



SPEAKING WITH SHADOWS

Transcript of Episode 5: From Queen to Captive – Witchcraft, Women and Power

Josie: It's the winter of 1420. Across a high peninsula near the English Channel, a stone castle stands within the bounds of an old Roman fort. The icy green moat water laps at its walls and towers, seeping through to the inhabitants of the dungeons. The mist hangs above the marshes; nearby the sea crashes in great white swells against the shore. It's a miserable place to be a prisoner.

High up in the keep, though, it looks like a different story. Here sits Pevensey Castle's most noble captive. She has a taste for fine wine, expensive spices and good food. She keeps exotic animals and birds and is richly dressed in the latest fashions. The keep is a great tower furnished with little apartments and it looks out over the gatehouse and probably a wooden chapel. Fires roar in the bailey hearths. It's not a home, but it will do. Prison could be a lot worse.

This is a woman whose power and wealth is crumbling. A woman accused of witchcraft and of plotting to kill the king. I'm Josie Long, and today it's my job to find out what happened when one woman's lavish existence at the end of the medieval period became a little bit inconvenient for the king. I'll also be hearing from experts on the lives of ordinary women in the 15th century. How did normal people work, raise children, trade and run estates? This was a time when your father's decision could see you walking up the aisle with a rich old guy whose death could buy you the legal emancipation to choose your own life. But it was also a time when you could get locked up for being a witch. Stepping out of the shadows today: it's Joan of Navarre, queen and captive.

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Josie: It's Friday morning and I'm in Pevensey, in Sussex, and I'm just outside Pevensey Castle. I don't know how close to the sea we are, but you can feel it a little bit. I'm outside an absolutely giant stone arch. I'm going to walk through and I'm going to be meeting with Richard Nevell, who is a historian and who is a Doctor of Archaeology as well, but also is a major castles nerd which is very exciting to me!

Richard: Hi, great to meet you.

Josie: Yeah you too, nice to meet you! I'm really excited to be at a castle with you because I know that this is something you have a deep interest in.

Richard: Yeah, it's a fantastic place. There is so much history going on here right from the Romans through to the Second World War. Pevensey is an absolutely fascinating place.

Josie: And we're here to talk about Joan of Navarre, who my knowledge of is pretty limited. I know that she was a half-French queen, who was widowed and then remarried, and then was widowed again – which is too many widowings for one person!



What I know about her and what brings us here, is that she was locked up in this castle by her stepson. Can you give us a bit of background as to what happened?

Richard: Yes, it's not very often that you hear of a queen being locked up by her own people, is it? She was part of European nobility. She was the daughter of the King of Navarre.

Josie: Where's Navarre?

Richard: It's northern Spain.

Josie: Oh! Oh, okay – but she's half-French so she's got some link to French royalty as well.

Richard: Exactly.

Josie: Who's her first husband?

Richard: Her first husband was the Duke of Brittany, which is in north-west France. So, rather close to England. Her first husband died in 1399 and she ended up marrying Henry IV a few years later – the King of England. And it all happened rather quickly.

Josie: How would they have met? Would they have met? Would they have just sent portraits?

Richard: Apparently they met a few years before they were actually married, which is quite good going for the Middle Ages nobility to be honest. So they probably would have met at court, the medieval nobility socialising together, conducting diplomacy and generally socialising and making sure that everyone gets on. And they are playing power politics as well.

Josie: So it seems like it felt like a good match to begin with, she got on quite well with her stepson to begin with, and then it all changed. What was going on behind that? What happened?

Richard: Yeah, so she started getting on quite well with the family. She seems to have been good at winning people over and this is despite, early on, there being a bit of scepticism in Parliament, by the size of her dowry. She was allowed 10,000 marks a year, which was a huge amount – £6,666 a year.

Josie: It's a devilish number.

Richard: It was an interesting choice, wasn't it? There seems to have been genuine affection between Henry and Joan, and Joan was bringing a fair amount with her from land she already held herself.

Josie: So a lot of their marriage, it's not a personal thing at all. It's about allegiances and power and people kind of consolidating that.

Richard: Yeah, absolutely. So with her first marriage she was betrothed to someone she'd never met.



Josie: Wow. So her second marriage was almost, like, a bit better for her because they got on and had met.

Richard: Yeah, absolutely. She had a good relationship with his son, Prince Hal, who later became Henry V.

