The Fall of Anne Boleyn

“The Most Happy”

By Claire Ridgway
Introduction

Anne Boleyn, queen consort to the Tudor monarch Henry VIII, was executed at the Tower of London on the 19th of May 1536, after being found guilty of treason, adultery and incest, charges that the majority of historians believe she was entirely innocent of and actually had alibis for.

Anne Boleyn’s story is an amazing one. Anne was no foreign princess, she was a commoner who had come to court because her father was a diplomat to Henry VIII. This woman caught the eye of Henry VIII, who was well-known for taking mistresses, but there was something different about her that made Henry become infatuated and obsessed with her and that led to her becoming Henry’s wife, not his mistress. Henry VIII married Anne Boleyn for love, not diplomacy, the only English monarch to marry for this reason. He had to move heaven and earth to marry her – breaking with Rome, risking his popularity, establishing the Acts of Supremacy and Succession, executing people he loved, like Thomas More etc. - but marry her he did.
Many have made out that Anne was a witch, who bewitched Henry and seduced him; others have concluded that she was playing a game, not yielding to Henry or giving away her virtue until she had a promise of marriage; and still others believe that she was simply an instrument, like her sister Mary, used by her father, Thomas Boleyn, and her uncle, the Duke of Norfolk, to seek favour at court. I can't say that I agree with any of those opinions, I believe that Henry's passion for Anne bowled her over and that she fell in love with him. Far from using her virtue as bait, she was a religious woman, a passionate evangelical, who wanted to protect her virtue and her soul, and not end up like Henry's other mistresses, including her sister Mary.

Henry VIII finally married Anne Boleyn in January 1533, after having pursued her for at least seven years, yet just over three years later she was executed and he married Jane Seymour.

A Conspiracy to Topple a Queen

It is widely acknowledged that Thomas Cromwell, the King's secretary, was responsible for the downfall of Anne Boleyn, her brother and followers, not Henry VIII himself. There is no evidence that Henry VIII ordered Cromwell to conspire against his wife; on the contrary, Henry was calling Anne “our most dear and most entirely beloved wife, the queen” in a letter written as late as the 24th April, 1536, to his ambassador at Rome, Richard Pate. Henry had also worked hard to get Chapuys, the Imperial Ambassador, and the rest of Europe to recognise Anne as his legitimate wife and had openly reinforced his commitment to Anne over the Easter weekend of 1536 and spoken of them going on to have a male heir. But, under a month later Anne was dead, executed as a traitor to her king.

So, how did Cromwell, a man who we know was close to Anne and a sympathiser to her evangelical views, come to betray her and form plans to get
rid of her, not just by annulling the marriage and sending her off to a convent, but by executing her?

The answer is fear. Cromwell was already beginning to worry about Anne’s influence over Henry and her pro-French views, while he was being pressurised by Eustace Chapuys (Emperor Charles V’s ambassador) to form an alliance with Charles and to legitimise Mary (Henry’s daughter by Catherine of Aragon) and her claim to the throne. If this wasn’t enough of a worry, Cromwell then clashed with her over control of patronage and the dissolution of the monasteries. Anne Boleyn not only argued with Cromwell over where the money from the monasteries was going (she wanted it to go to the poor and to education), she even instructed her almoner, John Skip, to preach against Cromwell and his policies. Cromwell sensed danger and it is easy to see why he was afraid, after all, hadn’t Anne caused the death of his predecessor, Thomas
More? If she knew how close he was to the Imperial ambassador, Chapuys, then surely she would turn Henry against him.

Thomas Cromwell had much to think about. He knew Anne well and was convinced that this feisty and intelligent woman would not “go quietly” and that even if he sent her away, Henry's passion for Anne may well cause her to come back. Both she and her supporters needed to go and to go permanently. It was a case of her or him, Cromwell had to get rid of her first.

Eric Ives, writer and historian, believes that Thomas Cromwell only moved against Anne Boleyn when the king's actions at Easter convinced him that her influence over Henry put both England and Cromwell in danger. Cromwell acted quickly. Decision to action (the first arrest) was just 12 days and Anne was dead less than 3 weeks later.
But how did Cromwell convince a king, who still seemed so passionate about his queen, that Anne needed to go?

