

ANNA BOLENA – BACKGROUND NOTES

Anne Boleyn – perhaps the most tragic of King Henry's six wives, seconded only by her rival, Catherine of Aragon, who quite literally died of a diseased and broken heart. Faced with trumped up charges of adultery, incest and treason, Anne was a victim of her own hubris – the brief reign of the “Thousand Day Queen” witnessed a meteoric rise to power only to be followed by a colossal fall from grace.

Her origins were humble by aristocratic standards. Though she could claim descent from Edward I (as did most of the nobility's inner circle), Anne's family achieved distinction through the efforts of her father, Sir Thomas Boleyn, a skilled diplomat. In 1512, he was one of three envoys sent to the Netherlands to meet with its ruler, Margaret, daughter of Austrian Emperor Maximilian I. Through the negotiations, Sir Thomas maintained a friendly relationship with Margaret, who extended an invitation for his daughter Anne to join her court, which was distinguished by the presence of her deceased brother Philip's offspring. Among these notable wards of state was Charles of Ghent, destined to inherit a mighty empire.

In 1514, another opportunity arose. English King Henry VIII's sister was betrothed to the aging French King Louis XII, and Anne joined her sister Mary in France as part of the bridal household. Though the marriage would end with Louis' death after only 82 days, the Boleyn sisters remained in the care of the new Queen Claude and her sister Renée. Thus, Anne spent her formative years absorbing Austrian and French culture. She also was surrounded by formidable female role models in her youth, first with Margaret of Austria and later with the new King François' mother, former regent Louise of Savoy, and sister Marguerite d'Angoulême, an upbringing that may have inflated her sense of self-worth.



SET MODELS BY NEIL PATEL



Anne returned to England in 1521 expecting to marry James Butler, the presumptive heir to Ormond, a county her father had long coveted. While negotiations lingered, she joined the court as a *demoselle d'honneur*, returning first to Mary Tudor until a highly sought-after spot opened up in Queen Catherine's domicile. At this point, she attracted the attention of Lord Henry Percy, the future Earl of Northumberland, one of the wealthiest provinces in the nation. Love blossomed, but due to Percy's future peerage, any contract for marriage had to be approved by the king and his High Chancellor, Cardinal Thomas

Wolsey. To Anne's disappointment, Percy was affianced to a better match, Lady Mary Talbot, daughter of the Earl of Shrewsbury, as part of an effort to maintain a stronghold in the north against potential French invasion via its ally, Scotland. Essentially, Anne's modest pedigree had not sufficed.

till, Anne had a presence at court and most likely was first noticed by King Henry in 1522 while performing in a masque. By Christmas 1526, a passionate romance had commenced. This was not Henry's first extramarital affair – though always discreet, he had had mistresses in the past, most notably Mary Boleyn and Elizabeth Blount, the latter liaison producing an officially recognized royal bastard, Henry Fitzroy, Duke of Richmond. Unlike these women, Anne was not to be tossed aside once used and strategized to keep the king interested by withholding certain favors. For Henry's part, he could not risk another illegitimate child and had already begun considering a separation from his first wife, Catherine of Aragon.

The divorce would not come easily, even though the religion-conscious Defender of the Faith King Henry thought he had a rational argument. Catherine had first come to England as the bride of his older brother Arthur, who died shortly after the wedding. The Bible's Leviticus states that "If a man shall take his brother's wife, it is an unclean thing ... he shall be without children" (it didn't matter that a later passage in the Deuteronomy encourages a dead husband's brother to "go in unto her and take her to him to wife," superseding the earlier pronouncement). In Henry's way of thinking, his marriage to Catherine had been a sin against God. In issuing an earlier dispensation granting the subsequent marriage between Henry and Catherine, Pope Julius II had made a mistake.

They had been a reasonably happy couple in the beginning, but Henry had greater issues to consider. Out several pregnancies, only one child, Princess Mary, had survived. Catherine was nearly six years older and at the end of her childbearing years. A daughter could be a valuable bargaining chip, whose marriage could be engineered for dynastic and diplomatic purposes, but in the 16th century, a son was truly needed to rule, particularly after some rather turbulent times. Henry's father had resolved the infamous War of the Roses by killing Richard III on the battlefield, seizing the crown and marrying Elizabeth of York, the daughter of the predeceased Edward IV. Henry VII's Lancastrian claim to the throne was shaky at best, and though he would eliminate several of his Yorkist contenders with obsessive paranoia, there were still several male Plantagenet



relatives ready to take the crown. Even as he was the corporeal union of the two houses, Henry VIII had serious concerns about his first cousins, the Courtenays (grandchildren of Edward) and the Poles (offspring of his brother George). The lack of a male heir could throw the country back into civil war.

