

4. Catherine: The Faithful Queen Dowager

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Abstract:

Most of the young aristocratic women during the Renaissance had no say in who they were to marry. If they were Queens, or holding influential positions of power of any higher kind, they could pick and choose between bridegrooms. In Lucrezia Borgia's case, her arranged marriage to the Lord of Val d'Ayora was annulled less than two months later. Today, one would say that there were "irreconcilable differences". That was, however, a very rare case. Her father was Pope Alexander VI.

Catherine Stenbock's father was not a pope. He was, nevertheless, a nobleman and belonged to one of the most influential families in Sweden. When King Gustav Vasa proclaimed having chosen Catherine as his new Queen, the young girl had no other choice than to accept his offer. It wasn't that she didn't fight or try to run and hide.

She did hide. Where? Behind a bush.

Eventually, she had to come out and her father could again smile. His daughter would become the most powerful woman in the country.

The real achievement was the grace, dignity, intelligence and nobility with which Catherine handled the situation. She silenced the sceptics by becoming a faithful and hardworking Queen and a regal personality.

Working as a trilingual tour guide at Kalmar Castle during the 1990's, I came across stories about this woman on many occasions. This paper is the result of two decades of research: I present to you now Sweden's most dignified and faithful Queen Dowager: Catherine Stenbock.

Keywords: Swedish history, Renaissance women, Arranged marriages, 16th century royalty.

Full Text:

The daughter of Gustaf Olofsson Stenbock and Brita Eriksdotter Leijonhufvud was like so many other 16th century aristocratic girls. She fell victim to the political willpower of her influential parents. Catherine being the niece of Gustav Vasa's last wife was a sin in the eyes of the newly founded protestant Swedish Church. This was incest.

At least according to the church.

To the Vasa and Stenbock families, it was a triumph that only strengthened the long standing positive relations between the families. Catherine had all the personal characteristics of a Queen. She was young, pretty, of representative origin and could function as a strong and fertile mother of heirs to the throne.

The only problem was that she was the last to know about the nuptial plans.

During the Renaissance, royal wedlock had very little to do with love. At times love did grow out of a regal relation. There were times when love was the catalyst. But there was always politics involved.

In 1552, 56-year old Gustav Vasa had been King of Sweden for almost three decades. He was an aristocratic self-made man that had transformed and saved Swedish society from Danish occupation. He was an icon.

When he came to ask for Catherine Stenbock's hand in marriage, the 16-year old girl ran away from him and hid behind a bush. She was already engaged to be married to a boy, also named Gustav, but the engagement was broken off so that the king could have his chosen Queen. It can be assumed that King Gustav Vasa had held multiple conferences with his government courtiers, discussing which woman to choose as a bride. German noblewomen were suggested as brides during these late-night meetings, spruced up with German Beer and Swedish salty meat and perhaps even a delicious custard tart. While listening to an estampie in C on a quill-plucked lute or an aulos or a rebec, Vasa's closest courtiers mapped out plans to get the king a suitable counterpart.

Vasa was still not keen on marrying a German woman after his stormy relationship with his first wife, Catherine of Sachsen-Lauenburg. The king had just as many continental connections as his children would have one day. His son Erik XIV would later, in vain, try to entice the Queen of England into marriage. It is then

easy to assume how long the list of possible wives must have been: Finnish and Russian, French and perhaps even Spanish wives must have been a topic of discussion.

Catherine Stenbock remained the top candidate: her parents were old family friends, her relatives had already provided the crown with a wife, Catherine's aunt Margareta Leijonhufvud. Catherine Stenbock was young and, above all, she was Swedish. After all, the problematic Kalmar-Union that had been founded 1397, as an aim to unify the Scandinavian countries, had ended in a Danish occupation and an ultimate fiasco.

Vasa was not going to let any foreigner tell him what to do again.

The church and the clergy were not amused. Swedish or not, you cannot marry family. Those were their exact words. Vasa, true to fashion and much like England's Henry VIII, insisted on the liaison and got his way. He had never cared what the church recommended or felt and wasn't about to care about them on this.

