaven into England' when these 'two bodyes one heyre might succeed'.⁴ Yet hindsight can confer many such poetic turns of phrase. At the time, Henry's reign was in its infancy and Bosworth's truce could still prove fragile. There was no guarantee that the turbulent decades were, in fact, over; no neat historical line was drawn in the sand



at Bosworth indicating the end of the Wars of the Roses; Henry's end could prove as swift and bloody as his predecessor's. Yet the new king knew better than to rest on his laurels: soon the first rumours of rebellion would threaten his delicate position and they would not be the last. His own family was small; as an only child he had relied on the support of his stepfather Thomas Stanley, Earl of Derby, as well as the country's disaffected magnates, in order to seize power but such alliances could prove infamously fickle. Henry needed to establish his family line. The rapid production of heirs would be seen by the world as a mirror for the health of his claim to the throne: a son would confirm God's approval of the match and the new Tudor monarchy.

No descriptions survive of the actual wedding but accounts of Henry and Elizabeth's separate coronations offer a taste of the day's finery. From the start, the new regime was characterised by an understanding of the importance of impressing the people with numbers, pageantry and ceremony. Appearances were critical. Royalty should look the part, to elevate them above their subjects and display the divine and earthly power at their disposal. The bride would have looked striking, with her rich clothes, jewellery and golden hair. White wedding gowns were not the Tudor norm: Henry IV's daughter Philippa had worn one back in 1406, for her marriage to Eric of Pomerania, but it was as a favoured colour rather than a tradition. Elizabeth's wardrobe of the late 1480s did contain kirtles and mantles in white cloth of gold of damask, trimmed with powdered ermine, but she was equally likely to have chosen velvet, in rich tawny, blue, purple or crimson. Her garments would have been designed well in advance and worked by hundreds of seamstresses, embroiderers, furriers and jewellers. The choice of fabric was as significant as the style of dress: sumptuary laws dating back to the 1360s had confined the wearing of cloth of gold and purple silk to women of royalty, another important distinction of status at a time when upstarts jostled for power. Elizabeth's wedding dress was an opportunity to reinforce her legitimacy through colour, material, design and decoration; it was not just a pretty dress, its sumptuousness sent a barely coded message. No doubt it would have been studded with precious gems, embroidered with thread of gold, set with intricate lace and



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brocade, delicate filigree tissue and silk ribbons. For the Tudors, simplicity and elegance did not equate – as ornamentation was a measure of status, the more the better: descriptions of their clothing can make the modern reader wonder just how all these elements were combined in one outfit! The bride's golden hair might have hung loose, as befitted a maiden, or else been caught up in a net dotted with pearls and gold tassels. Perhaps the bridegroom put aside his habitual black velvet jacket, furred with the skins of black lambs, in favour of the purple cloth of gold tissue, shirt of crimson sarracenet (soft silk) and satin doublet worn during his coronation. One unused plan for that event imagined him dressed in the Tudor colours of green and white: 'a doblet of gren or white cloth-of-gold satyn, a long gounne of purpur velwet, furred with ermyns poudred, open at the sides and puffed with ermyn.' Later during the proceedings, he was to wear a shirt laced with silver and gilt, a velvet belt, hose laced with ribbons, a cap of crimson garnished with gold and a surcoat with gold ribbons at the collar and cuffs.⁵ Whatever choices they made on the day, the dazzling appearances of Henry and Elizabeth distinguished them as the personifications of divine majesty and temporal wealth.

The royal pair were married by the ageing Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Bouchier. It was an appropriate role for a man whose long, distinguished career had placed him at the very heart of the country's shifting fortunes. Himself a grandson of Edward III, he had initially been a reconciling figure in the wars, before siding firmly with the Yorkists and officiating at the coronations of Elizabeth's parents. More recently, he had crowned Richard III, witnessed a dramatic turn in that ruler's fortunes and anointed his conqueror as England's new king. The wedding ring Bouchier blessed that January was a solid gold band, costing 23s 4d and weighing two-thirds of an ounce, making it a 'hefty' size in comparison with its modern equivalents.⁶ It had been ordered in advance, arriving at court at New Year, when preparations for the wedding day were well underway. Several English gold rings in the collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum suggest its appearance and possible decorations: one cast gold band made around 1500, as part of a group of popular medieval poesie rings, was engraved 'God joins us together', followed by the dates and





Elizabeth of York & Arthur, 1485–1486

initials of the owner's wedding. Another bore the message 'observe wedlock' on the outside, with the warning '*memento mori*' carved within, while a third was decorated with hearts and floral sprigs around its engraving 'think of me'. It had been traditional for brides to wear a blessed ring since the eleventh century, and by the medieval period custom dictated that it would be worn on the ring finger of the left hand. Popular belief stated that so long as it was worn, the ring would protect against unkindness and discord. If he wore one, Henry's ring may have been similar to the museum's dazzling gold band made around 1450, encrusted with a natural diamond crystal and spinel rubies from Afghanistan or one of the signet rings engraved with religious or heraldic symbols. Other signet rings in the collection are decorated with trees, domestic animals such as tethered dogs and even a cradle, perhaps in anticipation of the union bearing fruit; one impressive fifteenth-century example includes a red spinel gem, carved with a crowned head and engraved 'there is none like him'. As he blessed the rings and heard the couple repeat their vows, Bouchier was fulfilling his final duty to the State: he would die that March at Knole, his Kent home, at the grand old age of eighty.

The couple had something of a chequered history. Still in her teens, Elizabeth's archetypal golden beauty, virtue and lineage made her a focus of popular sympathy, yet her position at Henry's side had by no means been guaranteed. She was the product of a secret, controversial marriage and the quirks of civil war had seen her childhood ricochet between luxury and exile. Her father had married her mother for love; a beautiful widow with two sons, who had refused to become his mistress and so, controversially, became his queen. When Elizabeth arrived, in 1466, conceived a year after the marriage, she was the first of three girls born to the couple in rapid succession. Then, their fortunes turned. The princess's life changed dramatically as dissident nobles captured and dethroned her father, forcing her mother into sanctuary and accusing her grandmother of witchcraft. The unstable Henry VI was reinstated as king and the Yorkist family's future was uncertain. Elizabeth was offered as a significant pawn in the 1470 peace negotiations, her hand offered in marriage to the rebel Earl of Warwick's nephew, but the realm's truce was short-lived. With her father forced to flee





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to the Netherlands, the little girl accompanied her mother to the safety of Westminster Abbey, where the heavily pregnant queen was delivered of a son, the future unfortunate Edward V.

Only after the bloodshed of Barnet and Tewkesbury in 1471, followed by the murder of Henry VI, had the Yorkist line regained control. Elizabeth was offered again as a marital bargain, at the age of eight, in a betrothal to Prince Charles of France and after that, her position remained relatively secure until 1483. By the age of seventeen, she had grown accustomed to the impersonal nature of national and international politics, aware that she and her siblings were instruments of family advancement and that the personal aspect of her life was always secondary to duty. Then, unexpectedly, everything changed. At only forty-one, the charismatic and capable king's health deteriorated, variously reported to be the result of poison, excess, typhoid or pneumonia. His death in April left his children and his wife's unpopular family vulnerable. Edward was succeeded by his twelve-year-old son, the baby who had been born in Westminster Abbey amid the civil turmoil. The Protectorship of the boy was given to his uncle Richard but the little king and his ten-year-old brother were incarcerated in the Tower of London that summer and never seen again. Following the executions and murders of Elizabeth's other remaining male relatives, Richard III proclaimed his niece illegitimate, fuelling reports of the invalidity of her parent's union and her father's paternity. However, as the Yorkist heir, Elizabeth retained the best claim to the throne and in spite of her reduced status, Richard considered strengthening his title by making her his wife.

It was rumours of this intended marriage that crossed the Channel and spurred Henry, Earl of Richmond, into action. His claim to the throne was tenuous in the least, through the female, illegitimate line, dating back to John of Gaunt, while his father had been the child of Henry V's queen, Catherine of Valois, by her Welsh page. Separated from his mother as a small boy and having spent the last fourteen years in exile, a marriage with his guardian's daughter Maud Herbert and a relatively quiet life had, until recently, seemed more likely. Edward IV offered a significant ransom for the capture of 'the imp', as he called Henry, who after his death, moved to Paris and collected a group of rebels



about him. One failed attempt at invasion had already sent him back across the Channel with his tail between his legs and in the summer of 1485, he had been the rank outsider at the Battle of Bosworth, mounting a challenge to the established Yorkist king. Yet things had gone Henry's way that August and his shrewdness and political cunning were already marking him out as a monarch to be reckoned with.

The royal pair may have only met for the first time that autumn. Henry's enforced exile for fourteen years meant any previous meeting would have taken place when Elizabeth was a small child. The match had been suggested by the two mothers, Elizabeth Wydeville and Margaret Beaufort, having both suffered at the hands of Richard III. Despite her declared illegitimacy, Henry was determined to have Elizabeth as his wife, swearing an oath to that effect at Rennes Cathedral on Christmas Day 1483 and acquiring papal dispensations early in 1484 and again in January 1486, just two days before the ceremony. As soon as his reign was established, he summoned his bride to London and established her at Coldharbour, his mother's house on the banks of the Thames. An ancient building originally named La Tour, comprising two linked fortified town houses, it had previously lodged Alice Perrers, mistress of Edward III and more recently, Elizabeth's aunt, Margaret of Burgundy. Repairs made during 1484–5 listed a number of chambers or suites of rooms within its tower, as well as a Great Hall on the river side. It was here that Henry and Elizabeth's first meeting probably took place.

Once the marriage ceremony was concluded, the couple processed the short distance from Westminster Abbey to the Palace. Founded by Edward the Confessor, it was close to, but not within, the City of London, then much smaller than today and centred around the modern 'square mile'. Subsequent kings had extended and enlarged the site; in the twelfth century, the Exchequer and Treasury had been incorporated, combining the king's official residence with the administrative heart of the country. For Elizabeth, it was familiar territory; she had been born there and would have spent a large portion of her childhood in the palace. Until it was destroyed in a fire in 1513, Westminster was the most frequently used and expensive of the Crown's establishments,



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the only one of Henry's many possessions to be referred to as a 'palace'. The huge Norman Great Hall, the largest in Europe, was often considered too large and impractical for use, with the smaller twelfth-century White Hall being more frequently in use and directly adjoining the king's private chambers. However, it is not impossible that for a royal wedding feast, the vast scale of the former, with its 6-foot-thick walls, may have been considered more suitable: a map of 1520 shows it to have been about four times the size of the White Hall. One surviving plan for Henry's succession describes the ceremonious procession from Abbey to Palace, with the king followed by his bishops and chamberlain, cardinals, lords, Knights of the Bath, nobles, heralds, officers, trumpeters and minstrels. Upon arrival, he retired to his chamber, before 'when he had pleasur sumwhat rested hym, in the same estate, with those nobles, he may retourne in to the said hall, ther royally to be serued as is according to the fest'.⁷ In January 1486, Henry and Elizabeth would have processed in state, surrounded by their witnesses, the short distance that took them down towards the river and into the palace, where they paused for a brief respite, perhaps a rest and change of clothes, before entering the Hall for their wedding banquet. Traditionally called a 'wedding breakfast', in pre-Reformation days, this would literally break the fast of the bride and groom: sometimes it referred to the Mass itself and the wine and spices served immediately afterwards. In this Catholic era, no one would receive the sacrament unless they had fasted all day, so the 'break-fast' might equally relate to afternoon or evening.

