

Anne Boleyn, Queen of England

Later copy of an original portrait, which was painted c.1534.

On May 2nd 1536 Anne Boleyn was accused of sexual crimes with men of the king's privy chamber, including her own brother, George, Lord Rochford, and Sir Francis Weston, Henry Norris, William Brereton and Mark Smeaton, who were all executed. According to the indictment, she had enticed or bewitched the men with French kisses to have sex with her ten times between October 1533 and December 1535. Disagreeing with most scholars who believe that Anne was innocent, George Bernard has recently claimed that she had indeed been guilty and that the charges could be validated. It can be proved, however, that she was not always at the place and time her accusers specified. For example, she was definitely with Henry at Windsor on 5 December 1535, the day she allegedly was committing incest with her brother at Westminster. Given Tudor travel conditions, she would have had to rely on flight by broomstick to complete and keep that rendezvous secret.

Similarly another scholar, Eric Ives, while affirming Anne's innocence of the charges, nevertheless presents her in a biography of 1986 as an avid religious reformer and courtly lover whose platonic flirtations with young courtiers could lead to intimate sexual relations. When she was not flirting with the men in her apartments, she was apparently praying with them in the chapel. Yet neither literary scholars nor social historians now maintain that courtly love, as defined by Ives, was an actual social practice at Renaissance courts.

Such misconceptions and errors abound in the life-history of Anne Boleyn. Many facts about her are either unknown or are obscured in mystery. Her life is important, for her marriage ushered in the Reformation and resulted in the birth of Elizabeth, who as queen presided over England's conversion to Protestantism. Yet controversy surrounds her birth year and childhood, her appearance, her relationship with Henry VIII, her religious beliefs and her interaction with her husband's courtiers.

Early Life

Anne's origins are disputed. Scholars have assumed that, as the child of Sir Thomas Boleyn and Elizabeth Howard, Anne was born at the Boleyn manor of Blickling in Norfolk or perhaps at Hever Castle in Kent. Thomas Fuller, a seventeenth-century writer, heard, however, that her birthplace was London. It is possible that her mother, Elizabeth, daughter of Thomas, later second duke of Norfolk, established her lying-in chamber at the Howard home in Lambeth, just across the Thames from London. Later Elizabeth, then the countess of Wiltshire, was to be buried there.

When Anne was born is also controversial. William Camden, an Elizabethan antiquary, favoured the year 1507. In 1981, interpreting a letter she wrote from France to her father, Hugh Paget argued that she was born in 1501. Paget was the first to translate the sign-off place of the letter, which even by sixteenth-century standards had irregular spelling and handwriting, as La Veure in Malines, the court of Margaret of Austria, regent of the Netherlands. Believing that Anne served the regent as a maiden of honour, Paget indicated that in 1513-14, when



she wrote the letter, she must have been 12 or 13 years old. Ives accepted Paget's findings, for this earlier birth date supports his claim that she was a courtly lover, that is an older woman who flirted with younger men.

My own research has led me to disagree with Paget's conclusions and favour Camden's 1507 as her date of birth. The letter's spelling and handwriting indicate a young child, perhaps only seven years old, for children in royal nurseries began their education at an early age. A comparison of her handwriting with that of her 11-year-old daughter Elizabeth indicates just how elementary Anne's was. Her place at Malines was surely with the regent's nieces, one of whom, Mary, the future queen of Hungary, was born in 1505. It is noteworthy that Anne Brandon, a young daughter of Charles, duke of Suffolk, was also at Malines. Later, Mary of Hungary, indicating a personal knowledge of Anne, remarked that she had always been a French woman, probably a spiteful reference to her father's decision to have her transferred to the French court in 1514 when Mary Tudor, Henry's sister, wed Louis XII. Since Anne resided at foreign courts, she must have been older than her sister Mary, for these opportunities would have been made available to the first-born daughter. Mary, who in 1520 wed William Carey, a member of the privy chamber with close royal contact, was probably born in 1508. Normally, Tudor women married in their twenties, but ambitious families sometimes arranged politically advantageous alliances for young daughters. Catherine Parr, for example, was 12 when she wed her first husband. Anne's brother George was probably the youngest Boleyn sibling.