Back in the 1520's, he had forcibly obtained precious treasures from the churches of Sweden, melted them down and handed over the remains to his German allies in order to pay back his war debts. When the community of Vadstena refused to hand over their churchbell, he travelled there himself and convinced them to hand it over. He used the power of his loud and deep voice and the strength of his army's swords. He won.

Yes, Vasa had helped found the Swedish Protestant Church. Yes, it was his initiative to promote the translation of the first Swedish Bible in 1541. But it was most certainly only a means to end: promoting his dynasty, promoting Sweden and promoting his own crown.

He only acted according to his own custom.

The 40 year age difference between Gustav and Catherine was a problem, at least in the beginning of their relationship. Catherine had an image to fulfill. After all, the third wife of Swedish King Gustav Eriksson Vasa had two very tough acts to follow. Catherine Stenbock might also have been too young to fill these oversized shoes. That, at least, was what many courtiers feared.

Gustav had made this mistake before.

The king's first wife, Catherine of Sachsen-Lauenburg, had been the daughter of protestant German aristocracy and chosen in order to strengthen the Swedish political relations with Denmark and Germany. It quickly becomes clear how political a marriage this was when one examines the family relations of the bride. Catherine's sister Dorothea was married to Danish king Christian III. This was a decade after the brutal Danish occupation of 1520, when Vasa's chief antagonist Christian II killed almost a hundred aristocrats and left a mark on Swedish history that we today know as "The Stockholm Massacre". Vasa was trying his best to get back at the Danes by turning their own family against them.

Although the marriage itself was everything but a success – it had been violent, silent and spiteful – her only son Erik XIV turned into one of Sweden's most culturally gifted noblemen. Not only was he an excellent painter, he also played several instruments, spoke several languages and eventually turned into an renowned sportsman. This knowledgeable personality naturally gave him a haughty air and a regal attitude. So haughty, in fact, that it inspired him to create a family tree that traced his own lineage back to Adam and Eve.

Be that as it may, the folly was founded on a certain status that Catherine of Sachsen-Lauenburg had acquired, in his mind, over the years. This all came from being the only child of his father's first wife and a half-brother to 10 other children, all of them with Vasa's second wife as a mother. This fact had always made him a recluse, a bit of a family outsider. His mother's violent temper had also conjured up rumors, spread by Gustav's enemies, about his father Gustav killing her with a silver hammer on the top of a walking cane.

This was later disproved. 20th century archeologists, hired by Catherine of Sachsen-Lauenburg's family, opened the woman's grave inside the Dome of Uppsala and found her skull intact. However, the fact remains that Erik tried to save his mother's memory by creating an even more impressive family tree for his coronation in 1561. Erik hoped that this would overshadow all the other stories that turned Catherine of Sachsen-Lauenburg into a beast.

"I am better than you," he seemed to say. "My mother was more special than the mother of my half-siblings."

Erik's wounded pride about this never ended. Catherine Stenbock often acted as a mediator between Erik and his brother Johan.

During her brother-in-law Christian III's visit to Sweden, Catherine of Sachsen-Lauenburg accused Gustav of planning to murder her, something that seemed to point to the truth of all those rumors. She fell during a castle ball while dancing with the Danish king. This fall caused her to have a miscarriage. She died in the complications surrounding this crisis one day before her 22nd birthday and was eventually buried in the Dome of Uppsala, where she lies to this day.

If King Gustav was in part responsible for his first wife's death is, of course, open for discussion. Evident, however, is that his next marriage made it clear to him how wonderful it could be to be married to a Swedish noblewoman.

Catherine of Sachsen-Lauenburg's successor, the king's second wife Margareta Leijonhufvud, a woman whose name means Lion's Head, belonged to one of the most powerful noble families in Swedish society. Among the ten children she had given birth to, two became Swedish kings and at least one of them married into prominent European nobility.

Margareta became popular with the court and became a popular personality. She subsequently also became a great negotiator and was also one of the few who managed to control King Gustav Vasa's violently aggressive temper, something that had gotten him into great trouble in the past.

He had executed people for not obeying him. An angry letter from Gustav meant trouble, at least to the person receiving the mail. Gustav had many palatial caretakers of whom he demanded the utmost efficiency. He loved to have his say in most of the country's affairs. One caretaker was so slow in his response to the king's inquiries that the king wrote him a letter, asking him if an old witch had pricked the man's mouth shut with a needle and tied his hands together. Apparently, Margareta could control that wrath. One can just imagine the heated conversations erupting at the royal dinner table.

