

# Joan of Navarre, the “invisible” Queen of England

by Natalia Rodríguez-Salcedo and Tom Watson

Above the Cathedral’s north aisle and close to the crossing, is the window celebrating the coronation of King George VI and Queen Elizabeth in 1936. Look higher up the window and you will see two other figures. (Fig 1) On the left is Henry IV and to the right is his second wife and queen-consort, Joan of Navarre, whom he married in 1403 at the Cathedral. The historical novelist Anne O’Brien recently called Joan (or Joanna) of Navarre (Juana de Navarra) a queen who was “more invisible than most” [1], but Joan was not only long-lived but a highly successful consort in two realms and once a regent.



Fig 1 Images of Henry IV and Joan of Navarre in the Coronation Window designed by Hugh Easton  
Photos: Simon Newman

Joan was probably born at Evreux in northern France on 10 July 1370, and died on 9 July 1437 at Havering-atte-Bower, Essex. [2] She was Duchess consort of Brittany and Queen consort of England. Joan was the regent of Brittany from 1399 until 1403 during the minority of her son John.



Fig 2 Joan of Navarre  
(C19th image)  
based on her effigy in  
Canterbury Cathedral

A member of the Evreux family, she was a daughter of King Charles II of Navarre (later called Charles the Bad) and Joan of Valois, daughter of Jean II of France. Aged sixteen she first married the nearly thirty-years-old Duke John IV of Brittany (Jean de Montfort), who had two English wives before her, at Saillé-près-Guérande on 2 September 1386. [2] She had nine children of this marriage: four sons and five daughters. The eldest, John V, inherited the dukedom when his father died on 1 November 1399. Joan was the regent of Brittany from 1399 until 1403 during his minority. Years later, her second son, Arthur III, succeeded his nephew.

On 7 February 1403, she married Henry IV at Winchester Cathedral and was crowned at Westminster Abbey later that month.

They had married by proxy a year earlier. It appears that the marriage was by mutual choice rather than for dynastic reasons. Henry Bolingbroke probably met Joan for the first time at Saint-Omer in October 1396 at a banquet organised by the Duke of Burgundy, which preceded Richard II's marriage to Isabella de Valois, daughter of the French king, Charles VI. Joan and her husband John, Duke of Brittany attended and met Henry who was with Richard's entourage. [3] They met again while Henry was in exile at the Breton court in 1398-9.

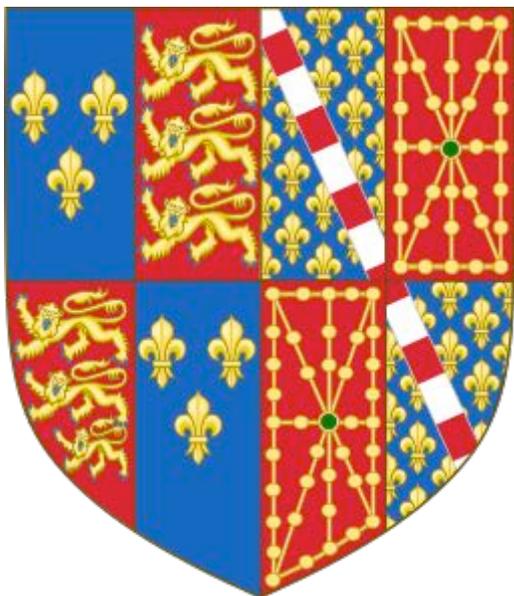
Widower Henry's marriage to widow Joan "was one of the real surprises of his reign." [3] It was a courtship undertaken in secret at a time when England and France were on the verge of war, but he could not obscure the attendance of Navarrese ambassadors at his court. It seems that marriage entered both their minds soon after John IV of Brittany's death. Joan contacted Henry through intermediaries and on 15 February 1400 wrote him a highly personal approach letter, full of good wishes and identification of common interests:

*My most dear and honoured lord and cousin, For as much as I am eager to hear of your good estate – which may our Lord make as good as your noble heart can desire, and as good as I could wish for you – I pray you, my most dear and honoured lord and cousin, that you would tell me often of the certainty of it, for the great comfort and gladness of my heart. For whenever I am able to hear a good account of you, my heart rejoices exceedingly. And if, of your courtesy, you would to hear the same from over here – thank you – at the time of writing my children and I are all in good health (thanks be to God, and may He grant the same to you) as Joanna de Bavelen, who is bringing these letters to you, can explain more plainly ... And if anything will please you that I am able to do over here, I pray you to let me know; and I will accomplish it with a very good heart according to my power. My most dear and honoured lord and cousin, I pray the Holy Ghost that He will have you in his keeping.*

Written at Vannes, 15 February, The Duchess of Brittany.