Anne remained in France after Louis XII's death in 1515 when his widow returned home as the wife of Suffolk. In addition to speaking French fluently, Anne learned to play the lute, to dance, and to do needlework. Possibly, her family had hoped she would marry a French nobleman, but those plans were overturned in late 1521 when she was recalled to wed a cousin, James, heir of the earl of Ormond. Those marriage negotiations having floundered, she was secretly betrothed, perhaps in 1523, to Henry Percy, heir of the earl of Northumberland. Anne was at court, possibly with Mary Tudor, the French queen, when she met Percy, a page of Thomas, cardinal Wolsey, the lord chancellor, who was outraged when he learned of their behaviour. Normally, young noblemen married their parents' choice. With the earl's aid, Wolsey broke up their romance and dispatched them to their respective homes. There is no evidence that Henry VIII was personally involved in terminating their betrothal.

About three years later, in December 1526, Anne returned to court as a maiden of honour to Catherine of Aragon. That she attracted Percy and then the king meant that she must have possessed a vivacious personality and an attractive appearance. In his book on the English schism that was published posthumously in 1585, Nicholas Sander, a hostile Catholic priest, was the first to make statements about her looks that appeared in print. Angry with her daughter as a defender of Protestantism, Sander, who probably never saw Anne, described her as a witch. Influenced by the theories of Neo-Platonism which held that as good must be beautiful, evil must be ugly, he claimed she was tall with protruding teeth, a wen or lump on her throat, sallow complexion, and six fingers. To tone down this outrageous description, later writers ignored all traits except the wen, which they called a mole, and the sixth finger, which they described as an extra little nail. Yet since contemporaries viewed deformities such as these as signs of divine punishment, it is unlikely that reporters who actually observed her would have failed to note them. Clearly Sanders invented them to disparage the daughter through the mother's depiction. In contrast to Sander's, the Venetian ambassador noted simply - and surely accurately - that she was of medium height with a wide mouth, a long neck, swarthy skin, and small breasts.

Anne and Henry

In the spring of 1527 French ambassadors were at court to negotiate a marriage between Henry's daughter Mary and a member of the French royal family. In Queen Catherine's chamber, it was noted that Henry danced with Anne while an ambassador danced with Mary.

Ironically, Henry had already discussed with Wolsey the feasibility of an inquiry into the validity of his marriage to Catherine. As she was his brother Arthur's widow, Henry, whose sons had died as infants, was troubled by the Biblical warning in Leviticus 20: 21 that a man who took his brother's wife would be childless. A minority tradition within the church supported his view that this verse forbade a man from marrying his brother's widow, but the majority interpreted it to mean that a man should not seduce a living brother's wife. While Wolsey worked futilely for the annulment, Henry sent off a request successfully to Pope Clement VII for a dispensation to marry someone whose sister he had known carnally. Apparently, perhaps in 1525, Anne's sister Mary Boleyn Carey had been the

king's mistress. Since Catherine was the niece of the Emperor Charles V, whose Imperial troops had recently sacked Rome, Clement was unlikely to comply with Henry's wishes.

While negotiations continued, Henry remained officially with Catherine although he still courted Anne. In the spring of 1528 he left Anne at Greenwich when her attendant contracted the sweating sickness, probably a form of influenza. Later Anne, who had retreated to Hever, also contracted it. While she was away from court, he wrote her 17 love letters, many of them in French, the language of love.

A reading of the letters makes it clear that she was not aggressively manipulating him. He denied her request for a post as abbess for Carey's sister Eleanor but also offered comforting words to her about their future together. Only one comment is erotic: he longed, he said, to kiss her breasts. Later that autumn, accompanied by her mother, she removed to London and probably resided at Durham House. Shortly thereafter, Henry learned that Clement had agreed to dispatch to England Lorenzo, cardinal Campeggio, to inquire into the validity of his marriage. Unbeknownst to Wolsey, who presided with Campeggio over the hearings, Clement had forbidden them to reach a verdict. The pope would permit Henry to wed a lady whose sister he had known carnally, but he was unwilling to free him from Catherine to let that marriage take place. In the summer of 1529, Campeggio terminated the proceedings. That December Wolsey was arrested, demoted, and dispatched to his archbishopric at York. The following year, he died on his journey south to respond to charges of treason.