Every aspect of the celebratory meal would have been sumptuous and splendid. The preparation and service of food was a highly skilled process, employing an army of specialist staff in Westminster's kitchens and creating further opportunities to demonstrate the new regime's power and wealth. Strict protocol on seating and service were followed; the tables set with damask cloth, scattered with flowers and herbs and set with the best cutlery and plate, surrounding the ceremonial silver and symbolic *nef*, the usually ship-shaped vessel carrying salt or spices. Such pieces were intended to mark status; seating positions 'above' the *nef* were infinitely preferable to those below and nobles may have



brought their own impressive utensils to reinforce their rank against that of their neighbours. One surviving set of Henry VIII's knives were set with a multitude of precious gems, and drinking vessels were of silver and gold. Carvers, sewers (serving drinks), cupbearers, pantlers (bread bearer), ewerers (linen and hand-washing) and waiters were choreographed by the Master of the Hall, prominently placed to announce their arrival. The food was offered first to the king and queen, after having been tasted to ensure it contained no poison; it can hardly have been more than tepid as it approached the end of its long journey but presentation was almost more important than taste. Like their clothing, the feast was an important signal of their status. The dishes chosen for a wedding table would have combined the best ingredients with colourful and inventive display.

Attached to the late fourteenth-century cookbook the *Forme of Cury*, a feast menu of three courses suggests a list of dishes comparable to that of the 1486 wedding banquet. Among the richest delicacies were larded boar's heads, baked teals, pheasants and curlew, partridge and lark, duck and rabbit, almond and chicken pottage in white wine and saffron, pork and cheese tarts with ground figs and pastry points, stuffed chicken and mawmenny, a pottage of shredded pheasant with fried pine nuts and dates, coloured red with sandalwood. All was washed down with spiced wine sweetened with honey, ginger and saffron, thickened with flour and egg yolk. Each course was followed by a subtlety; a fabulous allegorical creation, sculpted out of marchpane (marzipan) or spun sugar and painted or covered in gold leaf. Subtleties might take the forms of crowned birds or beasts, castles, battles, religious scenes or ships, designed to be showcases for a master artisan's skill and the king's purse. In 1487, the first course alone of Elizabeth's coronation feast comprised wild boar, deer, swan, pheasant, capon, crane, pike, broth, heron, kid, lampreys and rabbit, all heavily spiced, in sauces or gelatin, served with raisins and dates. This was followed by various sweet dishes containing baked cream, fruits, nuts, custard tarts and a subtlety. The first Tudor wedding feast must have been equally sumptuous. The existence of aphrodisiacs and association of culinary and sexual appetite had been long established; chestnuts, pistachios and pine nuts were used as folk



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remedies to excite the libido and the consumption of meat was considered beneficial for potential parents, likewise phallic-shaped foods like asparagus and those on which sexual puns could be made, like the ‘apricock’, which arrived in the 1520s. All these delicacies were a mere prelude to the intimate event that would follow: after a long afternoon of feasting and entertainment, husband and wife were ready for bed.

The formal bedding of a newly-wed couple was a matter of ritual and significance at all levels of society: even after a church service had been concluded, a marriage was not considered binding and could still be dissolved, until consummation had taken place. For royalty, the implications for sexual failure went beyond mere embarrassment, with consequences that could spark dynastic wars and political or religious change. With many aristocratic marriages arranged in their participants’ infancy, consummation was usually delayed until the onset of physical maturity, considered to be the age of twelve in girls, fourteen in boys. Henry’s own mother had delivered him at the age of thirteen but even at the time this was considered too young, as the resulting damage to her fertility proved. Although Henry and Elizabeth were well past this age, it is unlikely either had much sexual experience. Despite the upheavals of her childhood, Elizabeth had been closely guarded during her father’s reign; recent theories regarding her amorous intentions towards her uncle Richard, based on a dubiously interpreted letter by seventeenth-century historian George Buck, find little tangible evidence to support a physical relationship or romantic understanding between the two. A royal bride’s most powerful bargaining point was her virtue; as the mother of future heirs to the throne, her morals must be beyond reproach. It seems almost unthinkable that Elizabeth’s virginity was not intact before her first encounter with Henry. However, for a man approaching thirty, living a secular life, whose regal and marital ambitions had only recently been clarified, abstinence was far less likely. Henry’s exile in Brittany was concurrent with his sexual maturation and he would have had little reason to resist casual affairs; culturally, it may even have been expected. However, no reports of such behaviour survive. In the absence of evidence either way, it must remain within the realms of possibility.



Henry and Elizabeth most likely spent their wedding night in Westminster's painted chamber, the Palace's most luxurious apartment containing bed, fireplace and chapel, richly decorated as its name suggests. A 1520 map of London shows a complex of smaller buildings overlooking narrow gardens leading to the river, with a view over to Lambeth Palace and the surrounding marshes. Two visiting fourteenth-century monks recorded that on the chamber's walls 'all the warlike stories of the Bible are painted with wonderful skill' and the bed's canopy contained the famous image of the coronation of Edward the Confessor, attributed to Walter of Durham.⁸ This was habitually Henry's chamber, dominated by a four-poster bed that required preparation by ten attendants who would search the straw mattress with daggers to discover any potential dangers, before the ritual laying down of sheets, blankets and coverlets. Some truly sumptuous beds had been created long before then; perhaps that of Joane, Lady Bergavenny, in 1434, with its black and red silk hangings embroidered with silver woodbine, represented the sort of luxury Elizabeth and Henry would have enjoyed.⁹ As the ceremonial 'bed of state', the couple may have passed the night here, after which the queen would be established in her own chambers and afterwards visited there by her husband. They would not normally share a bed except for the occasions when intercourse took place. Wherever they slept, Henry and Elizabeth's official marital bedding would have been an important stage of the day's proceedings. The protocol followed on the wedding of Prince Arthur and Catherine of Aragon in 1501 gives some indication of the formalised, public nature of this most intimate aspect of their union. At around eight in the evening, the royal bride was escorted to her chamber by her ladies, undressed and put to bed; the groom followed, dressed only in his shirt, accompanied by his gentlemen, musicians, priests and bishops who pronounced their blessings before wine and spices were served. The void or voidee was a mixture of expensive sweet and sharp spices considered to have beneficial medicinal and digestive effects, as well as sweetening the breath, warming the constitution and engendering strength and courage. Almost a secular alternative to the Mass, it was an integral part of the marriage celebrations and would be intended to fortify bride and groom before their night



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together. Sometimes, before they left, onlookers required the naked legs of a couple to touch, in order to leave satisfied, as in the case of Princess Mary Rose, whose marriage to Louis XII of France in 1514 was considered consummated when her bare leg touched that of his proxy. Even as late as the seventeenth century, royal newly-weds could expect to be observed embracing and kissing before a group of onlookers. This served as a crude reminder that with the privileges of royalty came the loss of personal identity and autonomy over one's body, the functions of which were of valid interest to the State.

To Elizabeth, in 1486, the room must have seemed initially crowded, overflowing with well-wishers, servants, statesmen and clergymen but eventually, the doors were closed and the couple were left alone. Although the doors were closed upon them, they may not have been free from eavesdroppers. Privacy was a rare luxury, even in the richest palace in the land. Medieval and Tudor architecture determined a degree of physical proximity that meant sex must have been a less sequestered business than it is today; rooms and beds were routinely shared, even among the aristocracy. Returning from Moscow in 1568, Thomas Randolph commented that the Muscovites 'eat together' but 'lie apart', unlike the English, implying a good deal of bed sharing. Servants notoriously accompanied their masters to the bedrooms of wives and mistresses and slept outside the door, on truckle beds on the floor or in antechambers, as in the case of Catherine of Aragon and her twelve-year-old serving boy Juan de Gamarra.¹⁰ Henry V is rumoured to have kept his steward and Chamberlain in the same room while he slept with his wife Catherine of Valois;¹¹ one hopes her experiences with her second husband, Owen Tudor, were more intimate. Sometimes servants played key roles in the exposure of adultery or the dissolution of an unsuccessful match, as well as performing necessary practical duties. Also, it was an occasion when the monarch was at his most vulnerable and defenceless; given the recent decades of conflict and furtive assassination, a king in bed needed watchful eyes around him. On a practical level, thickly curtained beds afforded amorous couples some privacy while allowing unseen access to those bringing in provisions or building up fires. While it is unlikely that many couples were literally



overlooked, brides could expect their dirty linen to be aired quite publicly the next morning: in 1469, the bloodstained bed sheets of Isabella of Castile had been proudly displayed as proof of her lost virginity, while, significantly, those of her impotent half-brother's bride were not. Given the importance of royal consummation and the lengths taken to ensure it had taken place, there may have been eyes and ears at the keyholes in Westminster that January.

However, there is a chance the marriage may already have been consummated. Elizabeth's first child arrived the following September, exactly eight months after the wedding, a time frame which has given rise to much subsequent historical speculation. Assuming Prince Arthur was full-term, this would put his conception date around a month before the ceremony, in mid-December 1485. This was not unusual or impossible; after Bosworth, the couple had undergone a formal betrothal before witnesses and Henry had been zealous in the acquisition of Papal dispensations. Parliament had approved the match on 10 December 1485, suggesting consummation around that time, almost exactly nine months before the birth. A verbal promise of marriage or 'handfasting' could be enough to license physical relations, and Henry's eagerness to secure his bride and father an heir may have led them to share a bed before the ceremony. Within the privacy of his mother's Coldharbour house, this may have been easily achieved. Occasionally desire dictated a rapid consummation: Philip of Burgundy could not wait a week for his marriage to the beautiful Juana of Castile in 1496 and although this may not seem compatible with the supposed cold and careful reputation of Henry, it cannot be ruled out. The young, strong, healthy man of 1485, with years of abstinence and exile behind him, was still a long way from the miserly portrait of his widowhood, which has shaped many later interpretations. Perhaps his intention was to elicit divine blessing, as which, a speedy conception would have been received; perhaps his actions were dictated by sensitivity for his young bride for whom the wedding day and night would represent considerable pressure. Both possibilities are not incompatible. Contemporary belief stressed the necessity of female enjoyment in order for conception to take place. The female body, considered to be a poor shadow or imperfectly formed version of



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its male counterpart, could only conceive if orgasm took place, during which a female ‘seed’ was emitted to mix with that of the male. The public pressures of the wedding day may not have created a relaxed environment conducive to female conception; perhaps Henry was being strikingly modern in soliciting his virginal wife’s pleasure. Alternatively the little prince may have simply arrived early: Bacon certainly believed that Arthur was born ‘in the eighth month’ although he was ‘strong and able’. In either case, the nineteen-year-old bride must have conceived on the occasion of consummation or else very soon after, her ready fertility providing to king and country encouragement that God had blessed the union.