Mortimer comments “the tone of this letter leaves no doubt that there was genuine closeness between Henry and Joan. It goes far beyond the usual politeness between a member of the French royal family and the King of England.” The letter may have been in reply to one from Henry; it also indicated that Joan, like Henry, was a believer in the Trinity: “more than just friends; they shared a spiritual outlook.” [3]

## Courtship



*Fig 3 Joan of Navarre's Coat of Arms  
Quarterly the Arms of Evreux and Navarre  
impaled on the Royal Arms of England*  
By Sodacan (Own work) [CC BY-SA 3.0  
(<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/>)],  
via Wikimedia Commons

The courtship was conducted furtively and through ambassadors. They had to overcome the obstacle of potential hostilities between France and England, the disapproval of the French Crown and the issue of consanguinity (they were third cousins twice over). To get papal approval for a dispensation to marry, they also had the stumbling block of two popes – Boniface IX in Rome was recognised by England while Benedict XIII at Avignon was the French choice. Joan obtained a bull from Pope Benedict which sanctioned the marriage on 20 March 1402 and she was married to Henry by proxy within a fortnight, at Eltham Palace, on 2 April 1402. [See Note 1].

Witnesses included Henry's half-brother John Beaufort, Earl of Somerset, the Archbishop of Canterbury, and three Percys, the Earls of Northumberland and Worcester, and Hotspur.

The English were astonished at Henry's marriage to a Frenchwoman, while Joan had to make her case to the French royal family and court as she was marrying the man who had deprived the French king's daughter (Isabella of Valois) of the English throne by deposing Richard II. It was also a feat of negotiation by which she gained Pope Benedict's approval to marry a schismatic monarch who supported Rome.

The Navarrese presented no difficulties. Joan's brother, Charles III, referred to Henry as “our dear brother” but the French reaction was rapid – the Duke of Burgundy was called in by Breton nobility to oppose the marriage and went to Nantes on October and imposed a settlement on Joanna: She could take her two youngest daughters with her to England but her sons, including the heir Duke John V, were taken to Paris. Burgundy assumed the regency from Joan as “he would not tolerate any attempt by Henry to weaken French authority in what the Valois regarded as their sphere of influence.” [4]

The relationship between the courts of England and Brittany was well-established in the fourteenth century. John IV had been educated in the court of Edward III and he had been married previously to two Englishwomen: first to a daughter of Edward III, Mary (or possibly Margaret), and secondly to Joan Holland, stepdaughter of the Black Prince. For

the Navarrese, always a cadet branch of the Valois royal family, it was a triumph for one of their princesses to become queen-consort of a major nation. For Henry, marriage to a French princess helped legitimise his position as King of England.

### **Wedding in Winchester**

She left Nantes on 26 December 1402 with her two younger daughters, Blanche and Margaret, and accompanied by Henry's Beaufort half-brothers, John, Earl of Somerset, and Henry, then Bishop of Lincoln, and the Earl of Worcester. They set sail from Camaret on 13 January but a rough voyage meant they disembarked at Falmouth on 19 January. Henry had expected his bride to arrive in Southampton but he travelled rapidly west and met Joan in Exeter on 30 January. They travelled east to Winchester where they were married in the Cathedral in its newly rebuilt nave on 7 February 1403 by Bishop Beaufort.

The wedding was witnessed by much of English aristocracy as well as two of Henry's sons, John and Humphrey. A lavish feast was held, costing £522 12s. The guests were fed on roast cygnets, 'capons of high grease', venison, griskins (lean pork), rabbits, bitterns, stuffed pullets, partridges, kid, woodcock, plover, quails, snipe, fieldfares, cream of almonds, pears in syrup, custards, fritters, and subtleties decorated with crowns and eagles. [3] Henry's gift to Joan was a jewelled collar, costing £385, and amulets decorated with diamonds, pearls, rubies and sapphires. They then processed to London where Joan was crowned as queen consort on 26 February at Westminster and took up residence at Eltham, Henry's favourite palace. Overall, the wedding and coronation cost £1500 "but including the embassy to collect her from Brittany, it was a lot more than that." [4]

The question of why Joan left her life at the Breton court and her sons has been debated by historians since the nineteenth century with various themes [5] – that she was vulnerable because of the number of her children and so the marriage to Henry gave them an element of protection; that she was ambitious for the crown of a major nation and gained a "social triumph". [7] Breton sources are less forgiving, arguing that Henry IV married Joan so he could exert control over her brood of children. Another argument is that dissension among Breton nobles, during the early part of the regency, might have influenced Joan "to seek a quieter and more companionable life". [6]

