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**THE SUNDAY TIMES**

Bloody revolt of the chattels in skirts

Queen Consorts have fought for a role for a thousand years. Able to carve out her own destiny, Kate will be the mightiest of them all

Amanda Foreman Published: 1 May 2011



Eleanor of Aquitaine's was a Queen Consort with a fiery temperament (Bob Thomas/Popperfoto)

When Kate Middleton said "I do", she began the countdown to a role that stretches back for 1,000

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husband, William the Conqueror, was crowned in 1066. But Kate's position is unique. Unlike every previous royal consort in history, she has a husband who has publicly declared that he wants his wife to carve out her own life and be in command of her own destiny.

Such an idea would have been unthinkable for Kate's predecessors, and impossible to achieve. Until fairly recently, Queen Consorts were nothing more than dynastic pawns. Matilda of Flanders was an anomaly since she actually chose William of Normandy to be her husband.

Even before the great festival of blood and drama that characterised Henry VIII's six marriages, the life of a Queen Consort was fraught with danger. Most arrived in England as foreign barter, like a prized sheep or cow, knowing little or nothing about their future husband. They could discover, like Queen Isabella, wife of King John, that their husband was a homicidal maniac who thought nothing of hanging her alleged lover from her four-poster bed. Or, like another Isabella, wife of Edward II, have to cope with a husband who openly preferred the company of his alleged lover, Piers Gaveston.

Once dispatched from the lands of their birth, these young brides - few of whom could speak English - never saw their friends or family again. Some were allowed to retain the servants and confessors who had accompanied them from home. Yet even in the best circumstances, their presence was a mixed blessing for the Queen Consort. When not being bribed to act as spies, her servants were often persecuted or threatened with expulsion as a good conduct warning to the monarch's wife.

The hapless Catherine of Braganza, wife of Charles II, discovered this the hard way shortly after her arrival from Portugal in 1662. The Infanta had been contracted to Charles as part of an exchange that gave the British control of Tangier and Bombay in return for helping Portugal fight Spain. Having spent her entire life in religious seclusion, the naive Catherine protested vehemently when Charles's mistress, Lady Castlemaine, was foisted upon her as lady of the bedchamber. Charles was baffled at first, saying he was no atheist but he "could not think God would make a man miserable for taking a little pleasure out of the way", and then became furious.

To browbeat Catherine into compliance, her entire retinue was sent back to Portugal, leaving her alone and defenceless in a hostile court.

Her resistance crumpled within weeks and a peace of sorts was restored. Surprisingly, Catherine's swift acquiescence earned her the contempt of the entire court. The British liked their Queen Consorts to exhibit some pluck even as they were persecuting them to death.

The public was used to Queen Consorts such as Eleanor of Aquitaine, wife of Henry II, and Margaret of Anjou, wife of Henry VI, who relished the fight and battled as hard for power as any man.

Eleanor, the richest woman in Europe in own her right, divorced the King of France in order to marry Henry II, a man more suited to her fiery temperament.

But the doyenne of courtly love and patron of the arts was in fact so tempestuous that the marriage descended into civil war. Henry crushed the revolt led by Eleanor and their three sons in 1173 and imprisoned her for the next 16 years.

Long after they had settled their differences, the suspicious Henry still kept Eleanor under surveillance at all times.

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Eleanor's fate as caged lioness was better than that of Margaret, who died broken-hearted and poverty-stricken in French exile. Margaret's refusal to bow to political realities and accept compromise tipped the already divided country into violence. For her pride and shortsightedness she paid dearly, as did thousands of others. But as the leader of the Lancastrian faction against the Yorkists in the wars of the roses, Margaret displayed greater physical courage than any Queen in history, personally accompanying one military expedition after another to restore her son Edward to the throne. She was finally defeated at the battle of Tewkesbury in 1471, and survived only by taking sanctuary in a church. Her son and chief supporters were not so lucky and were either murdered as they surrendered, or were executed shortly after.

Shakespeare turned Margaret into an unappealing harridan in his history plays, but the tradition of a boldly defiant Queen Consort never lost its attraction. People were agog with excitement after Queen Anne defied James VI of Scotland in 1594 over the upbringing of their son, Henry. Until her revolt, Queen Consorts had never been allowed to have control of their children's upbringing. But Anne was furious when Henry was taken from her and sent to live under the care of the Earl of Mar at Stirling Castle. For nine years she kept up a campaign for the right to see her son, once even going so far as to bang on the doors of Stirling Castle. Finally, when her husband left Scotland to take up the English throne as James I in 1603, she created such a storm - refusing to set foot on English soil without her son - that the King was embarrassed into giving in.

Once the Hanoverians replaced the Stuarts the monarchy entered a far more sedate phase - at least until the disastrous marriage of George IV to Queen Caroline. He was drunk throughout the wedding and was hardly better thereafter. But this ghastly mismatch between two spoilt and self-indulgent people, which culminated in a failed divorce case in the House of Lords, was the exception that proved the new rule. Starting with Queen Charlotte, wife of George III, Queen Consorts carved a distinct role for themselves as patrons and benefactors of public charities. By the time Princess Mary of Teck married the future George V more than a century later in 1893, the role of Queen Consort had developed into that of a servant of the Greater Good. Diana's extraordinary contribution to society was the logical culmination of 200 years' of hospital openings.

Kate Middleton ushers in a new era for Queen Consorts. By marrying William she has, in my view, become one of the most powerful women on earth. Thanks to the internet, the entire world is her platform. Every charity and cause she supports will have a potential audience of billions. Already, the "Kate effect" has transformed the fortunes of designers and charities alike. Finally, after 10 centuries of struggle, the role will have real influence.

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