Josie: I worry that my knowledge of the Henrys is really only based in Shakespeare, and only really based in the 90s film adaptation of Henry V, fronted by Kenneth Branagh. So I have just very warm affection for Henry V because I'm like, he was a great guy – Kenneth Branagh! Is that an accurate representation of what he was like in any way?

Richard: Well, it's part of the story around Henry V. I think generally there's an impression that Henry was a Good King with a capital G.

Josie: So we're walking towards the castle now, and you can just start to see the moat – well that's kind of the remains of the moat now. It's a really strange atmosphere up here because it's like its own little microclimate. You've got the walls all around you ...

Richard: And then another bailey within that.

Josie: And what we're going to see is the part of the castle where Joan of Navarre was held prisoner?

Richard: Yeah, we think so. So it's a bit difficult to pinpoint, but we think we roughly know where she would have been.

Josie: Yes, so she was a very high status person being held prisoner. That, to me, seems like it is not a common occurrence.

Richard: It's not really, especially for a queen as well. You might occasionally get royalty captured in warfare, as happened with James I of Scotland who was held here after Joan, but for a queen to be imprisoned was really quite unusual.

Josie: And what led to it?

Richard: Well, basically there was this major falling out between her and King Henry V. They had been getting along very well, but in 1419 things very rapidly turned sour. She was accused by her personal priest of plotting to murder the king using witchcraft and sorcery.

Josie: Hang on! The priest, sort of, ratted her out!

Richard: Yep. It was certainly rather convenient for King Henry, since he was fighting a war with France at the time, and wars are very expensive. You need to hire a standing army and hire mercenaries.



Josie: And she's got a very big dowry – we already know. So you can just say anything you like and take all the money! Oh! What a turncoat!

Richard: Absolutely. Plus, the accusation is coming from a man of God, so someone who is meant to be trustworthy.

Josie: What's most disappointing is, I can't imagine Kenneth Branagh doing that. That's the thing that really hurts.

Richard: Exactly. It doesn't feel like the Henry V we're used to.

Josie: No! So Richard, what happens next? Are we going to go inside and see where she was held captive?

Richard: Yeah. So let's go to talk to Janet Taylor and she can show you around, and I'll meet you later in the dungeon.

Josie: Oh. Perfect – the dream!

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Josie: I've passed through the Roman walls and I've walked uphill and I'm just here to meet Janet Taylor.

Hi Janet. What's your role? What do you do here?

Janet: I'm site manager. So we've got this beautiful castle here set in this fabulous location with sea views, the Downs in the distance and the marshes.

Josie: Am I right in thinking the sea used to come right up to the castle?

Janet: Yes. It did. Yes. It was built on a mudflat surrounded by the sea on three sides.

Josie: When it was built it was a completely different landscape, because I'm squinting and I can see the sea but it looks like it could be a mile away! It looks like it's, you know, it's not anywhere near here. Well it is, but it's not.

Janet: Rivers have silted up what was a large bay that ran from Eastbourne to Hailsham right the way down to Cooden Beach. So as we're walking across, you can see rather an interesting feature – we're going underneath, what you might call a murder hole. And when it's very, very windy today, the wind sort of rushes through here and it screams. It's a quite eerie effect as you go under the tunnel of the gate.

Josie: Why is it called a murder hole?



Janet: I think it would have been somewhere which you would have poured down, reputedly, boiling oil, but people tell me it's more likely to be water, to deter your would-be assailant from entering the castle.

Josie: Oh my gosh!

Janet: It was a place that had short and decisive periods of military occupation and purpose, intertwined with long periods of peace and calm when the castle was either occupied or maybe abandoned at various times.

Josie: Can we go and have a closer look at the keep?

Janet: Yes, let's just go over there across the grass.

Josie: So there's a lot of life in the rest of the castle, and what would life have been like for Joan in the keep? Like, would she have been allowed to leave that and go into the Great Hall and sit by the fire? Would she be stuck in her little bit here? Like, what was it like for her?

Janet: Well, the building would have been a prison, she was a prisoner. So she was here with her servants, so she was well treated.

Josie: How many servants did she have, roughly?

Janet: A number of servants!

Josie: This is so funny though because you've got such a contrast between the fact that she's a prisoner, she doesn't want to be there, she is in reduced circumstances, but she's still the queen so she's still got loads of servants. And I presume that her quarters wouldn't have been that basic.

Janet: No, she would have had the best accommodation in the castle – the keep. And she was politically important so she was kept well fed, well looked after, cared for, in that sense of the word. She was just imprisoned and her liberty taken away by being put here. Less influential prisoners – those with no political or financial...