Subsequently, Thomas Cromwell emerged as Henry's most important minister. Other negotiators also failed to move the pope to action. Then, in 1531, bowing to pressure from crown officials, the church convocations recognised Henry as head of the church in England. Shortly thereafter, he refused to see Catherine again. The next year Henry appointed Thomas Cranmer, who agreed with his interpretation of Leviticus, to replace the deceased William Warham as archbishop of Canterbury. After ennobling Anne as lady marquess of Pembroke, Henry took her with him to an October meeting at Calais with Francis. Sometime later, perhaps in December, she became pregnant and, on 25 January 1533, they were wed. In April she went in procession to chapel as queen; in May, relying on the recently passed Statute of Appeals, Cranmer annulled Henry's marriage to Catherine, thus validating his union with Anne.

Anne as Queen

In June 1533 Anne was crowned queen and in September she gave birth to Elizabeth. Although disappointed not to have a son, Henry saw that the appropriate arrangements for the christening were carried out while Anne remained in the traditional 30-40-day seclusion after childbirth. The next year, 1534, Parliament, in which Cromwell played a major role, recognised the king as head of the church in England and, placing the succession in Anne's and Henry's offspring, named Elizabeth heir presumptive. In 1535 Sir Thomas More was executed, not because he opposed Anne's marriage but because he opposed the English schism.

Anne has often been aligned with an evangelical faction at court. Clearly, she supported scripture reading and the schism. Before her marriage, she may have presented two religious books to the king, an anti-papal one by William Tyndal and an anti-clerical one by Simon Fish. Yet although she also patronised future Protestants, such as Matthew Parker, Elizabeth's archbishop of Canterbury, there is no evidence that she followed the Lutherans in denying the good works system or transubstantiation. She probably would have supported, however, the church reform that has been associated with Erasmian thought, which was mostly enacted after her death. As queen, she took her position as a religious leader seriously. She wanted her chapel to serve as a Christian example to others and punished her attendant, a cousin, Mary Shelton, for writing poetry in her book of devotions.

As queen, Anne managed her household, including her chapel, effectively. She also dispensed the customary patronage to her family and friends. Her elevation certainly brought rewards to her family, including the earldom of Wiltshire for her father; but to retain her influence she needed to give birth to a male heir. In the summer of 1534, she probably suffered a miscarriage. It is possible this tragedy worried her, for in January 1535 she had a somewhat tense discussion with French ambassadors who were attempting to negotiate a marriage between Mary Tudor and one of Francis's sons, proceedings that she must have viewed as a snub to her daughter Elizabeth.

Later that year, perhaps in September, she conceived again. Then, on 7 January 1536, Catherine of Aragon died. Some time that month, Anne miscarried a male foetus. Tragically, it was this miscarriage, I believe of a deformed foetus, that caused her husband to turn against her. This event would have greatly concerned - even frightened - Henry, for contemporaries thought that God visited monstrous births, as they were called, upon parents to punish them for their sins. By having her accused of adultery with five men in the two years preceding the birth, Henry made it virtually impossible to identify him as its father. Only a tragedy like this would have led him to besmirch his honour with a public admission that five men had cuckolded him.

Anne's Downfall

Much of the information about the events of 1536 comes from the dispatches of Eustace Chapuys, the Imperial resident ambassador and a special friend of Catherine's. Relying on information from Cromwell, he dated Anne's miscarriage the same day as Catherine's funeral, 29 January. Although English chroniclers recorded other days, the ironic date has usually gained credence.

It is interesting that Chapuys only learned of the miscarriage on 10 or perhaps 17 February after he had heard rumours on 29 January that Henry was claiming Anne had seduced him into marriage with charms and sorceries. While Anne continued in seclusion at Greenwich, Henry remained in London, celebrating the last days of festival and then observing Lent, a decision that surprised Chapuys, for he noted that this was an unusually long separation for them. While Chapuys, who was ignorant of English, seldom visited court and usually relied on bribed spies, his evidence for the whereabouts of the royal family, as opposed to their private interactions or motives, is acceptable.