In the summer of 1486, while Henry rode north in response to rumours of unrest, Elizabeth travelled to Winchester to await her confinement. It was a deliberate choice. As England’s ancient capital, the reputed site of the fabled Camelot, it was a romantic bastion of popular culture: William Caxton had printed Thomas Malory’s *Le Morte d’Arthur* in 1485, a compilation of well-known fables and stories that had been woven into written and oral traditions since at least the twelfth century. Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *History of the Kings of Britain*, embellished by Norman writer Wace, as well as Layamon’s *Brut*, established the Arthurian idyll as a golden epoch and formed the basis of most subsequent chronicles for centuries. Edward I had hung a huge round table in the castle’s great hall; tapestries bore the arms of the mythical Arthur’s ancestors and alchemists repeated Merlin’s prediction of the union of a red king and white queen, which had been responsible for the creation of the first Arthur. Queen Elizabeth’s own father had genealogical trees drawn up to establish his own connection with the great British hero and Henry’s banner at Bosworth had borne the red dragon, Arthur’s heraldic device, against a white and green background. In 1486, Winchester was carefully selected as a symbolic location to realign the new dynasty with its Welsh heritage and recreate a context for the iconography of the new regime. Henry wanted to endow his firstborn son, the hope of his fledgling dynasty, with the strength and riches of national myth. Later chroniclers stated that the child was named to ‘honour the British race’, describing the people ‘rejoicing’ in reaction to the child’s name, which made



foreign princes ‘tremble and quake’ at the choice, which was to them ‘terrible and formidable’.¹²

Some doubt has arisen among modern biographers as to the exact location of Arthur’s birth, with accounts divided between Winchester Castle and the Prior’s lodgings at the nearby Abbey. Built as part of William the Conqueror’s system of strongholds across Britain, the castle was expanded in the thirteenth century into a huge flinty edifice flanking two courtyards, of which only the Great Hall remains today. It would seem a logical place for Elizabeth’s lying-in but if she had any intentions of delivering her child there, her mind may have been changed by the castle’s deteriorating condition. By 1486, it was considered old and draughty: its discomforts belonged in the era of civil warfare, rather than in the urbane, sophisticated, new European court Henry was forging. The royal party probably settled instead at the Prior’s House, now renamed the Deanery, at St Swithin’s Priory. Strong evidence for this comes from John Stowe’s *Chronicle*, published in 1565, which describes the baby’s christening procession: the ‘hole chapel met with my lord prynce in the qwens great chamber’, from where the child was carried into the church and up to the ‘hyghe altuar to St Swithin’s shrine’, which would have been a prohibitive journey for a newborn, had he arrived in the castle.¹³ It is far more likely that they remained in residence there while the Prior’s House was made ready. This three-storey stone building, with its arched entrance portico, was used to house distinguished guests separately from the pilgrims lodged in the usual guest house.

Winchester lay on one of the major highways of medieval England, a centre for pilgrimage housing around thirty Benedictine monks in 1500, who kept open house for visitors under the new Prior Thomas Silkested. There, Elizabeth’s ladies would have gone about the business of readying a chamber for her lying-in, against a backdrop of monastic business, punctuated by bells and the sound of voices raised in prayer and chant. Far from being austere and chilly, the Priory would have been able to extend their guests a warm welcome. As one of the richest monasteries in the land, St Swithin’s would have had no problem catering for their royal guests: Cathedral rolls show the variety of the monks’ diet, which, in 1492, included meals of venison, beef, mutton, calves’ feet, eggs,



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dishes of marrow and bread; on fast days they had salt fish, rice, figs and raisins. The rolls are full of details for the provision of 'good' beer, cheese, salt, wine, butter and candles; the gardener was to supply apples in season every two days and flowers for Church festivals. A further entry records the duties of the cellarer to include the upkeep of various pets acquired by the occupants. The currtarian was responsible for providing for visiting bishops and royalty while the porter was to make up the fire in snowy weather.¹⁴ While there was little understanding of the nutritional needs of pregnancy, kings were particularly well placed to satisfy any specific cravings their wives developed: in the fifteenth century, oranges were often given to expectant mothers as a treat, a practice that was so well known that John Paston the younger felt obliged to apologise when requesting some for a woman who was not pregnant. If the Tudor heir was born at the Priory, he and his mother would have been well catered for.

In addition to the provisions offered by the monks of St Swithin's, the king's mother had been anticipating the practicalities of Elizabeth's delivery. As soon as the child had quickened, around Easter of that year, Margaret Beaufort set work on her Ordinances, outlining the protocol and detail of the lying-in chamber. She was impressively thorough, from the number and colour of cushions in the room to the ranks and duties of those women in assistance. Under her formidable direction, the Prior's apartments would have been transformed into a little cell of luxury, furnished to the highest quality with all the necessaries of birth. First, the chamber was hung with heavy Arras tapestries, covering the walls, ceiling and windows. Draughts and fresh air were not considered healthy for the newborn, nor were bright lights, and the efforts of childbirth were reputed to strain a mother's eyesight. Additionally, the secure darkness would protect against the attacks of evil spirits who might threaten mother and child as their lives hung in the balance before the administration of baptismal and churching rites. The tapestries chosen were carefully scrutinised for their subject matter. Provoking or disturbing scenes, including hunts and wild or mythological beasts, were rejected for fear of their startling effects, in favour of scenes of love and romance. A mother looking upon violent scenes might transmit some of her emotional response to her unborn child, irrevocably shaping its



features or character. One window alone was left uncovered, so that a woman may have light and look outside if she desired. Next, a huge temporary pallet bed was prepared, where Elizabeth would labour. A giant, 8 feet by 10, it lay in the middle of the room, stuffed with wool and down, covered with crimson satin. The colour was regal but it may also have minimised the inevitable blood stains. Beside it were set two cradles. The first was 5 feet long and beautifully adorned for ceremonial use, embellished with the royal arms and buckles of silver. A smaller cradle of wood, hung with pommels of silver and gilt, with ermine-lined bedding, was reserved for sleep.

When Elizabeth finally entered her lying-in chamber, the room radiated heat and light. Despite the September mildness, candles illuminated the gloom, embroidered hangings kept out the cold, and piles of thick blankets sat waiting, along with fresh chests of linen and double petticoats. The list of material provisions was exhaustive and precise: exact quantities and types were listed, including yards of fine linen from Rheims and Rennes, imported Tartarin silk, fine lawn and wool, fustian pillows stuffed with down, furred panels, head sheets, a canopy of satin, posts to support the canopy, cushions and mantles all in a red and gold colour scheme. Cupboards were stocked with wine, food and spices to revive her during her ordeal, as well as the glittering plate that marked the status of mother and child. Daily supplies would be brought to the chamber door, but Elizabeth would not expect to emerge again for several weeks, probably more. It was a physical and symbolic isolation, where darkness and comfort made the environment for the child's arrival as womb-like and safe as possible. By inference, the richness of the surroundings mirrored the richness and special 'otherness' of the Queen's body: women across the country would prepare their chambers, or not, according to their differing social degrees. At the bottom of the scale, the poor, servants and beggar women would give birth in barns, church porches, at roadsides and in the houses of strangers. They could expect public intervention and debate concerning their bodies, their character, morals and relationships; they might be physically moved across parish boundaries to avoid expense or examined by midwives and civil officers to determine paternity and intention. Childbirth was everyone's business.



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No Tudor birth was of greater significance than that of a future heir to the throne. With the dynasty in its infancy, the new regime's survival could turn on Elizabeth's performance in the lying-in chamber: she was literally delivering the future. The outcome of her pregnancy had a significance the Tudors believed was foretold in the stars. In 1490, Henry VII was presented with the translation of a work by thirteenth-century Italian astrologer Guido Bonatti, outlining the influence of the heavenly bodies at the exact moment of a child's birth. The manuscript contains an illustration of a bare-breasted, newly delivered mother, lying in a bed hung with blue drapes and red patterned covers; the ground is depicted like grass and the stars overhead give a sense of the universality of the childbirth experience. The mother is placed at the centre of the world; a metaphor that held more than a degree of reality for England's new queen. No doubt Henry was waiting nearby, briefly relegated to second place. In lodgings around the city, courtiers, doctors, astrologers, astronomers, ambassadors, priests and prophets nervously anticipated the all-important news. A successful delivery for mother and child was paramount; after that, all depended upon the infant's health and strength. Arthur's first few days would be crucial and his survival governed as much by luck as the mixture of superstition and custom that governed medicine at the time. The Tudors did not yet understand the circulation of the blood, let alone foetal development. Medical diagnosis was made in terms of the four humours, with female illnesses addressed by 'balancing' or purging the body: Elizabeth may even have been bled before giving birth, to remove 'bad influences', weakening her considerably at a time when she most needed her strength. Even her women, with all their wisdom and good intentions, perpetuated the myths and ignorance that could contribute to high infant and maternal mortality. At the very least, no one understood the need to wash their hands.

As a symbolic 'womb' for the birth of the dynasty, Elizabeth's little Winchester nucleus was entirely female in character. Closing the doors would exclude all men until after the child's arrival, even the king and male doctors. She would be attended entirely by her 'good sisters' or 'gossips', who took over the usual daily ceremonies of service as well as specific maternity duties. Among



the women gathered to perform this office in September 1486 were the two grandmothers, Margaret Beaufort and Elizabeth Wydeville, who had arranged the match, as well as Elizabeth's sisters Anne and Cecily, whose youth would have limited their involvement. Seclusion also preserved the dignity and majesty of the queen in a society that venerated motherhood as the defining factor of a woman's life; Elizabeth was labouring to secure the future of the realm while trying to maintain the decorum becoming to her status. Submission, regality and purity were the watchwords for a queen, an image etched in medieval culture by the pens, laws and expectations of men. The symbolic closing of the chamber doors was a deference to her femininity and status: no one would raise an eyebrow there if she were to succumb to the usual human passions during labour. It would not be fitting for the court to hear her screams of agony or witness her dishevelment: these were for the eyes of her women only. Now all Elizabeth need do was rest and wait.