When Margareta Leijonhufvud died of pneumonia on Monday, the 26th of August, 1551, fifteen years after the wedding ceremonies, she left a gap in the hearts of her friends and loyal subjects. Five days after her death there was a solar eclipse and the court remembered her last words as they gazed up at the darkened sky. She

had excused herself for not having been worthy of her position and pleaded for the family to try and get along in spite of their differences. She left her carnal existence with phrases of a regal gratitude to the country.

Margareta's popular position and her ability to soften the king's ill will gave Catherine Stenbock a great deal to live up to. A 56 year- old man with so many ailments, leg troubles and massively chronic tooth pains would maybe think of marrying a woman young and strong enough to outlive him and take care of him. Maybe he enjoyed the company of young women, but no one asked Catherine Stenbock what she felt.

The wedding and subsequent coronation took place in Vadstena and lasted three days, beginning on Saturday, the 22nd of August and ending Monday, the 24th of August, 1552. This weekend of festivities is unique, because it is the first Swedish wedding feast to be completely chronicled from beginning to end. The historical documents can be studied at the Swedish royal archive in Stockholm.

On Saturday, the new Queen was introduced with orchestral fanfares, there was a banquet, wine and there was dancing. According to historian Lena Rangström, Catherine was prepared and clothed in a silver white gown with red and golden attributes on Sunday. Her jewels had been inscribed with the letter "G". Naturally, Gustav wore matching clothing.

It must have been quite a sight: Gustav's six feet long frame, his demanding gaze, sharp nose and long beard perfectly blending in with his silver white jacket, striding up toward the altar next to his young and beautiful bride. Their faces lit by torches, they were soothed by the original compositions played by drums and trumpets.

The beauty of the occasion was ceremonial in character. That included the wedding night. Catherine was a virgin and Gustav created his own rituals to erase that virginity. The virgin Catherine was escorted to her marital bed, offered wine and candy and sung to before being left alone with the king. The bridal ritual of a three day long female sexual abstinency was not obeyed. The tradition of having a rooster accompany the royal couple during these initial nights of celibacy, just to honor the religious quest for sexual withdrawal, was exchanged for simply eating one at the afternoon banquet and getting on with the lovemaking a little sooner.

Maybe the king was too eager to consume his relations. Maybe he felt unusually joyous in marrying a woman that had turned 17 only a few days earlier.

The king was, however, not as potent and healthy as he had initially thought to be. As the years passed, Gustav's health dwindled. Events that were seen as evil omens gave the royal courtiers a cause to worry: a plague swept through the country, parts of Vadstena and the city of Turku burned down after the coronation and people thought they saw evil signs appearing in the sky. The royal couple was mismatched and had very little in common. Aristocrats all over the country were sure the marriage would not last.

Catherine proved them all wrong.

What saved the marriage was Catherine's poise, her good behavior, her kindness and how she handled her fate. Catherine Stenbock became that royal and nuptial nurse Gustav actually rewarded in the end by becoming calm and collected. Catherine was peaceful, she became worthy of her stature, resilient – although, at first, reluctant.

Almost three months after the nuptial feast in the ravaged Vadstena, Vasa ordered a honeymoon to take place in his favorite castle in Kalmar, one of his sixteen exquisitely renovated Vasa-palaces. A logical choice. After all, he had named the castle "the key to my kingdom." This stronghold against the sworn Danish enemies on the other side of the border, at the time only twenty-five miles away from Kalmar, was Gustav's pride and joy. He hoped that the honeymoon would strengthen the relationship with a necessary foundation.

Queen Catherine could only obey her master and act according to her position. Her initial fear of Gustav couldn't overshadow her sense of purpose. She had proven the omens wrong. The young girl impressed everyone with her sense of duty.

In November of 1552, Catherine and Gustav arrived at the castle with 365 courtiers, preparing to wallow in culinary wealth for a course of three months.