In February, Cromwell began to reveal plans to Chapuys for effecting Anne's downfall because, as he alleged, she was interfering with his attempts to negotiate an Anglo-Imperial treaty, which Catherine's death had made possible. Validating these conversations, Ives claims Cromwell headed a conservative Catholic faction at court, which planned to achieve Anne's ruin by distracting Henry with the charms of her attendant, Jane Seymour. In contrast, I have expressed scepticism about Chapuys' reports, for Cromwell also provided information to the ambassador that is demonstrably false, such as his pretended opposition to the dissolution of the monasteries. It is difficult to believe that Cromwell was genuinely acting as leader of a conservative faction at court that spring while he was, at the same time, aggressively promoting Erasmian reform in the church. It is more likely that he was creating an elaborate smoke screen to obscure the actual cause of Anne's fall - the miscarriage.

Through their exchanges, Cromwell could discover if Chapuys had any insights about the miscarriage from Catherine's daughter, Mary. If the miscarriage were the cause of her fall, Henry's delay until May to have her arrested can easily be explained by the reminder that when Anne emerged from her lying-in seclusion, Hilary Term was well over. On circuit, the legal establishment was not due to return to Westminster until Easter Term. Meanwhile, Henry stayed in London, avoiding her. At Easter, he returned to Greenwich and deliberately insulted Anne. Reversing past practice, he had Cromwell invite Chapuys, who had never met Anne, to her apartments on Easter Tuesday. Although Chapuys refused the invitation, which was an unforgivable breach of etiquette, Henry welcomed him to devotions in the royal chapel where Anne, unaware of the previous insult, greeted him formally and politely, anticipating incorrectly that he would be her guest. Chapuys noted that many courtiers crowded around to observe how they reacted to each other.

She was not arrested until 2 May, but she had already heard troublesome rumours. On 29 April, the day before his arrest, when Smeaton, a musician, made an unscheduled visit to her presence chamber, she rebuked and dismissed him. Perhaps he meant to warn her of the pending danger. Earlier, she had tried to thwart her downfall: she held up Elizabeth for Henry to view as a reminder that she could give birth to a normal infant and asked Parker to have a special care for the child. She also required Norris to swear to her almoner that she was an honourable lady and charged him with harbouring ambition to fill dead men's shoes, meaning the king's. Later in the Tower, in explaining their conversation, she revealed that one year earlier, when she chastised the married Weston for flirting with Anne Shelton, he responded that he and Norris, who was supposed to marry Shelton, actually came to her apartments to admire her rather than her attendant. Anne recalled defying him. This year-old event was the only potentially damaging one she could remember. She had moved to defend her honour, for, as she knew, the easiest way to ruin a married woman's reputation was to spread rumours that she was flirtatious or

wanton, a claim that could gain credence simply because contemporaries viewed women as the more lustful sex.

Utilising Anne's admission and the questionable information in diplomatic writings, Ives called her a courtly lover and Bernard an adulteress. The five accused men, probably chosen because of their lecherous reputations, were convicted and executed for committing adultery and incest with her. Only Smeaton, after he was tortured, confessed. In addition, Sir Richard Page and Sir Thomas Wyatt were imprisoned but released. Learning about Wyatt's arrest, Catholic writers, such as Sander, later charged that Anne had had sexual relations with him; they seem to have been ignorant about Page's incarceration. More recently, scholars have utilised some of Wyatt's poetry to claim that Anne had a flirtatious relationship with him. The undated poems, however, tell only of his unrequited attraction for an unnamed woman. The sole explicit historical evidence linking them together is his arrest and release in 1536.

At her trial before a commission of 26 noblemen, presided over by the Lord High Steward, her uncle, Thomas, third duke of Norfolk, Anne pleaded innocent but was found guilty. The witnesses for the crown were her attendants, one of whom was probably the midwife. Two days before her execution on 19 May, Cranmer pronounced her marriage to Henry invalid. The documentation concerning this decision has not survived. Some scholars have speculated that the Percy betrothal provided the excuse for Cranmer's verdict. It is possible that as the indictment accused her of witchlike behaviour, Cranmer based his decision on the claim that she bewitched Henry, who would have been unable to give his consent freely to the marriage.

At her execution, she refused to criticise the law that condemned her but asked observers to 'judge the best' about her case and wished Henry a long life. As the Calais executioner swung his sword, she whispered 'Lord Jesu receive my soul'. She was buried under the altar of St. Peter ad Vincula at the Tower. That morning at Lambeth, Cranmer, who heard her last confession, was found crying, because, as he explained, it was her execution day.

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