As the queen's labour began, her gossips would have gathered round to follow certain folkloric rituals. It was customary for mothers to remove all fastenings: rings, buckles, bracelets and laces were thought to mimic a state of strangulation in the body which could be transmitted to the child. Likewise, no one in the chamber would cross their legs, arms or fingers. The labouring woman's abdomen might be rubbed with creams made from a mixture of brandy, distilled marjoram and saffron to aid contractions. Tied around her belly, magic girdles and pieces of paper inscribed with 'charms' offered protection, and belts hung with cowrie shells were thought to bring good luck through their resemblance to, and therefore sympathy with, the vulva. In her hand, a mother might clasp an 'eagle stone' or *aetites*, a larger stone which contained a smaller stone within its hollow centre, rattling when shaken: according to medieval theories, nature left 'signatures' to imply use, by which these were a natural echo of her condition and could alleviate pain and prevent miscarriage. Eagle stones were worn on the arm during pregnancy and transferred to the abdomen when labour began; a variant was St Hildegard of Bingen's twelfth-century remedy of holding a jasper stone during birth. Agnus Dei were also popular religious tokens, for those who could



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get hold of them; they were wax discs stamped with the image of a lamb and flag, blessed by the Pope and supposedly offering protection from sudden death and the malice of demons. In some places, the skin of a wild ox was tied about a woman's thigh and snakeskin or hartskin belts were worn, the placebo effects of which can only be imagined, in the absence of modern forms of pain relief. Herbs and flowers were used to help lessen the intensity of contractions, including the oils of lilies, almonds and roses, cyclamen, columbine, aquilegia, wild thyme and musk: some must have really helped, such as meadowsweet, which would later be synthesised and called aspirin. Other potions included the more bizarre ants' eggs, powdered eel liver, virgin's hair, ale and red cow's milk. Although it is unlikely Elizabeth's labour was aided by all of these, she would have had access to the most expensive and rare ingredients. Enemas were also given to aid dilation and sometimes 'subfumigation' was used, by channelling herbal vapours into the wombs; women were also given special powders to make them sneeze, as this was thought to help expel the child. Even though some of these sound extreme to the modern reader and may even have given the Tudor woman cause to smile, childbirth could prove a deadly and dangerous event: for a nation heavily steeped in superstition, there was some correlation between these practices and the odds of survival.

Religious comforts were also available to a Catholic queen. From pre-conception devotions and pilgrimages, through all stages of pregnancy and parturition, there were appropriate prayers and saints to petition for intercession. The Church clearly distinguished between the times when a woman was expected to attend church and when to stay away; from maternal repentance as the child quickened, to Mass before labour, baptism by the godparents and, finally, churching. Elizabeth would have taken Communion before entering her chamber, its blessing extending to her unborn child in the eventuality of tragedy. Birth was the most significant and dangerous of all rites of passage, when a woman was susceptible to malign influences as she languished in spiritual limbo, so direct access to the fortifications of faith was essential. Reading the Gospels during the delivery was one well-practised method of ensuring all went smoothly; prayer books and books of hours



would have also been used to pass the hours of waiting. A crowded reliquary in the birth chamber would display a range of artefacts such as holy bones and girdles, phials of blood, tears or milk and shards of the true cross, through which Elizabeth might commune with those saints associated with childbirth. During her ordeal, she may well have held the famous Westminster girdle, supposedly made and used by the Virgin Mary,¹⁵ which the next generation of Tudor mothers would favour. Pre-Reformation Catholics believed in the real, comforting presence of saints during labour as well as the power of prayer. Mary, whose cult following in medieval England was profound and ubiquitous, could stand above the complexities of womanly status and identity as a parallel, or objective correlative, of shared experience: through her, all labouring mothers could be brought closer to God in time of danger.

In the long dark hours of labour, Catholicism, pseudo-religious practice and superstition were easily blurred. As Elizabeth hovered between life and death, devoid of any pain relief and uncertain how long her travail would last, she would have sought whatever comforts her ladies could offer. The earliest surviving manuals relating to pregnancy and childbirth were recipe (receipt) books, including the Anglo-Saxon *Lacnunga* or ‘Remedies’, and the ninth-century Bald’s *Leechbook*, containing a number of magic charms or incantations to be invoked against disease, misfortune and attacks by demons, often through the ritualistic repetition of words or actions in patterns of three or nine. One of the charms relates to ‘a delayed birth’, intended to induce overdue labour, while another assists in the onset of sudden stabbing pains, supposedly caused by the machinations of ‘mighty women’. Pagan ritual and Christian rites were mingled in many early medical texts, translating into a variety of practices in the Tudor delivery chamber. The Catholic Church had its own prayers to combat these customs, including one included in a 1425 prayer book, containing an English rubric and Latin prayer composed by St Peter for labouring women. Interestingly though, the Latin was written with feminine endings, indicating that it was intended to be read by a woman, which, in practical terms, could only have been accessed by a tiny literate minority. The benefit of charms and prayers alike lay in their formulaic, repetitive patterns, which



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could help concentrate the mind and the exercise of some small form of control over a bewildering and helpless experience. The word ‘abracadabra’, now associated more with stage magic, was a popular part of a repetitive chanting formula. It is not difficult to picture commoners and queens alike incanting verses through gritted teeth as their contractions take hold. One tenth-century charm, from the South of France, written in Occitan, would have been recited by midwives to establish a rhythm in accordance with a woman’s contractions and to establish a pattern of regular breathing. Similar English secular and religious lyrics would have been used in many birth chambers around the country, from those of queens downwards. Such traditional rhymes must have been part of an experienced midwife’s repertoire:

A swollen woman
sat in a swollen road;
a swollen child
she held in her lap;
swollen hands
and swollen feet,
swollen flesh
that will take this blow,
swollen wood
and swollen iron
that will give out this blow.
The pain goes out
from bone to flesh,
from flesh to skin
from skin to hair
from hair to grass
let Mother Earth receive the pain.¹⁶

No record is made of the midwives in attendance on Elizabeth, although at least one would undoubtedly have been present. They were indispensable as the only females allowed to physically intervene during the process and touch the queen’s reproductive organs. It is possible that Elizabeth was attended by her mother’s favourite midwife, Marjory Cobbe, who had attended Elizabeth



Wydeville's final confinement only six years before. During the months of her pregnancy, the queen would have been attended by doctors and physicians, such as Walter Lemster, to whom Henry granted £40 a year for life that February. The royal nursery would be presided over by Elizabeth Denton, who, in 1509, received the gift of Coldharbour House for life as a reward for her services. As unlicensed practitioners, midwives would have been chosen according to their moral standing, appearance, experience and reputation; quite probably they already had associations with the family and may have delivered siblings, cousins or friends. The varying reputations of 'wise women' could be determined by factors beyond their control, like maternal health and infant mortality but they were usually older women, past their childbearing years, who had been in attendance at many lyings-in. There was little prenatal care in the modern sense but once they arrived in the birth chamber, they assumed absolute control. As Elizabeth's labour pains intensified, she may have lain on her pallet bed, walked about the room or knelt. A midwife may even have brought or commissioned her own 'groaning chair', allowing her to attend the delivery while another helped the queen brace herself against the pain and pressed down on the top of her womb. Some midwives used rope tourniquets to aid expulsion while others employed massage, warm towels and applied herbal remedies to speed up uterine contractions. A midwife's job was also to remain calm and be cheery and encouraging, in which she would lead the other women in setting the tone of the chamber.

Unsurprisingly, the male-authored accounts do not describe whether Elizabeth's labour was long or difficult; once the heir had safely arrived, such details may have not been considered important. However, it would have made all the difference for the queen. As a first birth, it was an unknown quantity and probably a daunting experience for the young woman, despite the collective wisdom of her gossips. She may well have observed the births of her younger siblings, especially in attendance on her mother through the difficult months of sanctuary, yet observing and participating differ vastly. Considering her youth and relatively quick recovery, she most likely experienced a relatively straightforward delivery once the baby began to crown during the night of 19/20 September.



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Finally, in the early hours of the morning, a healthy child arrived. The prophets were proved right: it was a boy. Following a quick examination, the midwife declared him perfect. The little prince's umbilical cord would have been cut and anointed with powdered frankincense or aloe, before he was washed in a mixture of wine, herbs or milk and rubbed with butter or the oil of almonds, roses or nuts to close his pores, so that the air would not harm them. Then he was tightly swaddled, placed in the cradle and given a spoonful of wine and sugar. The eleventh-century Italian female physician Trotula of Salerno recommended a newborn's tongue to be washed with hot water to ensure clear speech or else rubbed with honey to stimulate a healthy appetite. While her baby slept, Elizabeth delivered the placenta. This was achieved through a 'mini-labour' during which her womb was again massaged until the afterbirth arrived. The women would have checked it carefully before disposal, as any remaining fragments could lead to fatal haemorrhaging later. Finally, Elizabeth was briefly washed down with fine linen cloth or clean sponge and allowed to rest. She was not allowed to sleep for a couple of hours after delivery, so her women would have kept her diverted and cheered with their chatter. Her aching body would have been soothed with the best ointments and cures, using well-known herbal and floral remedies to staunch the flow of blood and ease blood-flow and pains; the days following were crucial for her health and recovery. Natural light was not supposed to penetrate the room for at least three days, as birth was considered to strain the eyesight and a typical lying-in period might last a month or more. Eventually, she would be washed and dressed, perhaps transferred to a state bed and formally 'sat up' to receive visitors. Access to the queen's body still followed strict protocol; no one lower than the rank of duchess or countess was permitted to help her rise from her bed or receive her at her chamber door when she would finally emerge.

It seemed that her ordeal was over. However, in the days following the birth, Elizabeth suffered from an ague or fever, so the court remained at Winchester for her recovery and churching. Perhaps from her chamber she was aware of the town's celebrations of bells ringing in all the churches, Masses, bonfires, revelry and the dispatch of messengers across the country bearing the good news.



Elizabeth of York & Arthur, 1485–1486

Elizabeth's own gratitude for her safe delivery would prompt her to found a chapel in Winchester Cathedral, where Arthur was christened, in her absence, a few days after his birth. It was a grand occasion, again dictated by Margaret Beaufort's Ordinances, with the walls draped in rich arras and floors spread with carpets. The silver gilt font from Canterbury Cathedral was borrowed, lined with soft Rennes linen, to protect the child at the moment of baptism, while coals scented with perfume burned and wooden barriers kept back the throng of onlookers. The main roles in the ceremony were taken by Elizabeth's women; her sister Cecily carried Arthur, wrapped in a mantle of crimson cloth of gold furred with ermine. After his baptism, with salt, oil and water, the child was passed to his godmother, Elizabeth's mother, who presented him as an offering at the altar, before he was richly endowed with gifts and the party celebrated with wine and spices. Then, the baby was returned to his mother's chamber to be blessed by his parents.

Early in October, Elizabeth had recovered sufficiently to process to the church in the wake of a large burning taper for her churching ceremony: following this, she was restored to her role of queen and wife, appearing seated ceremonially below the Cloth of Estate. By the end of the month, the court had removed to Greenwich and after the New Year, plans were drawn up for the establishment of Arthur's household at Farnham in Surrey. His household was overseen by a Lady Governess of the nursery, assisted by a dry nurse, wet nurse and various yeomen, grooms and others who saw to the practical running of the house: 1,000 marks were allocated for its expenses. From that point, Elizabeth's contact with her young son would be intermittent – queens could not be incapacitated by breastfeeding or maternity: other women would feed and clothe him, comfort him at night, play with him and nurse him through illness, until he was of an age for his father to start preparing him for his important future. As the dynasty's bodily vessel, Elizabeth's first pregnancy had been a success. Now she had to begin the process again.



