



Queen Katharine

HENRY VIII. ACT 3. SC. 1.

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KATHARINE OF ARAGON

KATHARINE of Aragon, of sorrowful memory, was the daughter of Isabella, queen of Castile, and first wife of the infamous Henry VIII of England. In her seventeenth year she was married to Arthur, prince of Wales, the eldest son of Henry VII: but he died a few months after, and her royal father-in-law, anxious to secure the throne, as well as the magnificent dowry, of the princess, procured a dispensation from the Pope to betroth her to his second son, Henry, then a child of twelve years.

Henry, however, was not contented with this match, when Henry VIII, who succeeded the throne, was still young. Yet that he was devotedly attached to her, and that he lived in undisturbed harmony for nearly twenty years, when the beautiful Anne Boleyn came to court, as maid of honor to the queen.

Henry was fascinated by this lady's charms, and as she was proof against a dishonorable suit, he proceeded to rid himself of Katharine by divorce—pretending that his conscience would no longer permit him to cohabit with his brother's widow, and that her marriage with her was illegal.

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This marriage was consummated five years later, when Henry had ascended the throne. Katharine was six years older than her boy-husband, and they possessed not a point of character in common; yet he was devotedly attached to her, and they had lived in undisturbed harmony for nearly twenty years, when the beautiful Anne Bullen came to court, as maid of honor to the queen.

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herself and daughter with all the spirit and pertinacity of her Spanish blood; but the divorce, which to the last she refused to acknowledge, was granted by Archbishop Cranmer, in open contempt of the Pope's authority; and Anne Bullen, whom Henry had secretly married previous to that decision, was crowned at Westminster with magnificent ceremony.

The play of *King Henry VIII.*, of which Katharine is the heroine, extends through about twelve years of his abominable reign, commencing with the disgrace of the Duke of Buckingham, and ending with the christening of Elizabeth, infant daughter of Anne Bullen, previous to which, by an allowable anachronism, the death of the heart-broken queen occurs.

The Katharine of *King Henry VIII.* is, almost without doubt, a faithful portrait of the unhappy lady whose virtues and wrongs command a tribute of pity from all true and tender hearts.

Apart from her overweening pride of birth, and jealous exaction of the homage due to her exalted rank, which was engendered in her Castilian blood—aside from her austere and narrow-minded bigotry, the result of a rigorous education—Katharine was remarkable for her quiet, domestic virtues, conjugal devotion, simple tastes, and genuine piety. She was not endowed with the brilliant mental gifts of her mother, the famous Isabella; but that her intellect was by no means of low order is proved by the decided influence she exerted over her violent husband, and by the confidence with which, in his absence, he intrusted to her judgment affairs of national importance.

In his portrait of Katharine, Shakspeare has followed historical records for all personal details, with the most conscientious exact-

ness, depending for effect simply on the unembellished story of her misfortunes; in many of her speeches the words are the very same imputed to her by the old chroniclers.

The queen first appears on the scene of action in all the enjoyment of acknowledged dignities, and her royal husband's respect and favor; her appeal to Henry in behalf of his people, mercilessly taxed by Wolsey, which is granted even before it is concluded, is a natural emanation from her strict integrity, her kindness of heart, and her sound judgment. But our sympathies for her are not fairly aroused until, stripped of all the insignia of her state, all the honors of her chaste matronhood, she stands arraigned for trial, one of the most pitiful objects in history—the devoted wife of twenty years' fidelity, the mother of many children, repudiated by her husband for no more honorable reason than the gratification of a new and illicit passion.

The perfectly natural pathos of her address to the king, on this occasion, is exquisite, even as a merely dramatic effect, but doubly touching in that it is a faithful paraphrase of the very words uttered by the queen in her own defence:

Sir, I desire you do me right and justice,
And to bestow your pity on me; for
I am a most poor woman, and a stranger,
Born out of your dominions—having here
No judge indifferent, nor no more assurance
Of equal friendship and proceeding. Alas, sir,
In what have I offended you? what cause
Hath my behavior given to your displeasure,
That thus you should proceed to put me off,
And take your good grace from me? Heaven witness,
I have been to you a true and humble wife,
At all times to your will conformable—
Ever in fear to kindle your dislike—
Yea, subject to your countenance, glad, or sorry,
As I saw it inclin'd. When was the hour