Josie: Clout.

Janet: Yes, clout, would have been kept in the dungeons, which are over either side of the gatehouse. One, the oubliette, has no stairs up nor down. Once the trapdoor was down, no light.

Josie: God that's proper castle stuff isn't it!

Janet: Oh it is, yes – it's dingy dungeons.

Josie: So we're talking about the relative comfort that Joan was in, but it was over the winter. Do you think it was still not that pleasant to be in this place at that time?



Janet: Well, she didn't know what her future would be. So it was a place of detention and maybe terror in her own mind as to what would happen to her.

Josie: Wow, thank you so much for showing me around Janet.

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Josie: Joan of Navarre's stay at Pevensey is definitely one of the castle's most interesting stories. But how typical is Joan of other women living at the time? What was it actually like to be a woman in the Middle Ages?

By the end of the Middle Ages women were starting to get married at 17 years old, which seems so young by today's standards, but it was much older than at the start of that historical period when girls were starting to get married when they were 13.

To find out more I talked to Dr Virginia Davies, a historian who researches and writes about the lives of medieval women.

Virginia: I think the major misconception was that women lead very dull lives in the Middle Ages, confined to the home environment. My students are surprised that women might undertake paid employment, were involved in running estates, might even find themselves engaged with the physical defence of their estate, and indeed we find women involved in popular protest such as during the 1381 Peasants' Revolt.

I think the evidence is best for the 14th and 15th centuries, perhaps also the 13th century. But there's certainly plenty of evidence of premarital sex, sometimes being able to choose their marriage partners and also being engaged in adultery, giving birth to illegitimate children and so on.

I think class and social standing are hugely important. In some ways women of higher social classes led more constrained lives because their marriages were more likely to be tightly controlled. Peasant women might have more freedom of action. What we can see for the majority of medieval women, they lead a sort of multitasking life. They're looking after the children, they're looking after the house, they might be brewing ale or making butter and cheese to sell at the market, and they're spinning in every spare moment that they've got, creating woollen cloth. Unlike their husbands, who were out in the fields doing the job of an agricultural labourer, peasant women were busy doing a whole range of things within the household.

There are serious expectations of them in society. Many of their role models come from the Bible, but that doesn't mean that women spent all their time sitting at home being miserable and being oppressed.

There are very few women who didn't marry in the Middle Ages unless they became nuns, but apart from that the expectation is that women marry. I mean, the place where women had real freedom



is when they became widows, because as long as they were unmarried, they were under the legal control of their fathers. Once they were married, they were under the legal control of her husbands. It was only when they became widows that they were free in terms of their legal position.

Recent research about widows suggests that it wasn't all the wonderful world that some historians have pictured. For example, if you were a widow left in charge of your husband's apprentices, you might find yourself struggling to control a whole lot of rather aggressive young males. If you loved your husband, you might be grieving him. If you had three young children and a small holding to maintain, then you might struggle without your husband's labour. So in fact, I think the picture has become much more nuanced. So women had a much better legal identity once they were widows, but they did not necessarily have a much better life.

In terms of inheriting masses of land, the position of the wife of a significant landowner was that their son, if they had one, would inherit the bulk of the property, but the widow would be left with one-third of what her husband owned at his death. And that land would be hers for her life. She couldn't pass it on, so if she married again, she couldn't pass it to her new husband, but her husband's heir would not have any control over that third of the land until she died. And if you married three or four times, as many noble women did, and you clocked up a third of your husband's property each time they died, then you might end up a huge landowner.

Women are not allowed to have official public power. They're not represented in Parliament. They can't run local government as justices of the peace, etc. But actually, they influence who are appointed to those positions if they're powerful landowners.

One has to be very aware that we're not talking about a homogeneous group of medieval women. We're talking about people who are coming from different places – your background, your education, whether you're in a town or in the countryside – all of these impact on women. And I think you have to add to that personality. There are women who are meek, there are women who are really tough, there are those who dominate their husbands, there are those dominated by their husbands. I don't think human nature changes terribly.

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Josie: Compared to other women of the time it seems that Joan had it pretty good, with her comfortable quarters in the keep, her servants to light the fire, but I want to find out more about what happened to her. Was she even released? How significant were the witchcraft charges? But before I do, I'm going to get a taste of what other prisoners lives might have looked like. I went to meet Richard in the dungeon. I mean, if there is a dungeon you've got to go and look at it!