But did Joan intend to leave her children behind? Fear of Henry's strategy at the Valois court meant the French were "determined to prevent the young duke and his brothers from accompanying their mother to England and coming under the effective custody of their new stepfather." [8] Joan's four sons were entrusted to the Duke of Burgundy and her eldest daughter Marie remained as she was contracted in marriage already. She took her two youngest daughters, Blanche and Marguerite with her in 1402 but they returned to the Continent in 1406 to make advantageous marriages. [5]

Joan remained in contact with her children for the rest of her life through letters and gifts and "there is evidence that her sons Arthur and Gilles visited her in England on multiple occasions". [6] Gilles died in France in 1412 while Arthur was captured at Agincourt by his

stepbrother's forces and taken to England as a hostage where he met his mother on at least one occasion.

### **Queenly stepmother**

Although their marriage did not produce any offspring, Joan got along with her stepsons who had been motherless since the death of their mother, Mary de Bohun, in 1394. She even sided with the future Henry V in arguments with his father, although some consider Henry V's relationship with her to have been duty, rather than affection. Being childless had two beneficial outcomes for Joan's reputation and security. As Henry's succession was assured through his sons – Henry, Thomas, John and Humphrey – the marriage did not draw criticism or close scrutiny [5] and her unexceptionable behaviour gave her security within the House of Lancaster: "The greatest woman at court was, naturally, the Queen, who even if she neither was, nor expected to be, the mother of a future king, still had many roles to fill: companion, intercessor, symbol, diplomatic buffer, financial burden" and "she had the good sense to cultivate a degree of detachment from court politics." [4]

There was criticism of Henry for his generous expenditure, in general, and to his Queen who had been promised an annual dower of £6,666 in March 1403. The sourcing of the dower was "hopelessly optimistic" [4] and the exchequer could not provide this sum and, after November 1404, Joan lost remittances from her dower lands in Brittany, which had been difficult to extract in any case.

In his will of 1409, Henry provided for endowments from the Duchy of Lancaster but these always fell short of the amounts promised. [4] Later in her life, she would be living on 500 marks (£333) a year. In 1404, the Commons sought major reductions in the king's household budgets from £42,000 a year to £12,200 and that all foreigners (e.g. Bretons) be dismissed from the royal household. Joan was allowed a few personal staff. A renewed demand for royal frugality was made in the Long Parliament of 1406. [3]

In spite of these financial travails, in 1404 Henry granted Joan a tower in Westminster in which to maintain an office: "She was clearly a hands-on sort of woman, more inclined to administrative duties than needlework. In that, too, she seems to have been a good match for the King", [3] who was legendarily hard-working and had returned to work soon after the 1403 coronation. [4] Joan would discuss management of the realm with her husband, as she has been regent of Brittany. They also shared a mutual love of music.

Henry IV died in Westminster on 20 April 1413, after ten years of marriage. From 1405 onwards, he suffered from debilitating illness, possibly a form of leprosy, and was cared for by his wife. Joan spent a further twenty-four years as a dowager queen.

### **Imprisoned**

Despite her apparently good personal relationship with Henry V, she and her friar-confessor were accused of plotting to kill him through witchcraft and imprisoned in comfort

at Pevensey Castle in Sussex and then Leeds Castle in Kent for more than three years (1419-22). All her properties were confiscated, giving the king a net profit of £5000 a year to help fund his campaigns against the French, but “it is clear that the accusation of witchcraft was simply an excuse for Henry V to apply the proceeds of her lands to his wars.” [4]

The warrant for her arrest was signed by her stepson John, Duke of Bedford, who was regent for his brother in England during the conflict with France. However, her later correspondence with John refers to him as ‘dearest son’; allowing for the formulaic nature of such royal correspondence, demonstrated a lasting bond between them. [5] Tension may have built between the king and his stepmother after her son Arthur was captured at Agincourt in 1415 and held as a hostage in England until 1420. Despite her pleas, Henry refused to release Arthur.

Joan’s household accounts, which show annual expenditure of between 1000 and 1500 marks (£666 to £1000) for the years of her captivity, indicate she lived well. The dowager queen also received important visitors including the Archbishop of Canterbury, Henry Beaufort, Bishop of Winchester, and her stepson Humphrey, Bishop of Gloucester; the latter indicating that her relationship with most of her stepchildren remained sound. Thomas, Lord Camoys, stayed for nearly ten months in 1420-21. [2]

Her Breton relatives were less sanguine and the Bishop of Nantes was sent on a diplomatic mission to obtain her release, although John V seems to have been less active in support of his mother. When Joan was released by Henry V in July 1422, shortly before his death, she did not return to Brittany despite the accusations and her imprisonment. She chose to stay with her step-family rather than her children.