2

Elizabeth of York & the Future Henry VIII 1487–1503

The Family Expands

*For first his sweet and lovely Queen
A Joy above the rest
Brought him both Sons and Daughters fair
To make his Kingdom blest.
The Royal Blood that was at Ebb
So increas'd by his Queen,
That England's heir unto this Day
Do flourish fair and green.¹*

Fourteen months after the birth of her son, Elizabeth was crowned as England's queen. It was perhaps a more glorious moment for her than her marriage had been, and just as spectacular. This time however, there was no one else to share the limelight; this above all, was her day. In a sense, it was also her reward for the rapid production of a healthy male heir; not all Tudor consorts were crowned and their status lay firmly in the hands of their royal husbands on whose orders the ceremony took place. It was a November day in 1487 when the royal convoy of barges sailed up the Thames from Greenwich, streaming with colourful silk banners; on one, a huge red Welsh dragon spouted flames of fire into the water as people gathered on the banks to watch. On another sat Elizabeth and her ladies, dressed in all their jewels, furs and finery. It must have been an impressive sight, even for a city that was used to pageantry. Music would have wafted downstream on the autumnal air and into London homes and streets, heralding their soon-to-be queen's approach. She passed that night in state at the



Tower, then set out the following day to travel the short distance to Westminster Abbey, reclining on downy cushions in a litter of cloth of gold of damask, carried by Knights of the Bath. On her head was a circlet of gold set with precious stones – which would later be exchanged for the crown – and her kirtle and mantle of purple velvet were fronted with lace. The previous day's warnings had been heeded; the packed streets, thronging with Londoners in all their finery, were decorated with rich cloths and banners that hung from the houses along her route. As she passed along the special 'ray cloth' of striped wool, leading from her litter into the abbey, the crowd surged up behind to seize pieces of this carpet, which was thought to have magical properties. Their enthusiasm was so great that riots broke out but the great doors were quickly closed upon the rabble outside, allowing the important business of State to proceed. According to tradition, Elizabeth was anointed twice, once on the chest and once on the head before receiving a ring for the fourth finger of her right hand, a gold crown, sceptre and rod of gold. Onlookers were then cleared from Westminster Hall to make way for the guests: Lords, bishops and abbots; barons, knights and nobles, beside London's mayor, alderman, merchants and distinguished citizens, were seated either side of the dais on which Elizabeth would be served her celebratory banquet. No doubt the food was as sumptuous and plentiful as it had been at her wedding. After the feasting, the Garter King of Arms led the heralds and officers in proclaiming her queen and offering her their sincere gratitude and thanks. If any doubts had lingered about Elizabeth's validity as queen, the birth of her son and her splendid coronation reaffirmed the strength of the Tudor dynasty and the royal marriage. As a young, fertile woman, regularly sharing her husband's bed, expectations for an imminent second pregnancy would have been high.

Yet two and a half years would pass before Elizabeth would conceive again. Given the royal couple's ages and regular periods spent together, as well as the rapidity of Arthur's conception, this represents a significant interval. Easily long enough to suggest fertility issues in a modern couple, it may well have given the royal pair and their physicians cause for concern. Yet such situations were not uncommon among European royalty. Isabella of Castile's



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seven-year interval between her first and second child puzzled the Spanish court and all her physicians, yet she then went on to deliver a son and three more daughters. Catherine de Medici would be married to Henri II of France for a decade before conceiving the first of eleven offspring. Even after the arrival of their healthy son Arthur, the Tudor imperative for heirs was still strong, as a royal family's future strength lay partly in its size. It must be assumed, therefore, that Henry and Elizabeth were still actively trying to conceive during these years. Political threats and strains would have proved an unwelcome distraction, though, which could affect fertility and performance. 1487 had brought difficult challenges, with Yorkist claimant Lambert Simnel threatening to invade and usurp the throne. His coronation as Edward VI in Dublin that May had forced Henry again into battle, defeating his enemies at Stoke. It had been a powerful reminder that one little boy in his nursery at Farnham was not sufficient guarantee of the Tudor lineage, nor protection against the menace of rival claimants. The hereditary succession was as precarious as his young life, prey to all the dangers of infant mortality that were no respecters of rank. In spite of – or perhaps because of – their early trials, the royal family were close. Whenever possible during this troubling summer, Henry and Elizabeth had remained together. As he prepared for battle, the king had summoned his 'dearest wife and dearest mother' to be with him at Kenilworth; among his last acts before leaving to fight were to pay the wages of Arthur's household and to equip his wife's attendants. Although some chroniclers suggested that Henry was cool towards his wife because of her Yorkist origins, there is no evidence to suggest this. They were together again in London for her coronation and celebrated that Christmas at Greenwich. The following year they were at Windsor for Easter, passed the summer at Woodstock, then on to Westminster in the autumn, providing them with plenty of opportunities to conceive a second child. Yet nothing happened.

There is little doubt that if Henry and Elizabeth were under the same roof, they would have at some point, shared a bed. Although they would often have been lodged in different chambers, depending on their residence, a king would customarily visit his wife, sometimes remaining with her all night, sometimes returning



to his own bed to sleep. Elizabeth's overall conception pattern shows that their physical relationship was fairly consistent. Tudor wives of all classes were under considerable pressure to acquiesce to their husband's demands for sexual relations, or the 'debt' of marriage: Chaucer's parson's saintly wife 'has the merit of chastity who yields the debt of the body to her husband, yes, though it be contrary to her liking and the desire of her heart'. A wife's inclinations were not considered important. The feigned 'headache' had not yet emerged as a clichéd deterrent and levels of rape, undue force or at least reluctance among wives must have been high. If this was the case, it follows that married women had inconsistent control over their conceptions. Primitive forms of birth control and withdrawal methods were frowned upon at the very least, following the Catholic line that the prevention of pregnancy was sinful. The only arguments for marital abstinence were put forward by some enlightened religious and medical professionals on grounds of health. As early as the twelfth century, clerical voices had been raised in dissent against the dangers of unchecked fertility for women. Peter Cantor, Chanter at Notre Dame, put the case of a woman who had sustained such terrible injuries during repeated childbearing that her doctor advised against another pregnancy, which would certainly endanger her life. The debate focused on where her duty lay, whether she must submit to her insistent husband or refuse him the marital debt and save herself. It is possible that Henry and Elizabeth exercised some limited methods of control over the pace of their reproduction in the wake of Arthur's birth, but this seems unlikely. Although various later sources have implied Elizabeth's health may have been delicate, the successful delivery of one child and her subsequent recovery suggest no impediment to enjoying a full sexual relationship with her husband. As a queen and a woman, it was her marital and national duty to do so. On both religious and cultural levels, Elizabeth would have been considered receptive to her husband's advances from the moment of her churching, in late October 1486, onwards. For the next two and a half years, she would have been hoping to conceive.

Perhaps she succeeded. While the arrival dates of most of Henry and Elizabeth's children are carefully recorded, some controversy



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surrounds the arrival of a short-lived prince named Edward, with at least one historian² suggesting his birth must have occurred towards the beginning of the marriage, in 1487 or 1488, rather than its usual placing, somewhere between 1499 and 1502. Given the intervals of her subsequent conceptions, of ten months after her second child Margaret and then three months after Henry, her third, Elizabeth's fertility appears to have been strong. The lengthening gaps between the births of her subsequent children are consistent with patterns of dwindling conceptions experienced by aristocratic and noble women married comparatively young and producing larger families. Typically, a rapid number of children were born in the years following marriage, before fertility tailed off and accelerated the arrival of the menopause in the mid-thirties. This pattern is illustrated by the conception rates of Jane Dudley, Duchess of Northumberland, who produced her first child at the age of seventeen and her tenth – and final – when she was thirty-six, and Elizabeth de la Pole, Duchess of Suffolk, who bore twelve children between her nineteenth and thirty-fourth years. Prolonged phases of infertility early in marriages did occur and Elizabeth's failure to conceive may have been caused by the strains of political upheaval, illness or other, now irretrievable, health factors in both partners. It is not impossible that during this time she did conceive and miscarried, or delivered a short-lived heir. On balance, though, the expected arrival of a second heir during these years would have incited more comment, even in the event of a failed pregnancy, indicating a later birthdate for Edward. If this is so, the question of Elizabeth's fertility and the royal marriage remains uncertain. Perhaps after five centuries, these elusive answers may simply be those of timing, health and opportunity.

Throughout these early years, Elizabeth must have been alert to any potential indications of conception. Without modern testing methods, Tudor women could only rely on some rather unscientific physical symptoms. Contemporary accounts listed increased appetite, full breasts, tongue colour, dull eyes, swollen veins, vomiting, strange desires and the end of the menstrual cycle among the early signs. Yet these could still be open to misinterpretation, or caused by other illnesses, especially in an age of poor nutrition and inexplicable illness. A mother still may not have been certain



she was expecting until she felt a stretching or quickening within her swelling belly, between four and five months in. During the 1480s, there were few written records for mothers to turn to, even if they had been able to read. *Hali Meidenhad*, a thirteenth-century alliterative prose homily based on the Psalms, graphically warned young girls against the unappealing physical changes pregnancy could bring: the face would grow thinner and shadowed, dizziness would make the head ache cruelly, the womb bulged like a water-skin, stitches developed in the side, discomfort in the bowels, painful backache, heaviness in the limbs and the dragging weight of the breasts. Once a woman was known to be pregnant, there was no lack of dietary advice for her to follow to ensure the birth of a healthy child. Bald's tenth-century *Leechbook*, full of ancient remedies, charms and recipes, had been much recycled and reused by the Tudor era. It recommended pregnant women should not eat anything salty or sweet, nor eat pork or fatty foods or drink beer, nor the flesh of any other 'animal that could beget', or else the child would be humpbacked. Fruit and vegetables were best avoided but wine and ale were far safer to drink than milk or water. Only a very bland diet appears acceptable, although expectant mothers were at least exempt from the fasts that punctuated the Catholic year.

Tudor medicine lacked any detailed or thorough understanding of the workings of the female body or reliable diagnostic tools. Misdiagnosis must have been common. It could lead to the prescription of cures for similar conditions before pregnancy was suspected. A woman experiencing nausea or giddiness in her first trimester might be prescribed powders made from the stones found in a swallow's belly, or the liver of a kite. She might be encouraged to drink 'fine leaved grass' for thirty-three days or the juice of cowslip for nine, or a month's worth of rennet from a hare, or to eat the boiled heart of a stork. Another experiencing swelling in her body or legs might be advised to take elderberries boiled in ale with sparrow's grease; another with stomach pains could be prescribed to make up a little bag filled with wormwood, egremony, spearmint, vinegar, rosewater and a dead chaffinch and lay it on her stomach. The effects of these can only be imagined. Pregnant women needed to be careful from whom they sought



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advice. Complaints were made against physicians and midwives who prescribed potions and powders that did expectant mothers more harm than good, or caused death. London midwife Cecilia Pople's fumigations in 1598 ended in the premature death of Dorothy Gatersby of Aldersgate and, although she promised to cease practice, the following year she gave pills and purgatives to a Mrs Kennyck in exchange for the payment of a feather-bed cover.³ Elizabeth could at least rely on the advice of the best physicians in the land, even if their knowledge was imperfect.