Unfortunately, the end of a royal marriage would require the approval of the pope, and it was now up to Clement VII to reverse the earlier papal decision. This type of clearance would take a certain amount of travel time, complicated by the fact that the new Austrian Emperor (and Catherine's nephew) Charles V had invaded Rome, and the pope was virtually his prisoner, having sought refuge in the Castel Sant'Angelo. Granting Henry a favor at this particular juncture was a thorny issue given the ever-changing alliances among Austria, France, England and Italy. Also, Catherine wasn't going quietly and had enlisted the help of Charles to put her case before Rome. Rather than retire to a nunnery, as all expected, she desperately clung to her lawful place as queen and to her daughter's right to inherit the crown. She emphatically



still in existence, but the couple was clearly frustrated by the risks of impregnation, the opportunities for love-making and the lengthy approval process.

The tribunal was held in summer 1529 and proved inconclusive. Eventually, Catherine was rusticated to the English Moors, never to see her husband or daughter again. Anne's future thrived with a series of successes, including an elevation to a title in her own right as Marquess of Pembroke, and while in France visiting King François, she rewarded Henry accordingly. By the end of 1532, Anne found herself with child, and the couple secretly married, later altering their exact wedding date to allow for a nine-month gestation period in order to confirm the child's legitimacy. Parliament passed the Act of Restraint of Appeals, a preliminary step toward an autonomous Church of England, and in May, the new Archbishop Thomas Cranmer declared Henry's marriage to Catherine invalid.

Anne reached the pinnacle of her ascent when, visibly pregnant, she was crowned Queen of England at Westminster Abbey in June 1533. Born in September, the child did not turn out to be the much-anticipated boy as all had hoped, but a girl, named Elizabeth after her grandmother. Disappointment ensued, but there was a good chance Anne would be expectant again soon, which turned out to be the case. By 1534, however, there were signs the relationship between the king and his new queen had begun to sour. In the Renaissance era, it was considered dangerous to have sexual relations with one's pregnant wife, so Henry went elsewhere for satisfaction. Ever tempestuous and independent of spirit, Anne objected only to receive an angry rebuke from the king to "endure it as well as those better than her" with the reminder that he who had made her could also break her.

In March, Clement issued his long awaited ruling – there would be no divorce and Henry must return to Catherine under threat of excommunication. In retaliation, Henry passed the Act of Supremacy declaring himself Head of the Church and God's deputy on earth. This action legalized both his marriage to Anne and his divorce of Catherine. For a short period of time there had been two queens of England, but this new status demoted Henry's first wife to Dowager Princess of Wales, a title which she had held following Arthur's death.

insisted that she and Arthur had not consummated their marriage (he had died too soon) and therefore had not violated any Biblical canons.

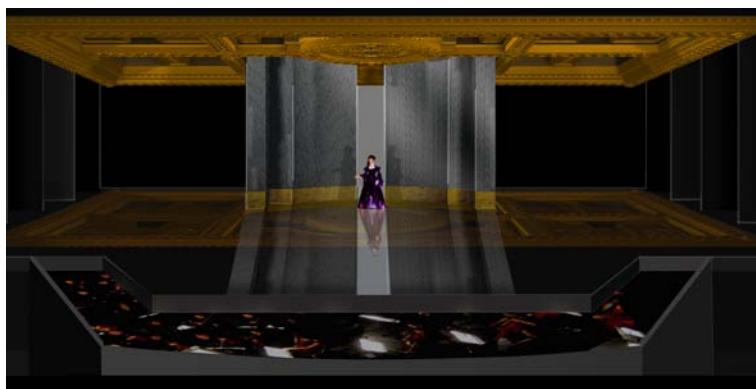
Clement ordered an investigation into the king's "Great Matter" and sent Cardinal Lorenzo Campeggio off to England. Meanwhile, an uneasy ménage à trois was maintained among Anne, the queen and the king – as for all outward appearances, the royal couple continued to perform their public duties including dining and sleeping together. Nonetheless, there is little doubt Henry doted on Anne, as evidenced by the 17 heated letters to her



On January 7, 1536, Catherine died and the royal couple rejoiced. There was no longer any uncomfortable impediment to their union. But with tragic irony, Anne miscarried her third child three weeks later (the second had been stillborn the previous summer), after hearing news of Henry's fall from a horse in the tiltyard. Meanwhile, the ambitious Seymours posed their family pawn Jane as an attractive alternative. Anne had earlier caught her in an affectionate moment with Henry, and accused him shrilly: "I saw that harlot Jane sitting on your knees while my belly was doing its duty!"

In early spring of her last year, Anne made a fatal error – she quarreled with Thomas Cromwell, Wolsey's eventual successor. They had been allies during the divorce fiasco, but the chancellor realized she had since lost her usefulness. Diplomacy was still a chief objective, and an Austrian concord was still highly desirable. Emperor Charles warmed to the notion of his cousin Mary Tudor, no longer a bastard after Catherine's death, as heir presumptive of the English throne, thereby displacing Elizabeth.