So I'm going down the most perilous stone spiral staircase – it's so small, so much smaller than I thought – and I'm going to meet Richard.



Richard: Hello again.

Josie: Wow, the dungeon is ... it's smaller than I thought it would be!

Richard: Yep and a bit wetter, no doubt!

Josie: Yeah! So there's about four inches of, I'm going to say fetid, water down here. But you can really feel that it's had centuries of that dampness.

Richard: Exactly. This is where you ended up if you were at the bottom of the social scale. You were put in here and basically just left to rot on your own. It really contrasts with how Joan would have been held in basically relative comfort – especially compared to this it would have been a life of luxury. It might not have been as good as she was used to, but it was all right compared to what it could be.

Josie: Yeah. There's a snail on the wall! I feel like that's a good sign that we ought to leave this place. So let's go up the stairs a little bit so we can talk.

Oh, the air is so fresh!

Richard: Yeah and you've got two really strong contrasts within, well, one castle. It's how Joan would have lived up there compared to how a common prisoner would have lived, perhaps not even for very long, down there.

Josie: So Joan was eventually released.

Richard: Yeah, that's right. On his deathbed Henry V decided to release her.

Josie: That feels so jammy, doesn't it?! Like, he got what he wanted, he waited until the last possible minute, then in the eyes of God, he's redeemed, and he doesn't have any consequences for that power play!

Richard: It gives an interesting insight into his character, I think.

Josie: So, what would Joan's life as a widow have been like?

Richard: Well, after two very busy marriages she retired a bit from political life. So before, where she'd been involved in influencing life at court and exercising, basically, the power of a queen, she was basically retiring from that kind of role.

Josie: Is it more a kind of soft power that women were able to access at that time? So it had to be much more about, kind of, influencing people subtly or moving things in a less direct way, than having someone locked up on trumped-up charges of witchcraft so you can steal their money.

Richard: Very much so. It's useful to have the ear of the king and when Henry IV was still alive, she would have been a very influential and powerful person.



Josie: Even within that, you can be the most powerful widow in the whole country – can be the king's widow – and you still can have your life manipulated by such, kind of, spurious claims.

Richard: Absolutely. It shows how fragile power could be at that time.

Josie: It's not going to be men who are going to be open to charges of witchcraft in that way.

Richard: Absolutely, that's a really interesting point. So in medieval society, magic was something which was fairly commonplace.

Josie: What do you mean by that?

Richard: So people would carry charms with them as protection and you would have, say, powerful words, inscribed on things.

Josie: And that was all fine alongside Christianity?

Richard: Yes. There was some interesting overlap as well, between magic and religion, say, if you had a saint's name engraved on something, is a power coming from magic or is it from God? So there's an interesting interplay there. And we start to see the emergence of tropes around witchcraft in the early 15th century – so the ideas of it being something that happens in secret and very evil as well. So that's just starting to emerge when Joan is then accused of practising witchcraft to assassinate the king.

Josie: Wow, so he exploited something that was, you know, quite new and quite fashionable and in doing so probably created a really high profile instance of supposed witchcraft that other people could then refer to.

Richard: Absolutely, it makes me wonder how that particular instance –the imprisonment of Joan – might have influenced witchcraft and how it was perceived in European society.

Josie: Joan was accused of witchcraft a long time before it became a lot more commonplace to use that as a way of stigmatising women. She was never tried for it, was she? Why is that?

Richard: Despite this really very serious accusation, she was never made to defend herself against this. So it suggests, to me at least, that the king wasn't interested in demonstrating her guilt. He really just wanted to exercise his power and get hold of her land and money really. So the idea of the mass witch trials comes along a bit later.

Josie: It's almost like, him using this as a convenient excuse could have helped shape much more devastating repercussions for ordinary women.

Richard: Yeah quite possibly. It probably helped speed things up with that.



Josie: What about Joan herself? Did she think that she was going to die? Did she think that was the end of her life? Like, how did she feel about all of this?

Richard: You would have to think that there was a certain amount of fear with this because she's going from a position of considerable power to one where that's been taken away. And while other people might have been able to look in on it from the outside and see that she's held in relative comfort, for her she definitely would have felt the restrictions. And she would have seen changes of dynasty in Europe before – so I mean Henry IV came to power by deposing a king – so she knows that power and influence is fleeting and that there was a possibility she might lose her life.

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Josie: Thank you so much Janet and Richard for showing me around Pevensey today.

