

## Anne Boleyn's Love-life



This extract is taken from *The Anne Boleyn Collection II* by Claire Ridgway.

In May 1536, while Anne Boleyn was imprisoned in the Tower awaiting her death, her husband, King Henry VIII, was heard to comment that he thought that “upwards of 100 gentlemen have had criminal connexion with her”,<sup>1</sup> i.e. that Anne had slept with over one hundred men. I believe that we can put this comment down to bluster, to Henry defending his actions and the treatment of Anne, and even Chapuys was sceptical, commenting that “You never saw a prince or husband show or wear his horns more patiently and lightly than this one does. I leave you to guess the cause of it.”<sup>2</sup>

Obviously Henry was not showing any signs of distress at his wife making a mockery of their marriage, not like he did when he broke down in tears in front of his privy council over Catherine Howard's alleged betrayal. However, even if we put Henry's words down to bluster, Anne Boleyn has been called many names, in the sixteenth century and today, which relate to her sexuality and her love life:

- Ⓜ The scandal of christendom
- Ⓜ Goggle-eyed whore
- Ⓜ The concubine
- Ⓜ The putain
- Ⓜ Harlot
- Ⓜ The English Mare
- Ⓜ The Royal Mule
- Ⓜ A home-wrecker

These are names used by her enemies, men such as Nicholas Sander, who also wrote of her having an extra finger, a wen and a projecting tooth; and of course Eustace Chapuys, who just couldn't bring himself to call the woman he viewed as a usurper by name. These men had an agenda, a need to discredit Anne, plus Sander may well have been confusing Anne and her sister, Mary, who Francis I allegedly nicknamed his “English Mare”. But had Anne done anything to earn herself these nicknames? Had she, as one book's blurb claims, before she met Henry VIII, “wandered down love's winding path....[and] learned its twists and turns during her youth spent at the courts of the Low Countries and France”?<sup>3</sup> Let's examine the love-life of this fascinating Queen...

### Sinning with the Family Chaplain and Butler?

According to the afore-mentioned Nicholas Sander, Anne was actually banished to France by her father at the age of fifteen because she had “sinned first with her father's butler, and then with his chaplain”.<sup>4</sup> I think we can take this claim with a very hefty pinch of salt when we know that Anne was sent to Margaret of Austria's court at the age of twelve to finish her education and then, a year later, to France to serve Mary Tudor, Queen of France. She was already in France at the age of

fifteen and Sander is the only one to make this claim.

## **Corrupted by the French Court**

Alison Weir questions Anne Boleyn's virtue in her recent biography of Mary Boleyn, writing that she had “risked becoming the subject of scandal at the French court”.<sup>5</sup> Weir uses two pieces of evidence to back this up:

1. Francis I, King of France, confiding in Rodolfo Pio, Bishop of Faenza: “Francis also spoke three days ago of the new queen of England, how little virtuously she has always lived and now lives, and how she and her brother and adherents suspect the duke of Norfolk of wishing to make his son King, and marry him to the King's legitimate daughter, though they are near relations.”<sup>6</sup>
2. Eustace Chapuys, imperial ambassador, reporting that Henry VIII had confided in him that Anne had been “corrupted” during her time in France.

What Chapuys actually reported was that after Anne's fall Henry did not want to marry Madeleine of Valois, Francis I's daughter, because “he had had too much experience of French bringing up and manners”.<sup>7</sup> Not quite the same as saying that Anne Boleyn had been corrupted.

There is no evidence to back up Francis I's claim that Anne had lived “little virtuously” and we don't even know that Francis really said it. Surely someone would have warned Henry VIII, before their marriage, if Anne Boleyn had been corrupted in France; scandal would certainly have been attached to her name. Chapuys, one of Anne's main enemies, does not repeat any gossip about her time in France or her alleged sexual experience. Seeing as Anne served the virtuous Queen Claude in France, I suspect that Anne kept her virtue. Anne would have known that her future marriage prospects rested on her keeping her virginity and her reputation.

## **First Love – Henry Percy**

Anne Boleyn returned to England in late 1521, after being recalled to marry James Butler, one of her Irish relations, and to serve Catherine of Aragon, Henry VIII's first wife. According to Cardinal Wolsey's gentleman-usher, George Cavendish, it was in 1523, while Anne was serving Catherine, that she met Henry Percy, the son and heir of the Earl of Northumberland, who was a member of Wolsey's household. They fell in love and were apparently intending to marry when Wolsey and the King put a stop to their relationship.

Cavendish claims that the King ordered Wolsey to stop the marriage because of his “secret affection”<sup>8</sup> for Anne, but there is no other evidence that the King was attracted to Anne at this time. It is thought that he was involved with her sister, Mary, in 1523, and the marriage was more likely to have been stopped due to Wolsey's plans for Anne to marry Butler. Anne and Percy were separated and Percy was quickly married off to Mary Talbot. It was not a happy marriage.

## **Thomas Wyatt - The Lover Confesseth Him in Love**

In Hilary Mantel's recent novel, *Bring Up the Bodies*, Henry VIII suspects his wife of having had a sexual relationship with Thomas Wyatt the Elder, poet and courtier, but is there any truth to this claim?