Henry would not be easily fooled, so Cromwell planned Anne's demise long in advance. A golden opportunity presented itself when she quarreled with Henry Norris, Groom of the Stool and one of Henry's closest friends, over his lack of interest in her cousin, Madge Shelton (reportedly showering more attention on Anne instead), and then openly argued with the king, a serious gaffe. On April 30, Mark Smeaton, one of Anne's chamber musicians, was arrested and racked. Under great duress and with hopes of being spared a death sentence, he confessed to adultery with the queen. Several of her ladies, including Jane Parker, George Boleyn's wife, gave evidence, indicating that they had seen the typically flirtatious and witty Anne express affection beyond what was considered to be within the constraints of "courtly love" with her male-dominated company. Her own brother had been seen kissing her on the lips, and more than once, emerging from her private apartments in a state of dishabille.



the queen at various times. The choice of these men, three of whom had close access to the king as gentlemen of the Privy Chamber, would have provided the most shock value, not to mention the incest with Anne's brother and the inclusion of a lowly, untitled musician. Norris and Anne were additionally charged with treason for socially intimating they wished the king eliminated. During their trials, even Henry's virility became a topic of derision, as Anne's pregnancies could be explained away by relations with any of these five men.

Fortunately, the now publicly cuckolded Henry was nowhere near the courtroom. Having seen his wife for the last time on May Day, when he suddenly and mysteriously rode away in the middle of a jousting match, the king focused on Jane, to whom he was betrothed the day after Anne was put to death. He was good enough to commute his second wife's burning at the stake to simple decapitation, sending for the finest swordsman in Calais and paying a hefty surcharge. She was also given a "kinder," more private beheading on Tower Green. The men also received a gentler sentence. Rather than being hung, drawn, castrated and quartered at Tyburn, the standard sentence for crimes of state, they met the axe on Tower Hill. Time has shown the testimony against them to be entirely fictitious for the actual dates of their supposed assignations proved impossibly inaccurate.

After a period of virtual nonentity (future Queen Mary Tudor had nothing good to say about her former tormentor, and Elizabeth was strangely silent about her mother during her long reign), Anne and her saga became a popular topic for art and literature that still sparks interest today. In the 18th century, the Duke's Theatre in London premiered *Virtue Betray'd or Anna Bullen* (1753) by John Banks, and in Venice, the blank verse tragedy *Anna Bolena* (1788) by Count Alessandro Pepoli was first presented. The City of Paris witnessed a mounting of *Henri VIII* (1791) by Marie-Joseph Blaise de Chénier (younger brother to the revolutionary poet André de Chénier) at the Palais Royal, followed by *Anne*

de Boulen (1821) by M. Frédéric, written for the Théâtre l’Ambigu-Comique. Adapted and translated into Italian, Blaise de Chénier’s play served as a general basis for the opera *Anna Bolena* by Gaetano Donizetti, his first major success and one of his earliest works to reach Paris and London. What started as an off-hand commission from a group of Milanese dilettantes (they also championed Vincenzo Bellini’s *La sonnambula* in the same 1830–1831 season at the competitive Teatro Carcano) turned out to be the composer’s most ambitious project to date.

Of course, by that time the subject had become quite malleable – even librettist Felice Romani felt compelled to write an apologia to explain away the historical deviations. In reality, the romance between Percy and Anne had long since been extinguished, yet their secret “pre-contract” did become an issue at her trial, and he outlived his former paramour by a few months, finally succumbing to a long illness. In her confrontations with Enrico, the operatic Anna is portrayed with a more sympathetic eye, rather than as her reputation in history would indicate, a calculating shrew referred to alternately by her detractors as the Great Enemy and the Concubine. These alterations of the actual events are common in the Romantic era of bel canto – indeed, the later operas of Donizetti’s Tudor trilogy are just as loose interpretations of the facts for dramatic purposes.

Also compassionately depicted in Donizetti’s opera, Jane Seymour may have been less so in real life. She played the same game as Anne, supplanting a sitting monarch by using her feminine charms. There is no record of any regret for climbing over Anne’s dead body to get to the bridal altar. Opposite in temperament from her predecessor, Jane played the submissive spouse to an increasingly foul-tempered Henry, and most significantly, she gave him the much-desired male heir, Edward. Unfortunately, as childbirth was a risky endeavor in the 1500s, she died just two weeks after his birth.

Henry’s progeny had a difficult path ahead. The youthful Edward VI perished after only six years on the throne. His granddaughter Jane Grey lasted just nine days as a result of an ill-planned coup intended to save the new Anglican faith, and Mary Tudor’s cataclysmic rule earned her the notorious status as “Bloody Mary” for her reactionary return to Catholicism. It was only with the long sovereignty of Anne’s daughter that the country achieved political unity and international prestige. Choosing independence over procreation, Queen Elizabeth I would be the last and most stable Tudor monarch, ending a colorful, if not ruthlessly violent, often impetuous and politically volatile, royal bloodline.