Many believe that this was easy for Cromwell because the royal marriage was already cooling and Henry's head had been turned by Jane Seymour, but Henry's actions and his words in support of Anne do not tally with this opinion. Jane Seymour was used as a tool by Cromwell, Chapuys, Sir Nicholas Carew and the Catholic Conservatives to tempt Henry away from Anne and to show him what could be, an alternative future, she was not already in his life souring his marriage and could have been just another dalliance.

Cromwell knew that he had to have a good enough reason for the king to doubt Anne. The Conservatives' lawyers felt that Anne's pre-contract to the Earl of Northumberland could be used to invalidate her marriage to Henry, but Cromwell knew that Henry was already aware of this alleged pre-contract and that it meant nothing to Henry. Cromwell needed to hurt Henry, to plant the seeds of doubt, water them and cultivate them, and see Henry reject his wife.

So, Cromwell hit Henry where it hurt! He already knew that Anne's latest miscarriage had hurt the king and that Henry was worried that God had not blessed him with a son because this marriage was wrong, just like his marriage to Catherine of Aragon. He also knew that there was tension between Henry and Anne. According to Chapuys, after Anne's miscarriage Henry had said “I see that God will not give me male children” and Anne had lashed back at the king blaming his accident and his wondering eye (attention to other women) for her miscarriage. This account does not tally with other accounts of Henry supporting Anne
and talking about more children, but this miscarriage was definitely a huge blow for Henry and a worry for Anne, a queen who had no royal relatives to fight her corner if Henry's attraction to Jane became serious.

Part of me thinks that Anne may have dug her own grave and her actions “helped” Cromwell with his conspiring. I'm positive that she was innocent of the crimes she was accused of, but that she was guilty of alienating the king and angering him with her accusations and tongue-lashings. Catherine of Aragon had known her place, she had accepted that her husband would stray, that he would take mistresses, as was his royal right, but Anne had married Henry for love and their marriage depended on love, what if Henry became passionate about Jane? Where would that leave Anne? Anne could not turn a blind eye, Anne had to fight and this was her downfall. David Starkey points out that what had once attracted the king, i.e. Anne's assertiveness and her ability to say “no”, when everyone always said “yes” to Henry, started to annoy the king and that “Not only did it [the marriage] fail to produce the longed-for male heir, but also Anne's proud and abrasive character soon became intolerable to her husband”. Suddenly the virtuous, demure, meek and mild Jane Seymour, who had been coached by the Conservatives, was looking very attractive to Henry.

I believe that the combination of Anne's inability to produce a son, Henry's paranoia over the validity of the marriage, his fear about the future security of the throne and Anne's nagging and feisty behaviour led to Henry being vulnerable to Cromwell's whisperings and accusations against Anne and the Catholic Conservatives' pushing forward of Jane Seymour.

Cromwell was able to use the 1352 Statute of Treason
against Anne Boleyn, in that by accusing Anne and her key followers of adultery, he could actually charge them with treason. This is because a queen's adultery could contaminate the future of the succession, in other words a future baby may not be Henry's child.

It is not clear what Cromwell told the king about his conspiracy against Anne, but the fact that Henry VIII announced on 23rd April that Sir Nicholas Carew was becoming a Knight of the Garter, instead of the expectant George Boleyn, Lord Rochford, shows us that something was going on.

The next day, 24th April, Henry VIII signed the patent of oyer and terminer to allow Cromwell to investigate potential cases of treason and to bring them to justice where necessary. Did he know that Cromwell was going to use this against Anne? It's not clear, particularly as Henry was still publicly defending Anne. Whatever the truth of the matter, Cromwell started to investigate Anne and gather “evidence” against her.

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Around the 29th or 30th of April, Henry and Anne argued, and Anne brought up the fact that Henry Norris, a personal friend of Henry and a member of the Privy Chamber, was in love with her. Unfortunately, this accusation was flung at Henry in front of an audience and so probably angered and embarrassed him. Mark Smeaton, a court musician, is also said to have made an exhibition of himself in front of the queen, regarding his affection towards her, and this and the accusations against Henry Norris were picked up by Cromwell and used as evidence of the Queen’s adultery.