Thomas Wyatt grew up at Allington Castle, around twenty miles from Hever Castle, the Boleyn family home, and he and Anne were a similar age. However, Anne was abroad for her teenage years so they probably did not meet until Anne began serving Catherine of Aragon in the 1520s. Wyatt was a married man, albeit unhappily married, and his love for Anne is recorded by his grandson, George Wyatt, in his memoir of Anne Boleyn. “The Life of Queen Anne Boleigne”.<sup>9</sup> George records

that when Wyatt first saw Anne at court, he was “surprised by the sight thereof”, and he also records a story about Wyatt and King Henry VIII arguing over Anne. In this story, Wyatt manages to snatch a jewel from Anne and keeps it as a trophy. Later, when he is playing playing bowls with the King and arguing over a shot, the King points to the wood, showing a finger on which he is wearing Anne's ring, and declares “Wyatt, I tell thee it is mine”. Wyatt, seeing the ring, replies “If it may like your majesty to give me leave to measure it, I hope it will be mine”, and then takes Anne's jewel, which was hanging around his neck, and begins to measure the cast with its ribbon. An angry Henry VIII stomped off in search of Anne for an explanation.

Of course, we don't know the truth of this story, but it could well have been handed down the family. However, it does not mean that Anne and Wyatt necessarily had a relationship. Wyatt's poem, “Whoso List to Hunt” tells of a man hunting a hind, with little chance of success, and then being forced to withdraw from the hunt because of another hunter. Wyatt may have been referring to his unrequited love for Anne and his forced withdrawal of his suit because of Henry VIII's interest in her:

“There is written, her fair neck round about:  
Noli me tangere, for Caesar's I am”

Anne belonged to another, a more important man than Wyatt.

The Spanish Chronicle<sup>10</sup> tells an interesting story. In it, Wyatt visits Anne at Hever Castle and begins kissing her and touching her breast. All of a sudden, the couple are disturbed by a stamping noise from upstairs, the stamping of a jealous and impatient lover whose liaison with Anne had been interrupted by Wyatt's arrival. This story just cannot be taken seriously, it is pure tabloid journalism and simply an attempt to blacken Anne's name. No other source backs it up.

## Henry VIII – For Caesar's I Am

Nobody knows exactly when Anne caught Henry VIII's eye, but Henry rode out to the Shrovetide joust of 1526 motto with the motto “Declare je nos” (Declare I dare not) embroidered on his costume below a picture of a man's heart engulfed in flames. He was declaring his love and passion for a new flame and it is likely that she was Anne Boleyn.

What we do know is that Henry bombarded Anne with love letters between spring 1527 and autumn 1528, because we still have them, and that the couple agreed to marry in the summer of 1527. Following Anne's acceptance of his proposal, Henry VIII decided, in August 1527, to ask the Pope for a dispensation to marry Anne. He had no idea at that time that he'd have to wait so long to marry Anne, but he didn't give up and the couple were married in a secret ceremony on 25<sup>th</sup> January 1533.

Their relationship sounds pretty sordid. He was a married man, she was his wife's lady-in-waiting, and they actually married before his annulment had come through, but Henry was intent on replacing Catherine and having a fertile wife who would give him an heir to the throne. Anne was his chance.

## Her Frail and Carnal Appetites

In 1533, Anne Boleyn was accused of committing adultery and incest, and of conspiring with her lovers to kill the King. The Middlesex and Kent indictments accused Anne of “following daily her frail and carnal appetites” and procuring Sir Henry Norris, Sir Francis Weston, Sir William Brereton, Mark Smeaton and her own brother, George Boleyn, to “violate” her by “sweet words, kisses, touches and otherwise”.<sup>11</sup> In a letter to the King's ambassadors in France, Thomas Cromwell referred to Anne's “abominable” deeds and her “incontinent living”.<sup>12</sup> He painted her as the Queen of debauchery, a woman whose sexual appetite knew no ends.

We know now that the dates of Anne's alleged crimes just do not make sense, with three quarters of

them being disproved by historians, and the majority of historians believe that Anne and the five men were framed. There is no evidence that Anne was unfaithful to the King and it appears that it was simply a plot to get rid of her once and for all.

## **Conclusion**

When I read through these stories of Anne's alleged lovers it makes me think of the tabloid magazines you see advertised on TV, the ones giving the latest salacious gossip about celebrities – who's sleeping with who, who's having an affair, who's having whose baby etc. We take these stories with a pinch of salt because we generally find out later that they have no basis. Well, the propaganda machinery was in full swing in Tudor times too and Chapuys was a great one for repeating gossip and then correcting himself later. And don't get me started on The Spanish Chronicle which has Thomas Cromwell interrogating Catherine Howard when he was actually dead at that time!

Anne Boleyn was and is a fascinating lady, but her love-life was far from salacious. OK, she got involved with a married man but that's the most salacious it gets. Married man: yes, 100+ lovers: not likely. She wasn't an angel, but she was far from a whore.

- 1 "Calendar of State Papers, Spain, Volume 5 Part 2: 1536-1538," 121.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Wilkinson, *The Early Loves of Anne Boleyn*.
- 4 Sander, *Rise and Growth of the Anglican Schism*.
- 5 Weir, *Mary Boleyn: The Great and Infamous Whore*, 76.
- 6 "Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic, Henry VIII, Volume 8," n. 985.
- 7 "Calendar of State Papers, Spain, Volume 5 Part 2: 1536-1538," chap. Additions and corrections to No.61, 6th June 1536 .
- 8 Cavendish, *The Life of Cardinal Wolsey*, 1:58.
- 9 Cavendish, *The Life of Cardinal Wolsey, Volume 2*.
- 10 Hume, *Chronicle of King Henry VIII. of England*, 99.
- 11 "Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic, Henry VIII, Volume 10 - January-June 1536," n. 876.
- 12 Ibid., n. 873.