We know that Joan was eventually released when Henry V was dying, after nearly three years imprisonment at Pevensey and elsewhere. Her fortune was returned to her and she never had to answer the bogus charges of witchcraft against her. But witchcraft has become such a symbolic thing in the modern day now. It's so linked to feminism and to women's history – the persecuted woman with powers that are seen as threatening to society, and threatening to male academia.

Where did this idea come from? And is it really so simple? I caught up with Professor Diane Purkiss to see if there's a deeper discussion to be had.

Diane: Most people have a very clear sense of what they think a witch is, that derives mostly from places like children's literature and fantasy literature. In a way, that's a problem for historians, because those ideas are very far removed from the reality of popular witch beliefs. There's this really very charming and endearing fantasy that witches were pagans and that they worship the 'old gods' – as Game of Thrones calls them – but actually there's virtually no real evidence to support that. Yes, there are a few pagan residues in a very few trials.

Another example is most people think witches were being punished for medical knowledge like herbalism. Actually, really no, there are very, very few trial records that concern herbalism, and conversely most women, especially better off women, would have had really good knowledge of herbs because you had to make your own medicine in those days. It was a bit like making your own bread nowadays.

The main body of references to witchcraft in English literature is in the medieval equivalent of fantasy writing, which are called romances. So this is stories about King Arthur, poems about Arthur's knights: they feature a major witch figure, Morgan le Fay, who is Arthur's sister but also his enemy, and who does all kinds of really powerful magic – love magic, sleep magic. And there are other sorceress figures dotted around the Arthuriad.



It's interesting that the final summative version of the Arthuriad, which is Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*, coincides with the emergence of a number of accusations against very powerful women – people who are kind of the social equivalent of the king's sister – and that's not irrelevant I think, as a causative factor. Malory wrote during the Wars of the Roses, when everyone was very tense about inheritance, and about the power of queens, and about women who maybe had too much authority that couldn't fully be controlled, and so it's interesting that he puts in very scary sorceresses.

I think what we all find fascinating now is any kind of model of women with power because we're all searching for some kind of evidence that this is even possible, even still in the 21st century. And also most modern women are looking for, not so much even a role model, but someone they can identify with, who's maybe able to, if not take charge of her life, at least react actively to the things that are thrust at her, rather than just passively sucking it all up like a good girl. And I think the reason that we're so attracted by these witchy figures is because they seem to us to be doing that, they seem to us to be resistant figures. And it's true that to some extent that would be the case with someone like Joan. It's much less the case with the poor women that they employed or even the poor guys that they employed, who are basically behind the eight ball the entire time and never have much of a chance of agency. They just get put upon by a noble, which is pretty much standard for the period whatever your sex because, unless you are a noble, you can just be crushed by the weight of social prestige.

The vast majority of women executed during the peak period of the witch trials, when something around 30,000 people died over a 300-year period, were very poor, right at the bottom of the social scale, and would make us think more of bag ladies than of noble women in lovely dresses.

So I question how enabling it really is, if the only kind of agency we can assign to women in the past is the agency of screaming in somebody's face as an absolute last resort because they're finally depriving you of any chance of eating today.

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Josie: What's been so interesting recording this episode has been finding out how little I really knew about what medieval life was like. I had no idea what King Henry V was actually like, quite clearly. And I really didn't understand the fact that women could change or ameliorate their social situation through becoming widowed, and what a lottery that was in terms of what might happen to them.

And also, I was quite surprised at how little I knew about witchcraft! I thought I was so well informed about the later witchcraft trials and scares, but even that comes down to power and abuses. And again, it was women at the bottom of the pile who suffered most from witchcraft accusations. It wasn't herbalists, like I thought. It wasn't even women trying to become too powerful. It was crueller than that, and it was harsher.



ENGLISH
HERITAGE

I feel as if this trip to Pevensey has taught me so much. Joan of Navarre – what an interesting figure! And how her life was manipulated by Henry V! And beyond that, learning about the medieval period just goes to show that there is so much more history to be discovered when we look a little bit closer.

I really hope you've enjoyed exploring this as much as I have. Thanks for listening.

In our final episode, I'm heading north to the border where diverse communities thrived during Roman times and continue to live and work there after the Romans left Britain.

[Clip] I'm an archaeologist. I like to work in facts, but I also think these are the stories that inspire people to think about real life on the Wall, not just the soldiers marching up and down.

Josie: If you've got a question or just want to give us your thoughts, you can tweet us using the hashtag #speakingwithshadows. Plus you can find out more about this story at english-heritage.org.uk/speakingwithshadows.

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