On Sunday 30th April, Mark Smeaton was arrested and the following day, after the May Day jousts, Henry Norris was arrested. It didn’t stop there though, over the following 3-4 days George Boleyn, Sir Francis Weston, William Brereton, Sir Thomas Wyatt, Sir Richard Page and Anne herself were arrested, and Sir Francis Bryan was interrogated. It is said that Mark Smeaton, who was not a member of the Privy Council or a gentleman of high standing, was tortured into confessing to adultery with the queen, and this was used to fuel Henry’s paranoia. Accounts of Henry VIII suggest that he loved self-pity and this self-pity was fuelled by Smeaton’s confession and stories from Carew and the Seymours (the Conservatives) about how Anne had poisoned Catherine of Aragon and was planning to poison the Lady Mary. In the meantime, Jane Seymour dangled her virtue in front of Henry and the two of them had many secret assignations. What worked for Anne, i.e. not yielding to the king's desire, worked for Jane too.

Although the other men did not confess and steadfastly maintained their innocence, only Wyatt, Page and Bryan were released, due to their powerful connections. Anne, by this time, was panicked and scared, and started babbling to her ladies in the Tower. She really didn’t help herself by recounting events to try and figure out what could be seen as suspicious. Unfortunately, her babblings, including a comment about how she was worried about what Sir Francis Weston would say, were used against her. On Friday 12th May, Norris, Smeaton,
Brereton and Weston were tried and found guilty of treason and sentenced to execution. On 14th of May, Anne and George Boleyn were tried and condemned to death. During her trial, Anne denied all charges and said:-

“I do not say that I have always borne towards the king the humility which I owed him, considering his kindness and the great honour he showed me and the great respect he always paid me; I admit too, that often I have taken it into my head to be jealous of him...But may God be my witness if I have done him any other wrong.” (Quoted from Eric Ives' “The Life and Death of Anne Boleyn”).

This was an admission from Anne that she may not have been a perfect wife, but that that was her only crime.

On the 17th of May, 1536, the five men were beheaded and then two days later, on the 19th of May, Anne Boleyn, Queen of England, was beheaded by a French swordsman within the grounds of the Tower of London. The swordsman had been ordered from Calais, by a “merciful Henry VIII, as death by sword was meant to be less cruel than death by axe. We may well wonder about the king’s mercy when we consider that the swordsman was ordered before Anne was even tried!.

Before her execution, Anne gave the following speech:-

“For according to the law and by the law I am judged to die, and therefore I will speak nothing against it. I am come hither to accuse no man, nor to speak of that whereof I am accused and condemned to die, but I pray God save the king and send him long to reign over you, for a gentler nor a more merciful prince was there never, and to me he was ever a good, a gentle, and sovereign lord. And if any person will meddle of my cause, I require them to judge the best. And thus I take my leave of the world and of you all, and I heartily desire you all to pray for me.”

After saying farewell to her servants, Anne knelt in preparation
for her execution, saying “Jesu receive my soul; O Lord God, have pity on my soul. To Christ I commend my soul”. Then this queen of England was executed and her body wrapped and taken to the Chapel of St Peter ad Vincula, where she still lies today.

Many people ask why she did not speak defiantly against the king or protest her innocence, but really what was the point? As a mother, she had to think of the safety of Princess Elizabeth and speaking out against the king may well have turned him against his daughter by Anne. I won't go as far as to say that Anne died a martyr's death, as she did not die for her faith, but I agree with Archbishop Cranmer who, on hearing of the death of Anne, said: “She who has been the Queen of England on earth will today become a Queen in Heaven” and then he broke down and wept for the woman he had known and counselled for so long. Anne Boleyn, a woman whose only crime was falling in love with a king, had been executed as a traitor. Little did she know that she had changed the course of English history and that her daughter would become one of the most important monarch that England has ever known.

Eleven days after the death of Anne Boleyn “The Most Happy”, Henry VIII married his third wife, Jane Seymour whose motto became “Bound to Obey and Serve” and forgot the woman to whom he had made the promise “ever truly to honour, love and serve you.”

Sources: “The Life and Death of Anne Boleyn” by Eric Ives, “Anne Boleyn: A New Life of England’s Tragic Queen” By Joanna Denny”, “Henry VIII: Personalities and Politics” by David Starkey” and “The Love Letters of Henry VIII to Anne Boleyn”.