Henry and Elizabeth spent Christmas 1488 at Sheen, their fourteenth-century manor house in Richmond. Surrounded by friends and family, the old moated royal lodgings allowed them some privacy from the rest of the court and there must have been much feasting and pageantry. Elizabeth loved music and 'disguisings', the allegorical interludes peopled by saints and dragons, virtues and vices, set to the accompaniment of fiddles and drums. When it came to providing for his family's entertainment, the king spent regularly. Payments recorded by his treasurer John Heron for the court's indoor entertainments a few years later included players, fools, minstrels, musicians, tumblers, card and dice games. By the following Easter, they were resident at Hertford, at which time Elizabeth may have begun to suspect that she was pregnant. At once, she would have made some small changes to her daily routine. A woman was believed to nourish her child with her blood and shape it with her imagination, so once her body had started to display the physical symptoms, all manner of rituals, superstitions and precautions were considered necessary for the growth and delivery of a healthy foetus. To the medieval mind, evil influences were ever-present, waiting to pounce on those who forgot themselves: ritual and observation were essential precautions for personal protection and salvation. The performance of certain actions could be mirrored in 'sympathy' by the unborn child so activities that involved winding or grinding could cause the child to strangulate in the womb and mats must be rolled a certain way to prevent twisting injuries. The noise of guns and bells was to be avoided, as were exuberant dogs who might jump up and cause deformity; the sight of hares might engender a hare lip, a snake would give the baby green eyes and woe betide those who tiptoed



through the May dew, as they would certainly miscarry. A mother looking at the moon would produce a lunatic or sleepwalker; ill or deformed people could imprint their maladies; certain places must be avoided for danger and rituals followed to prevent birthmarks. Such marks were considered the sign of a werewolf, as were stubby fingers and excessive body hair. Expectant mothers were not to run, leap or rise up suddenly, nor should they lift heavy burdens or lace too tightly. They should beware extremes of temperature and emotion and sleep as much as they could. Shocks, certain foods, extreme emotions and lasciviousness could all be communicated to an unborn child. Conceiving around the end of February, Elizabeth must have been increasingly aware of her condition by the Feast of St George, 23 April, when Henry made gifts to her including cloth of black velvet, russet cloth and squirrel fur as well as cloth of white blanket, canaber cloth, cords, beds of down and feather, carpet, London thread, crochets, tappet hooks, hammers of iron and sheets of Holland cloth to furnish her bed. Perhaps these last items were prompted by solicitousness for her comfort, given her delicate state.

At the end of October 1489, Elizabeth went into confinement at Westminster, after hearing Mass and taking a ceremonial meal of spices and sweet wine. The queen's main chamber, with its attendant chapel and views across the river, would have been prepared in advance, with the late summer months seeing a flurry of activity as carpenters, furnishers, painters and fitters of all kinds set to work. It is unclear exactly how the day of admittance was decided; possibly a combination of Elizabeth's increasing size, the onset of practice contractions and the predictions of her women and doctors. It may have been calculated well in advance, according to the child's quickening or else determined on the day by the expectant mother's health. With no accurate means of anticipating due dates, and mistakes frequently made, confinement could be as short as seven days, or stretch for up to six weeks or more until 'late' babies made their arrival. In the autumn of 1489, Elizabeth probably played a part in the decision-making process, along with her mother-in-law, as the court machinery was set in motion for the big changes ahead; after all, this was an important State occasion. The witnesses, led by her Chamberlain, prayed for her safe delivery, as she and her women



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entered the inner chamber, hung with blue arras embroidered with gold fleurs-de-lys. Her bed and separate birthing pallet were hung with canopy of gold and velvet with many colours, 'garnished' with the symbolic red roses of Lancaster. To one side stood an altar, 'well furnished' with relics, on which Elizabeth would rely to assist her labour, while a cupboard 'well and richly garnished' held other necessities for the coming weeks. Attending her were Margaret Beaufort and her own mother, Elizabeth Wydeville, temporarily leaving her religious seclusion in Bermondsey Abbey. During this confinement, the strict rules of attendance were briefly suspended to allow her mother's visiting cousin, Francois de Luxembourg, and a group of French Ambassadors to visit her. It must have been a welcome break from the long month of waiting.

After almost a month in confinement, Elizabeth was delivered of a daughter at about nine in the evening of 28 November. The birth of a girl was not always as welcome as that of a boy: it went unrecorded by the London Grey Friars chronicler who did note the arrivals of princes Arthur and Henry, yet girls had their dynastic uses, forging foreign alliances through marriage treaties. There is no reason to suspect that the little princess's arrival was treated with anything less than delight by her parents, considering the existence of a healthy heir and the ability of her mother to go on and bear more sons. The christening was held at Westminster, on 30 November, again using the traditional silver font from Canterbury Cathedral. The Marchioness of Berkeley carried the child from the queen's chamber at the front of a procession bearing 120 torches, followed by Elizabeth's sister Anne holding the lace christening robe. She was lowered into the font and baptised Margaret, after her paternal grandmother. The party partook of spices and wine, trumpets sounded and the child was carried back to her mother. The court would remain at Westminster for Christmas but an outbreak of measles delayed Elizabeth's churching until 27 December, when it was held in private. As the illness had claimed several victims among her ladies, this was a wise decision considering Elizabeth's vulnerable post-partum condition. By Candlemas, in early February, she was well enough to celebrate the purification of the Virgin Mary by watching a play in the White Hall. Seven months later she was pregnant again.



By now Elizabeth knew what to expect in the delivery chamber. *Hali Meidenhad* described the birth process in graphic terms: that ‘cruel, distressing anguish, that fierce and stabbing pain, that incessant misery that torments upon torment, that wailing outcry ... fear of death, shame added to that suffering by old wives ... whose help is necessary to you, however indecent it may be’.⁴ Such advice was designed to help prevent unwanted and illegitimate pregnancies but more practical advice was on hand for those who were well beyond this stage. Early sixteenth-century birth manuals instructed midwives not to encourage the mother to push before such time as the child was ready to be born, before which ‘all labour is in vaine, labour as much as yee list’: if all the mother’s energy was spent too early, it could become a ‘perilous case’ indeed. She was to walk up and down until the ‘matrice’ or womb ruptured, after which she could rest and keep warm. If the waters did not break naturally, it was up to the midwife to rupture them with her fingernail or, terrifyingly, shears or a sharp knife. To strengthen her, a woman might then take a little sustenance in the form of an egg, with butter and bread, wine and water. Babies were delivered in all positions; standing, lying, kneeling, squatting, although many manuals advised the traditional lying flat on the back, braced on the bed with the feet against a log of wood, the better to push against. A pillow might be placed under her back and hips, to prevent them sinking down into the mattress, while a long ‘swathe’ of fabric under her body allowed her to be raised a little by her women on either side, if necessary. Those present in the room with her had to be careful about their positions too: sitting with crossed legs, arms or fingers was thought to contribute towards a difficult birth. As she prepared to deliver, the midwife would stroke and massage the womb to encourage the child’s passage, while continually anointing her genitals with butter or grease until the head began to crown. Traditionally with queens, only the leading woman would be allowed such intimate physical contact: strict protocol dictated even the most unappealing of tasks.

This was the stage when, in the extremities of pain, women made oaths of allegiance and promises to undertake pilgrimage and dedicate their children to God. The realities of medieval and Tudor childbirth were learned through experience, passed down



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through generations of female oral traditions; Elizabeth's mother and mother-in-law would have been invaluable to her during her confinements. Few descriptions of childbirth have survived in public or private texts. Hardly any pre-Reformation letters and diaries detail the event from a female perspective and published accounts tend to be either literary or medical. It might be assumed that those involved were too busy to prioritise writing the process down, even if they had been able to. The rare female memoirs that survive have usually been preserved by families, particularly when portraying husbands and heirs in a positive light, some of whom edited diaries and memoirs in order to suppress critical voices: Pepys would not have been unique in tearing his wife's writings to pieces before her eyes for his unpleasant portrayal.⁵ Medical advice manuals were largely produced for a small, predominantly male readership. Midwives, either formal or informal, would have had little access to them; their collective body of information belonged firmly in the oral tradition, transmitted through inheritance and the female support networks that had their basis in domestic relations. By the time of her third pregnancy, Elizabeth and her women knew what they were doing.

The future Henry VIII was born at Greenwich, in the old manor house of Placentia, begun by Humphrey, Duke of Gloucester, and developed by Henry VI and Edward IV. As such, it was a smaller and less significant royal property, more of a country retreat than the symbolic locations chosen for the arrival of Arthur and Margaret. Within a few years, all that remained of Henry's birthplace would be completely demolished to make way for a grand new programme of building in the Burgundian style. Its positioning may have afforded the heavily pregnant queen a greater degree of privacy and quiet than she would have found at Westminster; apparently it was her favourite house. Assuming the physicians' calculations had been correct, Elizabeth would have taken to her chamber early in June, to await the birth at the end of that month. The usual mechanism of preparations would have ensured all was ready for her enclosure in her chamber, from the yards of cloth and hangings about her bed, to the tapestries on the walls, cradles, pallet bed, all in the richest colours and fabrics, as well as the indispensable reliquary. It was her first summer confinement; perhaps in the heat



she requested that the one uncovered window might be left open, so she could look out down to the river and watch the distant craft sailing past in the long days of waiting. Finally, on 28 June 1491, the ordeal came to an end; she was delivered of a sturdy, golden-haired son.

A child's safe arrival triggered the next phase in the frenzy of activity of the birth chamber. While Elizabeth lay back and rested, exhausted after her ordeal, the focus of her attendants shifted to the child, to secure its safety and establish the all-important gender and state of health. Superstition continued to govern this element of the procedure. While some gossips remained to comfort and congratulate the mother, it was the midwife's next job to cut the umbilical cord; a task of immense significance, as a child's navel was believed to hold the key to future fertility: if it was wrinkled, the mother would bear more babies, if smooth, her child-bearing days were over. The cord also had magical qualities of protection: some people carried a dried piece of it around as a charm to fend off witches, which was a very real fear for pregnant and labouring mothers, illustrated by a case of July 1582, when the Kent assizes found Elizabeth Johnson, a spinster of Kemsing, not guilty of having bewitched one Elizabeth Fremlynge so that she gave birth to a stillborn child. The caul and placenta were removed from the child and left to dry, thought to bring great fortune and an indicator of baby's future health, although as superstition became increasingly frowned upon, midwives were directed to bury them. As usual, the child's navel was dusted with powder of aloe and frankincense to speed recovery, while the midwife examined the new arrival carefully, checking his breathing and wiping his ears, eyes and nostrils. Cases of jaundice were treated with tree bark boiled in barley water or clarified whey. Then the little prince was washed gently in any of a number of substances; wine, milk, mallow, rue, sweet butter, myrrh, linseed and barley water, or rubbed with oil of acorns – supposedly another preventative measure against the perils of death before baptism – before being swaddled and laid in the cradle. Alternative methods of care included swathing them in roses ground up with salt to absorb moisture from their limbs and the mouth and gums cleansed with a finger dipped in honey. As she looked on the face of her sleeping newborn baby,



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Elizabeth cannot have predicted what the future would hold for him. As a second son, Prince Henry was the necessary ‘spare heir’, significant as a safeguard but not expected to rule. His arrival was celebrated but few records were made of the event. His birth was a comparatively quiet business: it is symbolic that Margaret Beaufort only briefly mentioned his arrival in her Book of Hours, writing over a correction, while his elder brother and sister’s exact time of arrival had been noted. He was baptised in the nearby church of the Friars Observant, which had been decorated for the purpose with tapestries, cypress linen, cloth of gold and damask, around a temporary wooden stage on which stood the Canterbury silver font. Wrapped in a mantle of cloth of gold trimmed with ermine, he was anointed and blessed by Richard Fox, the Bishop of Exeter. Soon, this tiny prince would be sent away to join his sister at her Eltham nursery where he would be brought up among women and quickly learned to ‘rule the roost’.