Catherine also prepared to enjoy Kalmar during those months, engage in light conversation, make a political decision or two, behave how she thought a Queen should behave and learn something about Kalmar in the process. She knew that "he

who wants to invade the kingdom from the Baltic Sea or the South must take Kalmar first.”

After all, Kalmar Castle’s fate was to be invaded twenty-two times, protected successfully by its 287 cannons. She could indeed feel protected within its walls.

Renovations of the king’s castle had been going on for three decades and would continue throughout the coming century. So it could come to be that architects and builders were included as part of the festivities, just like in the festive Vadstena. Next to fireplaces filled with burning logs – to the sounds of estampies and saltarellos played by old instruments such as quill plucked lute, rebec, and aulos – Queen Catherine dined on sumptuous foods in what today still remains Scandinavia’s most well kept Renaissance palace.

The initial Saffron Broth (egg yolks, saffron, cinnamon and chicken broth) and Zanzarella (mozzarella, bread, eggs and Saffron Broth) prepared the guests for their dishes of beef, pork, poultry, fish, eel, chopped liver, carp and dishes of spinach tart. Wine, mead and beer were constantly shipped in from the continent. All the while, the aristocrats laughed along with the ensemble playing the saltarellos in the corner. Queen Catherine had the joy of finishing off her daily gastronomical tour of two dozen courses with Gingerbread, Cheese and Flour Cake, Custurd Tarte and a Dafair Sourdough Saffron Cake with a honey, lavender, cinnamon and pepper sauce.

There was a total consumed intake of 228,000 litres (60,231 gallons) of beer between all of them. Germany may have lost its political ally in Swedish royal significance, but the country had maintained its financial position as trading partner and exporters of good ale and mead. The 16th century Kalmar beer, by contrast, was labelled as “undrinkable.”

Lucky for Germany.

The inventory list of slaughtered live stock kept the kitchen working day and night. The festivity cooking list looks like the annual report of a major franchise. Adding it all up, two thousand animals were served on the palatial banquet tables; beef, lamb, chicken, rabbit, peacock, swan and pork, not counting the half thousand barrels of fish. All of this was spiced and peppered and salted and brought to the royal tables by a hard working assembly of thirty servants and cooks.

No efforts were spared in providing the entourage with good entertainment and spectacular gastronomy during Gustav's and Catherine's honeymoon festivities. It is quite probable that more guests arrived to join the assembled during their three month long honeymoon. There were allies and friends, political collaborators and nuptial candidates arriving. Taking that into consideration, there must've been around a thousand people criss-crossing the palatial island during those cold months of 1552-53.

The winter months must've been cold, to say the least, with only clothing and fire as heating utilities. The guests, Catherine included, probably wore several layers of fabric to warm up their bodies in that 50°F chill, in spite of walls that were at least six feet thick and green lead glass windows overlooking the whitewalled courtyard with its snowy cobblestone ground.

A chosen group of local ordinary citizens arrived from time to time to watch the royals eat. Catherine didn't much like the fact that some of the noblemen threw food at the peasants; or that they tickled their own tongues with feathers just so they could empty their bellies in order to eat more. The emptied contents of those noble bellies were served to pigs, who were slaughtered and served on royal tables. Today, we call that recycling.

This introduction to royal gluttony only accentuated the young girl's opinions of the importance of behaving in a sympathetic and regal manner, staying away from abusive and useless celebrating. There are no indications anywhere of a Queen who at all partook in festive gluttony. That is a clear indication of a noble and regal attitude. She maintained a regal and polite manner throughout her reign.

She became Queen Catherine.

During her rather quiet eight years and thirty days of royal reign, Catherine's endurance became respected, especially since everyone knew how mismatched a royal couple they were. Catherine often talked in her sleep about her former fiancé, Gustav Johansson "Tre Rosor" ("Three Roses"), unable conceal her suffering:

"King Gustav is very dear to me, but I shall never forget the rose."

This suffering must've had an effect on King Gustav. He knew that becoming Queen of Sweden meant that she couldn't have the love of her life back. Gustav

implemented a law that proclaimed that married couples should be more or less the same age.

Maybe she understood that Gustav was sorry he couldn't be the dashing young man she deserved to have as a husband. She answered his unspoken affection by taking care of him. The last years of their marriage became endearing.

