

## Anne Boleyn: Fatal Attractions

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Steven Gunn

In his new study of Anne Boleyn, George Bernard at no point defines the ‘fatal attractions’ to which his title refers. There is not even an assurance that no rabbits were harmed in the making of the book. Perhaps the title is deliberately polysemous, for we might think of at least six fatal, or metaphorically fatal, attractions exercised by the queen. Her own attractiveness to Henry VIII proved at length fatal to her, the first of his two beheaded wives. Her alleged attractiveness to five of Henry’s courtiers, Henry Norris, Francis Weston, William Brereton, Mark Smeaton, and her own brother George Boleyn, Lord Rochford, proved fatal to them, as they were tried and executed for treasonable adultery with her. Moving out from the heart of the court, Henry’s determination to wed her and to break with Rome in the process destroyed Thomas More, John Fisher, Elizabeth Barton and many other opponents of the king’s proceedings. In the next generation, the contested title and related religious partisanship of her daughter Elizabeth in turn cost the lives of those who challenged her.

Two brands of modern attraction, lastly, might be considered, not fatal perhaps, but distorting. There is a widespread sense in the public perception of Henry’s reign that she was and remains the most fascinating of his wives, whether as seductress, style icon or strong female operator in a male political world; whether depicted by Vanessa Redgrave, Geneviève Bujold, Natalie Portman or Natalie Dormer. And debates about her life, fall, reputation and significance have exercised a magnetic pull for Tudor historians in the nearly four decades since Eric Ives published his seminal exposition of her demise as a textbook case of factional conflict at court in 1972. Ives himself has produced two editions of a biography of the queen and a number of supporting articles.<sup>(1)</sup> Retha Warnicke challenged Ives’s views with a biography in 1989 and articles either side of it.<sup>(2)</sup> David Starkey gave Anne a chapter, associating her with ‘the beginnings of faction’, in his influential general study of the politics of Henry’s court in 1985, and 31 chapters in his *Six Wives of*

2003: seven fewer than Katherine of Aragon, it is true, but a strike rate of chapters per year of marriage to the king nearly five times that of her rival.<sup>(3)</sup> Greg Walker published an article re-examining her fall in 2002 and George Bernard himself made three major contributions to the debate with studies of Anne's fall, her religious proclivities and the fall of Wolsey, in 1991, 1993 and 1996 respectively.<sup>(4)</sup> Together these distinguished scholars have wrestled over every aspect of Anne's life, from the theological implications of her book collection and her whereabouts on the dates of her alleged adulteries to the existence of her eleventh finger – or was it just an extra fingernail? – and the size of the lump on her neck.

Inevitably such intense debate has placed extreme pressure on the fragile evidence that survives, and it is with the difficulties of the evidence that Bernard begins his discussion, to those difficulties that he often returns, and with the difficulties even of identifying a realistic likeness of Anne from the 'tantalisingly fragile evidence' of portraits that he ends. The difficulties are complicated by questions of source criticism, such as how systematically we should discount the evidence of Eustace Chapuys, the imperial ambassador hostile to Anne, whose letters Bernard uses, to good effect, in the Viennese originals rather than the 19th-century English paraphrases of the *Calendar of State Papers, Spanish*. They are dogged by hypothetical issues, such as what kind of evidence might have been adduced at her trial but destroyed in her daughter's reign. They demand close calls of judgment at every stage, to which no answer can be wholly satisfying: in her first surviving letter, written from the Habsburg court in the Netherlands, why did she call Margaret of Austria a queen when everyone, surely even her lowliest English lady in waiting, knew she was not, or was she referring to some other queen, and if so, to whom? They require dissection and assessment of a number of key texts of very different sorts: Cavendish's *Life of Wolsey*, Sir Thomas Wyatt's verse, Anne and Henry's love letters, Lancelot de Carles's French poem on the queen's fate, the wonderful, but sadly unreliable, Spanish chronicle that has Anne calling to her attendant to bring her some marmalade as the signal to convey Mark Smeaton from the cupboard to the waiting queen's bed.