Between 1491 and 1501, Elizabeth bore four, possibly five, more children. She conceived again only three months after the birth of Henry and went into confinement shortly before his first birthday. While awaiting the delivery, she was brought news of the death of her own mother Elizabeth Wydeville, who for the first time had declined to assist her during labour. When a second daughter arrived on 2 July 1492, the queen named her Elizabeth. The little girl was the first of the royal children to die in infancy, taken by an ‘atrophy’ or wasting disease at the age of three, and was buried in Westminster Abbey. Regular, unpredictable infant mortality was a sad fact of Tudor deliveries and was no respecter of rank; in many families, rates of survival could be as low as 50 per cent, although some families suffered fewer losses. Those dying at birth or within a week were known as ‘chrisom children’, still wearing the white baptismal cloth, while those surviving the dangerous first months could still be prey to all manner of dangers. It is impossible to know, across time, exactly what factors contributed to specific deaths but undeniably traumatic deliveries, illness, poor hygiene, malnutrition, cot death, accidents and imperfect understanding of childcare were contributing factors. In spite of their grief, Henry and Elizabeth knew their daughter had been in receipt of the best available care. In addition, Elizabeth was three months pregnant



again. Princess Mary was born at Richmond on 18 March 1496.

Elizabeth's childbearing record and advancing age, by the standards of the time, may have affected her fertility. She did not conceive again for over two years. Perhaps the pilgrimage to Walsingham she undertook in the summer of 1497 was related to conception; it had certainly been a difficult period with the presence of the pretender Perkin Warbeck at court and the great fire that had razed Sheen Palace to the ground that Christmas. Payments made by Henry to Elizabeth's physician Master Lewis and her surgeon Robert Taylor in 1498 may have been related to a pregnancy or birth: certainly by May that year, she had fallen pregnant again. At the relatively advanced age, in Tudor terms, of thirty-three, she went into confinement for the sixth time at Greenwich in February 1499. Although this pregnancy went to term and the little prince Edmund was apparently healthy, something had caused concern in those attending the queen. The Spanish ambassador reported that there had been 'much fear for her life' but in the end, the delivery proved straightforward. Perhaps she had experienced a more difficult pregnancy or her age and general health provoked doubts: she had just passed her thirtieth birthday when she delivered Mary back in 1496 and those three extra years may have been considered significant. Possibly these fears combined with political and dynastic dangers: her confinement coincided with the culmination of years of threat from pretender to the throne Perkin Warbeck. In the event, however, the delivery proved comparatively easy and another male heir was welcomed and celebrated. Sadly though, the little prince died at fifteen months and was buried at Westminster: perhaps he was weak or underweight from the start, or Elizabeth's unrecorded complications during the pregnancy gave grounds for concern at the time. Alternatively he may have fallen prey to any one of the infantile illnesses of the age, unpredictable and often untreatable with contemporary medicine. His death may have coincided with the conception of the mysterious Edward, putting this child's delivery date somewhere in the summer of 1501; alternatively he predated his brother in birth and death, arriving in 1497 or 1498. Perhaps the very closeness of these pregnancies lay behind the concerns for the queen's health.



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In late 1501, Elizabeth witnessed the arrival of the Spanish infanta Catherine of Aragon, whose marriage with Prince Arthur, just turned fifteen, had been planned since their early years. The queen's eldest son had grown into a tall, slender, serious young man, much in the mould of his father; contemporary portraits show him thin-faced and delicate-looking with a certain tenderness about the eyes and mouth. His bride was to be the beautiful, auburn-haired daughter of King Ferdinand of Aragon and Isabella of Castile, an extraordinary pair of joint rulers renowned for their warlike nature and ruthless, separate control of their individual territories. Catherine had arrived that October in Plymouth after an apparently smooth and uneventful crossing: they were married almost six weeks later. London turned out in its finery to watch the event. According to the chronicler Hall, the bride was conducted to St Paul's through streets decked with beautiful pageants, wise devises and prudent speeches, with ballads and instruments making 'heavenly noyes'. The city officials lined up to welcome her, dressed in 'costly apparel both of goldsmythes work and embraudery, ryche iewelles, massy cheynes' upon horses with glittering trappings, hung with gold spangles and bells. She was led into the church by the already charismatic ten-year-old Henry, Prince of Wales. A 6-foot wooden platform had been erected inside, covered in fine red worsted, making a sort of stage above the heads of the crowd. Here, Elizabeth and Henry watched as their son was married, both bride and groom dressed – unusually – all in white and being 'both lusty and amorous'. This was followed by a four-course feast in the Bishop's Palace, using plates from four cupboards, with dancing and 'costly disguising', before the formal bedding ceremony of the couple at Baynard's Castle, much unchanged since Elizabeth's day, for what was to become the most controversial wedding night in Tudor history.

One issue would later come to dominate Catherine of Aragon's life. The question of what the two teenagers did in bed over the course of the next four and a half months would irrevocably determine the course of British history and the development of the Church of England. It is, by now, a familiar question; perhaps the overriding question of the dynasty, dividing man and wife, parents and children, monarch and subject, and





Elizabeth of York & the Future Henry VIII, 1487–1503

continuing to divide historical interpretation to the present day. So, during their short-lived marriage, did Catherine and Arthur sleep together? Did they consummate their union in the full sense, or was it, as Catherine was to later insist, a slow, cautious, innocent connection between two children who had no reason not to believe they had time on their sides? Did their failure to connect on their wedding night preclude any subsequent relations? Catherine later claimed they shared a bed on seven occasions but that full consummation had not taken place. Her waiting women and Arthur's gentlemen were divided on the issue; some even suggested that the force of their sexual passion had weakened the frail young man, paralleling the accusations levelled at the death of Catherine's brother Juan and his supposedly 'over-passionate' wife Margaret, in 1497. Their ceremonial bedding was public enough, with Arthur cheered along by his fellows, with dancing, pleasure and mirth, as well as trumpets sounding, as their friends witnessed the young groom climb into bed beside his wife and receive the blessing of a priest, that they should be protected from 'phantasies and illusions of devils'. After that, only Arthur and Catherine knew exactly what had passed between them. Hall's chronicle would later insist that 'this lusty prince and his beautiful bride were brought and joined together in one bed naked and there did that act, which to the performance and full consummation of matrimony was most requisite and expedient' but he was three at the time of the wedding and writing in the early 1540s, when it was expedient to believe in the union's success. Later, when the matter became of national importance, the expressions and testimonies of servants would become crucial and the events of that November night and following morning would be analysed and debated. In the autumn of 1501, however, there was no foreshadowing of the immense consequences of the teenager's courtship, and the series of jousts, pageants and feasts continued unabated. The king and queen watched their newly wedded son and his bride enjoying tournaments on the newly sanded tilt yard by the river and lavish Burgundian-style disguisings in Westminster Hall. Ironically, one of these pageants included eight 'goodly' knights overcoming the resistance of eight 'goodly and fresh' ladies, who yielded to the





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forces of love. The subtext for Arthur and Catherine couldn't have been clearer.

However, tragedy awaited the newly-weds. Barely six months later, terrible news reached Elizabeth and Henry in London. After the wedding ceremonies, the young couple had departed for Ludlow, where they had settled into the imposing defensive borders castle. The location was remote and the weather extreme, exacerbating the damp and dirt: a local outbreak of the sweating sickness took hold in the late spring, a painful disease that would dispatch most sufferers within days. Both Arthur and Catherine fell ill. While she survived, he succumbed on 2 April 1502 and the sixteen-year-old Spaniard became a widow after only four and a half months of marriage. The sweat may have been to blame, or else the tuberculosis assumed by nineteenth-century historians. The official record of his funeral related that a long-term disease may have been the underlying cause: 'a pitiful disease and sickness' of 'deadly corruption did utterly vanquish and overcome the (healthy) blood'. It is possible that this was testicular tuberculosis, which can cause increased libido but dampen performance, which may provide answers to the lingering questions of Arthur's marriage and death. The London messengers were afraid to break the news to the king, delaying until the following morning. Devastated by their loss, the king and queen consoled each other as best they could, with Elizabeth telling Henry they still had a 'fair, goodly' son and were young enough to have more children. This was no idle promise. Within weeks, she had conceived again.

The fears that had surfaced during Elizabeth's previous pregnancy were ominous for the advent of her final child in the winter of 1503. That July at Woodstock, she had been unwell and in September her apothecary was paid for delivering 'certain stuff' for the use of the queen. The fact that she had conceived so quickly after consoling Henry with the idea of a new child, suggests she was still fertile but that the couple may have previously decided to limit their family due to her ill health. As she prepared for her confinement, two nurses visited her in November, the start of her final trimester, which may have been routine but may equally have indicated that something was amiss. On the fourteenth, a Mistress Harcourt saw her at Westminster and twelve days later



she was attended by a French woman at Baynard's Castle. New bedding and curtains were ordered, accounts for the delivery of bed linen were settled and the girdle of Our Lady of Westminster was delivered mid-December. Right up until the end, Elizabeth was on the move. At the end of January, she travelled from Richmond to the Tower of London where she gave birth to a daughter a week later. This was in itself unusual: previous retirements to her chamber had occurred three or more weeks before labour began, allowing for misdiagnosis, preparation and the long hours of 'travail'. Elizabeth had barely settled herself into her Tower lodgings before she was seized by violent contractions and she gave birth to a daughter, Catherine, on Candlemas day, 2 February 1503. Perhaps the child was born prematurely or else the date had been miscalculated: contemporaries recorded that she had intended to lie-in at Richmond and was delivered 'suddenly', which must have been a surprise after her previous pregnancies. Soon after the birth it became apparent that Elizabeth was seriously ill; possibly puerperal fever had set in or heavy bleeding; perhaps she had sustained an injury during the delivery. A messenger was sent into Kent to try and locate a Dr Aylsworth or Hallysworth but nine days later the queen was dead.