On several occasions, there were signs of pregnancies, but no official announcement was ever made or confirmed. In 1555, she spent a longer time in Finland away from her husband, but returned to the king in good health.

Her good relationship with her stepchildren put her in regal standing with the king, even though two or three were her own age and some were older. When one of the children, the wild child Cecilia Vasa, got into deep trouble with an adulterous count during a party in Vadstena in 1559, Catherine became one of those responsible people who succeeded in negotiating the matter and bringing it to a close.

She could not have been more different than Gustav's first and very temperamental wife, Catherine of Sachsen-Lauenburg, who had been her own age during their unhappy marriage. Queen Catherine matured as a regal leader in a way that impressed even her enemies.

During King Gustav's last days, as he lay sick and tired and aching in his bed, she sat by his side, waiting day and night for a positive sign of betterment. Her willingness to sacrifice her own peace of mind made her sick, as well. Finally, she asked her courtiers to bring her a bed and position it next to her husband, so that she could lie next to him until his final hour came on Sunday, the 29th of September, 1560.

Before his last moments, he summoned his chancellors and his children and asked them to remain united. This was especially important to the king. After all, he had driven out the Danish occupants back in 1521 and literally created this new strong country out of the bloody ruins and ashes of a difficult war.

After the king's death, Queen Catherine became "The Queen Dowager of the Realm". This Swedish premiere title was one she kept for her sixty-one remaining years of mourning. She always wore black, she never remarried and she probably always remembered her first fiancé, "The Three Roses."

Catherine became a mature woman, one whose representative assignments included opening festivities and acting a political mediator in nuptial negotiations. Her prominent place as Queen Dowager, guesting at balls and hosting gatherings, included walking first in line in processions and attending festivities. She became a respected public personality.

One of the few unfortunate battles she became involved in concerned the escalation of events between her late husband's sons during the late 16th century. Duke Karl, later King Karl IX, denied her the right to live in her own mansion. Apparently, her homestead lay on his grounds. The Arch-Protestant father of Gustavus II Adolphus pulled her into the middle of a religious feud between himself and his Catholic nephew Sigismund, accusing her of taking Sigismund's side.

The situation was resolved by Karl's brother, King Johan III. Luckily, Catherine managed to pull out as mediator before Karl invaded Kalmar and executed several of Sigismund's courtiers, throwing Sigismund out of the country and crowning himself king.

Surviving many of Gustav's sons by a large number of years, her perseverance gave her the winning card. Devoting much of her time to charity, she gained a great deal of respect as a spokeswoman for the destitute. So much so that when she died in Strömsholm at age 86 on December 13th, 1621, it was said of her that "the poor have lost a friend and the orphans their mother."

She was buried alongside her husband in Uppsala Cathedral, without a monument of her own. Her real monument, however, is the memory of the position she upheld and the respect she gained as an honest, intelligent, soft-spoken and sympathetic Queen Dowager.

Catherine's greatest legacy was taking the unfortunate initial circumstances of her marriage and turning them into something quite extraordinary. Her attitude was so exemplary, in fact, that people still talk about her four hundred years after her death. Not bad for a teenager, who hid behind a bush when her royal husband came to ask of her hand in marriage.

Facing a court of cynical aristocrats must've been difficult. The fact that her contemporaries only speak of her well is also an indication that she handled all of their insults well. Gustav's older children most probably had to swallow a bit of their

pride themselves, realizing that their stepmother was younger than themselves. The fact that no one speaks badly of her is a sign of Catherine being a royal soul, not only in position or stature, but in attitude and regal splendour.

Brought up to follow religious traditions and rituals, it must've been a challenge not to speak up against the very clear accusations of incest that signified her initial marriage to Gustav. In modern terms, there is no harm in the fact that her husband's previous wife was her aunt. Gustav was quoted in saying that "it is only incest because you refer to the Old Testament's rules of marriage, but they are only applicable for followers of the Jewish faith."

The intertwining of these two bloodlines exists to this day. A lady friend of mine from south Sweden can show off her decendance to two prominent Swedish Queens. Catherine is a part of Swedish history and could act as a role model for future heads of state. We should all be more like her.

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