### **Later life**

Diplomatic relations between Brittany and England were not affected by her imprisonment. In a treaty of 1423 signed by John V and John, Duke of Bedford, son and stepson, they vowed to “get along together as brothers, relatives and good friends.” [9] Later during her step-grandson Henry VI’s reign, her grandson Gilles visited her during his visit to England from 1432 to 1434 “demonstrating some long-term benefit from the connection between the two houses that Joan’s second marriage created”. [5]

Joan lived a quiet, comfortable life with her court at Nottingham Castle for the brief residue of Henry V’s reign and for nearly fifteen years of the reign of his successor Henry VI (1422-1461), who gave her a state funeral. Despite her experience in Brittany, the queen did not play a part in the regency of her step-grandson, who succeeded his father at just nine months old.

Queen Joan died at the age of 66 and was buried in Canterbury Cathedral next to her husband for whom she, not his son, had commissioned a monument. Their alabaster effigies carry both their heraldry, and Henry’s figure is larger than hers. (See Fig 4)



EFFIGY OF KING HENRY THE FOURTH AND HIS QUEEN JOAN OF NAVARRE  
in Canterbury Cathedral.

Engraved by J. G. Heath.

*Fig 4* Detail of tomb with effigies of Queen Joan of Navarre at left and King Henry IV beside her from Canterbury Cathedral, after Edward Blore; proof. 1826 © *The Trustees of the British Museum* reproduced under a Creative Commons Licence, details of which are given [here](#).

## Discussion and conclusion

So why is this long-lived mother and stepmother, duchess and queen-consort, so little known and celebrated? Shakespeare omits her completely from his plays on Henry IV and V and she left no memoirs of her own experiences. One reason could be the unexceptional nature of her life. Apart from her arrival, wedding and coronation, there were no events such as childbirth to engage the interest of contemporary chroniclers, although her arrest in 1419 is recorded, but it was Henry V's reputation which suffered for her mistreatment. [5]

The interpretation of her life decisions is diametrically opposed – some cast her as a victim who sacrificed her relationship with her children to be with Henry IV, while others claim that her actions were “pure ambition” and present her as selfish and callous. Most agree that she was a very able and loving stepmother who tried to reconcile her husband with his assertive, ambitious son, as well as having enduring relationships with the other stepchildren and her step-grandson, Henry VI.

However, Mortimer's summary shows that her personal qualities of loyalty and steadfastness probably kept her out of view. He writes that Henry “had a constant, intelligent and trustworthy companion. She was passionate and determinedly loyal. She was also a woman with whom Henry could discuss business.” [3] Joan of Navarre's affection for Henry and motherly relations with her stepchildren weren't the essence of modern headlines, let alone late medieval chroniclers.

## Notes

1. The marriage of Henry and Joan at Winchester Cathedral probably had consequences on the ceremonials of later Kings of Navarre who adopted similar coronation and funeral rites. The General Archive of the region of Navarre holds a copy of the Codice of the ceremonial and protocols for coronation, anointing and funerals of the kings of England. It looks like a copy of the *Liber Regalis*, prepared for the coronation of Richard II in 1377, and related to the *Missale ad usum ecclesiae Westmonasteriensis* (1362-1386). It seems its existence dates to the later years of the late fourteenth or early fifteenth centuries and is most likely that the proxy marriage in 1402 was the proper juncture for the English ceremonial to arrive in Navarre. Reference: Raquel García Arancón, “Los Evreux, ¿Reyes “taumaturgos” de Navarra? [The Evreux, “miracle-worker” Kings of Navarre?], *Príncipe de Viana*, 52(189), (1990), 81-88.
2. Apart from the stained-glass reminder of their marriage in 1403, there has been little Winchester commemoration of Henry IV and Joan other than in 1934 when the *Record* reports briefly that *The Marriage of Henry IV* was the “most successful” main event of the Festival of Music and Drama held at the Cathedral and Close that year. It was accompanied by a “charming historical brochure” on the marriage written by Canon Goodman, price 6d.

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9. ***Lettres d'alliance des Ducs de Bedford & de Bretagne***, signed April 17, 1423, in Morice, *Preuves*, pp 1135-1136.