Most Tudor mothers did not die during childbirth. Surprisingly, the odds of survival were fairly good, providing there were no complications. Roger Schofield⁶ estimates the likelihood of maternal mortality at 1 per cent per pregnancy and between 6 and 7 per cent across a woman's childbearing years, giving them a similar chance of dying of non-birth-related causes. Another case study, of sixteenth-century Aldgate, suggests the figure was more like 2.35 per cent,⁷ as crowded and insanitary as urban areas undoubtedly were. Then, as now, complications arose that were met with varying degrees of response according to the skill and experience of the age. Difficult deliveries and breech births, without preventative action being taken, could lead to maternal and infant death. One 1513 work contained images of sixteen unnatural birth presentations and advice to the midwife to oil her hands, apply butter to the cervix and try to turn the baby, using all her 'diligence and pain'. If this state continued, brute force was needed to expel a reluctant foetus. There were no forceps during



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this time, being invented by the Chamberlain family in the late Elizabethan period but not made public until over a century later. One or two famous contemporary cases of Caesareans were carried out in Europe but these were not used in England and certainly not on a live mother; maternal death inevitably ensued and live children were cut from dead mothers using damaging metal hooks. In the event of failure, religious help was sought. One miracle of St Thomas of Canterbury recorded how an infant arrived arm first; the midwives pushed it back, hoping the child would turn, whereupon it began to swell. The normal procedure would be to then cut off the arm in order to save the mother but prayers were offered and saintly intervention supposedly resulted in a successful birth. In many cases though, practical interference, contemporary wisdom and prayer were not enough. The more babies a mother bore, the greater her risk of death and resulting illness, with the increased physical toll on her body and advancing age. For some, birth complications made their very first pregnancy fatal while others bore in excess of ten children and survived into comparative old age. Significantly more women did die young though, of illnesses resulting from delivery, poor hygiene and contemporary lack of anatomical understanding. Pregnant Elizabethan women in particular, had their portraits painted in case their forthcoming confinement was to end in tragedy.

The interval between Elizabeth's delivery and death suggests the birth itself was a success but that a subsequent fever took hold or internal damage later caused a haemorrhage. Status, wealth, provision, duty, love, attention and experience were still not sufficient to save the queen's life; it proved that bearing a child involved as great a risk for royalty as for her female subjects. In addition to the dynastic importance of Elizabeth's life, the intimate association of Catholic ritual, prayer and famous relics during her confinements transcended the bodily event of her deliveries, advocating a personal relationship with the saints. Claspings the holy girdle, with her chest of relics and the Canterbury font on hand to christen England's heir, it must have seemed to those around that higher authorities were blessing and witnessing the union and its offspring. It was also significant for the superstitious Tudors that she had given birth at Candlemas, the day of the



Virgin's purification, suggestive of the queen's eternal rebirth and spotless purity. Elizabeth was the metaphoric and literal mother of the nation, bearer of heirs: in popular memory, she would be elevated to a saintly maternal figure, devoted to her religion and her family.

The semi-deification of Elizabeth began at once, with the wail of church bells across the nation and the iconography of her funeral. Colour and light were carefully deployed to intensify her saintly sacrifice. Dramatic white banners were lain across the corners of her coffin, signifying the manner of her death, while the main body of it was draped with black velvet surmounted by a cross of white cloth of gold: two sets of thirty-seven virgins in white linen and Tudor wreaths of white and green lined her route to Westminster, carrying lighted candles, and the torchbearers wore white woollen hooded gowns. More than a thousand lights burned on the hearse and the vaults and cross of the cathedral were draped in black and lit by 273 large tapers. The coffin was spectacularly topped by a wax effigy of the queen, dressed in robes of estate, her hair loose under a rich crown, a sceptre in her hand and fingers adorned with fine rings. Icons of the Virgin at shrines across the country hardly deviated from this description. Before burial, the effigy, with its crown and rich robes, was removed and stored in secrecy at the shrine of Edward the Confessor; so this lifelike, regal image of the queen was absorbed into a collection of holy relics and icons, interchangeable with the symbolic objects that assisted her during childbirth. Part of the effigy still exists in the museum at Westminster Abbey, its face, neck and chest painted white, its features regular and serene, unsmiling but beneficent. Elizabeth's adult life had been devoted to producing the future heirs of the Tudor dynasty. Her children would reign in England, Scotland and France yet she had paid the ultimate price for serving her king and country. *The Monument of Matrons*, published during the reign of Elizabeth's namesake and granddaughter, included a prayer for a mother who had not survived childbirth, thanking God for delivering 'this woman our sister, out of the woeful miseries of this sinful world'.⁸

A seventeenth-century ballad recorded Elizabeth's loss and Henry's inconsolable grief:



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The Queen that fair and Princely Dame
That mother meek and mild
To add more Number to her Joy
Again grew big with Child:

All which brought comfort to the King
Against which careful Hour
He lodg'd his dear kind hearted Queen
In London's stately Tower.

That Tower that was so fatal once
To Princes of Degree
Proved fatal to this noble Queen
For therein died She.

In child-bed lost she her sweet Life;
Her life esteemed so dear
Which had been England's loving Queen
Full many a happy year.

The King herewith possess'd with Grief
Spent many Months in Moan
And daily sigh'd and said that he
Like her could find out none:

Nor none could he in Fancy chuse,
To make his Wedded Wife
Wherefore a Widower would remain,
The Remnant of his Life.⁹

The anonymous seventeenth-century pamphleteer was only partly correct. There is no doubt that in the spring of 1503 Henry VII was prostrate with grief. He contained his sorrow long enough to organise his wife's funeral before withdrawing from the public eye. It was not contemporary practice for husbands and wives to be present at their spouse's interment. The loss of Arthur, compounded by the deaths of Elizabeth and their newborn daughter, represented a terrible blow for a still relatively young man. However, within



two months, the State Papers of Spain record that he was already entering into negotiations to find another wife. Rapid remarriage was not uncommon at the time, even when unions had been affectionate and companionate; and particularly when they had not been. Parish records list burials followed only a few months later by remarriage among Henry's subjects. A king needed a consort and a court needed a female head. His contemporaries would not have thought of him as callous; husbands often found new wives with what seems like indecent haste to the twenty-first-century eye but this should come as no surprise: for Tudor men and women, marriage was a safeguard against sin in the eyes of the Church, a comfort and support as well as demarcating social standing and advancement. The romantic notion of a lifelong union was rare and many marriages were contracted between widows and widowers: it was more a realistic reflection of the fragility and brevity of life and the need for comfort. Initially, Henry's immediate family and fellow monarchs would have been sympathetic. Then, they heard his choice of bride.

As early as April 1503, news had reached Spain of a projected match between the king and his widowed daughter-in-law Catherine of Aragon. Arthur's early death had left her in a difficult situation politically and financially, but more awkward still were the wranglings between the two countries over the long-overdue payment of her dowry. There had already been talk of a match between Catherine and Prince Henry, the new heir, when he came of age. The thought of the seventeen-year-old girl being wedded to her forty-six-year-old father-in-law appalled Catherine's mother, Isabella of Castile, who described it as 'a very evil thing; one never before seen ... which offends the ears' and urged Henry to send her daughter home. But did Henry really intend to marry his son's teenage widow? The lines of diplomatic communication were notoriously unreliable and subject to rumour and misinterpretation; the supposed match may have had more to do with Henry's hopes to extract the protracted Spanish dowry or answer the difficult questions of provision for Catherine than actual desire or intention. Being obliged to maintain Catherine's household and wait until the twelve-year-old future Henry VIII came of an age to allow them to wed may have seemed too protracted and restrictive for the king.



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Marriage to Catherine would have solved his immediate problem while opening up further potential foreign alliances for his son.

Her mother did not see it that way. Resolute and warlike, Isabella could not easily be put off. Instead, she offered her niece, Queen Joan of Naples, as a more suitable candidate. Born in 1479, Joan had been married to her own nephew and widowed young, at seventeen in 1496: her comparative youth and family connections made her a suitable match for Henry and she was still young enough to have borne him more children. With only one son remaining out of four, he had learned the imperative of having the proverbial 'spare heir'. By October 1504, Spanish ambassador de Puebla wrote to report that he had spoken at length to the king about the match, who had expressed great 'pleasure' at the thought of it and was questioning him as to the lady's beauty and personal attributes. The following June, he sent ambassadors to Naples, whose detailed report back gives a good indication of the physical attributes Henry required in a new bride. In response to a series of his questions, the king learned that she was aged around twenty-seven, her 'unpainted' face was 'amiable, round and fat', cheerful and demure, her skin clear and complexion fair and clean. Her teeth were fair and clean, with lips 'somewhat rounded' and hair that appeared brown under her headdress. It was difficult to discern her exact height as she wore slippers and her figure was hidden under a great mantle. Her arms were round and 'not very small', hands 'somewhat full and soft', fingers fair and small, of a 'meetly' length and breadth, her neck 'comely and not-misshapen'; there was no discernible hair on her lips and her breasts were 'great and full and trussed somewhat high'. She was recorded to be a good 'feeder', eating meat twice a day and drinking cinnamon water and hippocras wine. These descriptions were apparently pleasing to Henry on a personal level, as by that July, rumours had reached Spain of a potential marriage treaty.¹⁰

However, by March 1506, Henry was entering into negotiations for the hand of another woman. The Archduchess Margaret of Savoy was recently widowed and very rich. It would have been a powerful union for England, although the use of a rival may have been intended to hurry the Spaniards into an alliance. Political and financial obstacles may also have been to blame. Born in 1480,



Margaret was named after her step-grandmother Margaret of York, sister to Edward IV and Richard III; she was also the sister of Philip ‘the Handsome’ of Austria, the brother-in-law of Catherine of Aragon through his marriage to her sister Juana, and had been briefly married to Catherine’s brother Juan. After his death she delivered a stillborn child, and a second, short-lived marriage had been childless, after which she had vowed to remain single and was known at the Savoyard court as ‘lady of mourning’. Luckily or unluckily for Henry, Margaret refused him and he returned to consider another Hapsburg alliance.

By 1506, Catherine of Aragon’s sister Juana had attracted the nickname ‘the mad’. She was beautiful but considered deeply unstable. Her almost obsessive love for her husband Philip the Handsome was complicated by his infidelity and coldness: her maladies were more likely attributable to depression and neuroses. She was imprisoned and manipulated by him, suffered continual attempts to undermine her and eventually lived apart from him. Juana and Philip had been forced by bad weather to land on the English coast in 1505, where they had been royally entertained by Henry VII and reunited with Catherine. Philip’s sudden death in September 1506, of typhoid fever, put Juana back on the marriage market, although potential suitors may have been put off by her refusal to let him be buried and have his body removed from her presence. At this time though, she was five months pregnant with her sixth child. Unsurprisingly, these negotiations also came to nothing.

Henry VII did not remarry. It is difficult to know, at this distance, just how sincere his marital attempts were; whether they were driven by personal factors or simply another facet of the complicated game of European politics, or both. It would be misleadingly anachronistic to separate these motives and see his attempts at wooing as anything less than his royal duty. If he was looking for comfort, he might have found a willing wife closer to home, among his own nobility; dynastically, the pool of available women failed to provide him with a successful candidate. Perhaps it was the very geographical and political distance between him and these potential brides that made them attractive; the king was the ultimate prize in the delicate game of foreign alliances



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and to commit himself may have risked alienating other potential unions. He was spoiled for choice, so long as his marriage remained theoretical. There is no doubt about the genuine grief he exhibited at the loss of his wife, retreating ‘to a solitary place to pass his sorrow’ and seeing no one except ‘those appointed’. Ill health increasingly plagued him during the last years of his life, as he resigned himself to his losses. His heir was the now teenage future Henry VIII, already a charismatic and confident boy, who would soon need a wife of his own.

