

JOANNA (JOAN) OF NAVARRE (1368-1437)

by Joanne Johnson

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Walking along the Minster's south quire aisle one can't help but notice, right of the old doorway, an intricate carving of a woman. This lady is invariably referred to as Henry IV's Queen or simply his 'second wife'. Joanna of Navarre was however a remarkable woman who, like so many wives of our early English kings, has remained almost invisible and little has been written about her. I hope that this overview will provide readers with an insight into her life, personality and fragile world.

Joanna was born in Navarre. Her mother, Jeanne de Valois, was the daughter of the French King and her father was Charles II, King of Navarre. Joanna married John, Duke of Brittany in 1386. They had 8 children in their 13 year marriage. On her husband's death Joanna became Regent of Brittany to their eldest son and in 1402 she married Henry IV of England.

Henry and Joanna's marriage is reported to have been more than a political manoeuvre. The couple were affectionate towards each other and Henry gave Joanna a large annuity to support herself. Although the couple's marriage was childless, Joanna is said to have developed a good relationship with her step-children and after Henry's death in 1413 she chose to remain in England, closely in touch with her family by marriage. Yet in 1419, Joanna was accused of invoking witchcraft to try to poison her stepson, the new king Henry V. This was a serious crime punishable by death. On Henry's orders Joanna was arrested and for the next three years was kept prisoner in Pevensey Castle then Leeds, deprived of her property, her possessions confiscated and her annuity reduced.

Joanna's case never came to trial. It is alleged that Henry knew the claims were unfounded and that he had used Joanna's annuity to finance the war with France. Nevertheless, it seems the King maintained his affection for his step-mother as her household accounts show that her confinement was largely comfortable. Furthermore six weeks before his death in 1422, Henry ordered her release from captivity and the restoration of her lands and property.

Wikipedia states that following her release Joanna lived in Nottingham Castle almost until her death; although we have been unable to find any other evidence to support this. Joanna died at her home in Havering-atte-Bower in 1437 and was buried in Canterbury Cathedral next to her second husband, Henry IV of England.

Joanna has been described as a politically astute, intelligent and pragmatic woman whose eventual fate bears witness to the dangers faced by high-born women in the Middle Ages.