Bernard's close consideration of such sources has led him at almost every point to conclusions different from those who have gone before him. He sees Henry as the dominant partner in his relationship with Anne; the king's self-restraint, rather than Anne's determination to surrender for nothing short of wedlock, as the key to the long delay in their sexual relations as the divorce campaign dragged on. He suggests, indeed, that they may have slept together for a while and then ceased as the threat presented by an early pregnancy to the legitimacy of their hoped-for heir became evident, and cites tellingly in support of the idea the clause in the dispensation the king requested in 1527 that would have permitted him to marry a woman with whom he had already had sexual relations. He is equally unconvinced that Anne took a significant role in the divorce negotiations or the fall of Wolsey, noting that she could not tell Edward Foxe from Stephen Gardiner and that she wrote friendly letters to the cardinal, as she very well might do when he was trying to clear the way for her to marry the king. Anne's demotion fits the view of Henry as a clear-headed driver of policy expounded in Bernard's *The King's Reformation*.<sup>(5)</sup> It also fits his analysis of Anne's religion.

Ives in particular saw Anne as informedly and committedly evangelical in sentiment and as influential in advancing reform. For Bernard her attachment to French devotional reading matter was Erasmian rather than proto-Protestant and her attachment to 'my bishops', as she called them in the Tower, a response to their willingness to campaign for the divorce rather than their alignment with Luther. For him the evidence of those who praised Anne's devotion to the gospel in the 1560s, keen to press her daughter into further reform, is outweighed by her own ramblings under arrest, vaunting her good deeds and craving the sacrament, and by the controversial sermon her almoner John Skip preached on 2 April 1536, defending the clergy and traditional ceremonies against apparently imminent attack. These arguments might be finessed. Shaxton, evangelical in the 1530s if not later, was her almoner too, so should she not be held as much responsible for his views as Skip's? The ceremonies Skip defended – palms, ashes, holy water – were abandoned only in Edward's reign, so to defend them under Henry was mainstream rather than reactionary. Similarly the contention that Anne's brother's courtly gambling made him an unlikely Bible translator seems not to take account of the capacity of contemporaries such as Surrey to mix aristocratic wildness with pious literary pursuits. Yet here as elsewhere Bernard has certainly done enough to complicate and unsettle, if not to overturn, the recently accepted view.

On Anne's fall too he takes his own line. He agrees with most other commentators that her marriage to Henry was a mixture of tiffs and devotion, but not such as to explain Henry's destruction of his wife without some other factor. For Warnicke that new element was the king's conviction, sparked by Anne's miscarriage of a deformed foetus, that Anne had bewitched him. Bernard gives this reconstruction short shrift, his principal points being that there is no evidence of a deformed foetus and that in any case in contemporary belief witches caused other people to have deformed children, not themselves. He joins Warnicke, conversely, in rejecting Ives's view that Anne was destroyed by a court conspiracy engineered by Cromwell. It runs contrary, of course, to his view of the strong Henry, but there are also major problems in explaining Cromwell's motives: he exposes one by one the inadequacy of explanations based on England's need for diplomatic realignment with the Habsburgs, on Cromwell's need to survive an assault by more conservative courtiers on him and Anne alike, on the advantages for reform of regional government of removing power-brokers such as Breton and Norris. None the less he has to resort to the 'he would say that, wouldn't he' argument at one crucial point, when Cromwell told Chapuys, after the queen's fall, that he had managed the whole affair: a nice illustration of the way that all the evidence cannot be made to tell a straightforward story however hard we try.

The demolition of witchcraft and conspiracy leaves adultery. Here one source comes to the fore, De Carles's poem which recounts how an aristocratic lady, almost certainly the countess of Worcester, responded to her brother's reproaches about her own indiscretions by incriminating the queen. Supporting evidence comes in the shape of the bantering letters about pastime in the queen's chamber that suggest it was racier than later depictions of demure godliness might imply, and the queen's own recollections in the Tower of what Bernard fairly characterises as her 'remarkably flirtatious' chatter with male courtiers. The context is not quite as much sketched in as it might be. One element in the foregoing debate on which Bernard does not pronounce is Warnicke's attack on Ives's account of the conventions of courtly love around the queen, the nature of which we would need to understand to judge how innocent or otherwise Anne's jokes with Norris and others were. Here as elsewhere Bernard remains clear, calm and cautious: it is 'by no means a far-fetched interpretation of the fragmentary sources available to us' that Anne betrayed Henry with Norris and conceivably with others.

The debate on Anne will doubtless continue, and more books will be written, perhaps all the more so because this is a little too much an argument and not quite enough a life and times to serve as a general reader's biography of Anne. There are elements of context that are quite properly mentioned – parallels with Katherine Howard, for instance, or the rich cultural life Anne would have enjoyed at the French and Flemish courts – but might have been filled out to give us more sense of what was special about Anne. There are a few slight errors of fact that might confuse the unwary, over such matters as Anne's father's title after 1529 and the family relationship between Charles V and Katherine of Aragon (pp. 40, 57). Yet it would be a

shame if this book did not come into the hands of those outside the narrow circle of Tudor historical debate. It would tell them more about the challenge and the fascination of working out what really happened in Henry VIII's England than many a more uncomplicated account of Anne as saint, sorceress or sinner.

## Notes

1. E. W. Ives, 'Faction at the court of Henry VIII: the fall of Anne Boleyn', *History*, 57 (1972), 169–88; *Anne Boleyn* (Oxford, 1986); *The Life and Death of Anne Boleyn: 'the Most Happy'* (Oxford, 2004); 'Stress, faction and ideology in early-Tudor England', *Historical Journal*, 34 (1991), 193–202; 'The fall of Anne Boleyn reconsidered', *English Historical Review*, 107 (1992), 651–64; 'Anne Boleyn and the early Reformation in England: the contemporary evidence', *Historical Journal*, 37 (1994), 389–400; 'Anne Boleyn and the «Entente Évangélique»', in *François Ier et Henri VIII, deux princes de la Renaissance 1515-1547*, ed. Charles Giry-Deloison (Lille, 1996), 83–102. [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Retha M. Warnicke, *The Rise and Fall of Anne Boleyn: Family Politics at the Court of Henry VIII* (Cambridge, 1989); 'The fall of Anne Boleyn: a reassessment', *History*, 70 (1985), 1–15; 'Anne Boleyn's childhood and adolescence', *Historical Journal*, 28 (1985), 939–52; 'The eternal triangle and court politics: Henry VIII, Anne Boleyn, and Sir Thomas Wyatt', *Albion*, 18 (1986), 565–79; 'Sexual heresy at the court of Henry VIII', *Historical Journal*, 30 (1987), 247–68; 'Anne Boleyn revisited', *Historical Journal*, 34 (1991), 953–4; 'The fall of Anne Boleyn revisited', *English Historical Review*, 108 (1993), 653–65; 'Family and kinship relations at the Henrician court: the Boleyns and Howards', in *Tudor Political Culture*, ed. Hoak, Dale (Cambridge, 1995), 31–53; 'The conventions of courtly love and Anne Boleyn', in *State, Sovereigns & Society in Early Modern England: Essays in Honour of A. J. Slavin*, ed. Charles Hope Carlton, Robert L. Woods, Mary L. Robertson and Joseph Block (Stroud, 1998), 103–18; 'Anne Boleyn in history, drama, and film', 'High and Mighty Queens' of *Early Modern England: Realities and Representations*, ed. Carole Levin, Jo Eldridge Carney and Debra Barrett-Graves (New York and Basingstoke, 2003), 239–56; 'Reshaping Tudor biography: Anne Boleyn and Anne of Cleves', in *Writing Biography: Historians & their Craft*, ed. Lloyd E. Ambrosius (Lincoln, NE, 2004), 53–78. [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. David Starkey, *The Reign of Henry VIII, Personalities and Politics* (London, 1985); *Six Wives: the Queens of Henry VIII* (London, 2003). [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Greg Walker, 'Rethinking the fall of Anne Boleyn', *Historical Journal*, 45 (2002), 1–29; G. W. Bernard, 'The fall of Anne Boleyn', *English Historical Review*, 106 (1991), 584–610; 'The fall of Anne Boleyn: a rejoinder', *English Historical Review*, 107 (1992), 665–74; 'Anne Boleyn's religion', *Historical Journal*, 36 (1993), 1–20; 'The fall of Wolsey reconsidered', *Journal of British Studies*, 35 (1996), 277–310. [Back to \(4\)](#)
5. G. W. Bernard, *The King's Reformation: Henry VIII and the Remaking of the English Church* (New Haven, CT, 2005) [Back to \(5\)](#)

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