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INTERPRETING THE FALL OF ANNE BOLEYN

Henry Atmore

The juridical murder of Anne Boleyn, Henry VIII's second wife and Queen of England from 1533-1536, presents a compelling case of the challenges of historical interpretation. Her glamour (in both the sixteenth-century and modern senses of the word) undoubtedly contributes to the difficulty. Anne's combination of physical beauty and courtly accomplishment was the root of the fascination she exerted over her contemporaries, and has continued to exert ever since. (Nobody has ever bothered very much with any of Henry's other Queens.) At the time of her execution, and later in the sixteenth-century when polemicists on both side of the Counter-Reformation divide struggled to give the reasons for it, the strength of her personality, and of the emotions she aroused in friends and enemies alike, made it hard to get her into proper perspective. But glamour is something that resists retrospective reconstruction; and this is doubly the case with Anne, whose charms were not of an obvious kind, and baffled even some of those who succumbed to them. Rather remarkably, due to the violence of Henry's feelings in the immediate aftermath of his decision to have her killed, we do not even have a clear idea what she looked like.¹

¹ No definite contemporary image of Anne has survived. In the aftermath of the 1536 marriage crisis Henry was so pained by her memory that he destroyed all the material evidence of her existence he could lay his hand on. A famous painting, sometimes attributed to Nicholas Hilliard, does exist. It is clearly *intended* to be Anne (from the superscription, and the 'B' pendant on the subject's necklace), but it is not a living image. Both the provenance and the artist are unknown: stylistic evidence points to ↗

And of course the conduct of Anne's life, and manner of her death, had a wider significance; in the politico-religious maelstrom of the Henrician Reformation, the events of the summer of 1536 were crucial. Not least of the problems raised by the story of Anne's downfall is how to integrate these two perspectives on 'history': what bearing do sex, glamour, and the private turmoil of marital relations have on our understanding of affairs of state — papal legates, prayer-books, and the often brutal struggle for and exercise of power? It has become a critical commonplace that modern distinctions between private and public life did not obtain in Europe much before the mid-18th-century. This is an attractive idea for the historian; it means that, documentary lacunae notwithstanding, historical agency is transparent to retrospective analysis. People — people of Anne's peculiar caste at any rate (who for many practical purposes solely qualify as people in the period) — simply were as they presented themselves, or were represented by others, to be [Greenblatt]. But is this right? Should we be so quick to deny Anne and her coevals their opacity to our — and perhaps their own — understanding?

I.

Anne's fall from grace was as rapid as it was mysterious. It is not ill-documented, and the order of events is well-established. In a number of cases, however, their precise significance is contested.

\a date around 1570-80, i.e. several decades after Anne's death, but a time when there were still people living who had met Anne and could attest to the accuracy of the likeness — or not, as the case might have been. The dark hair, slightly protuberant eyes and sallow complexion do conform to certain written descriptions of the Queen; other contemporary documents, however, present her as a more conventional beauty. In addition, there survive several Hans Holbein sketches of the 1530s traditionally identified as Anne. It is likely that Holbein did paint her (he painted both of her two immediate successors), maybe more than once, and that the finished articles were lost in the conflagration of 1536. Given the rather anemic quality of Holbein's portraits of Henry's other consorts (vapid Anne of Cleves; dowdy Jane Seymour) this might be just as well. The sketch — if it is indeed Anne — gives a pleasing sense of vitality, a quality Anne possessed in abundance, but that is lacking in other images purported to be of her.

January 1536 — Beginning of Henry's liaison with Jane Seymour.

7th January — Katherine of Aragorn dies.

c. 29th January — Anne miscarries. The baby is reported to have been male.

2nd April — Anne's almoner, John Skip, preaches condemning the confiscation of clerical property.

18th April — Anne acknowledges Eustace Chapuys, the Imperial Envoy, in the chapel at Greenwich Palace. (Chapuys was an indefatigable chronicler of goings-on at Henry's court.) That evening Chapuys dines with Anne's brother, Lord Rochford. It is not known what they discussed, but it is believed that this meeting troubled Thomas Cromwell.

24th April — Cromwell appoints an *oyer & terminer* commission for the prosecution of treason. Most — though not all — historians interpret this as marking the first administrative step in Cromwell's plot against Anne.

29th April — Anne has a public argument with Henry Norris. Norris is instructed to go to his almoner and 'swear on the Queen's honour'.

30th April — Mark Smeaton is arrested. Under duress (probably physical) he confesses to adultery with Anne.

1st May — Joust at Greenwich. Henry rides with Norris.

2nd May — Anne and Rochford are arrested. They are imprisoned in the Tower, where Anne makes a series of indiscrete remarks to her jailer. He is a spy, and these comments will later be used against her at her trial. Five other men — Norris, Brereton, Weston, Thomas Wyatt & Page — also arrested.

12th May — Smeaton, Norris, Brereton, and Weston are tried and found guilty of adultery and treason.

15th May — Anne and Rochford are tried and found guilty.

17th May — The five men are executed. Wyatt (maybe) witnesses the event from his cell in the Tower. Thomas Cranmer, Archbishop of Canterbury, pronounces the Boleyn marriage invalid under

scripture.

19th May — Anne is executed.

There is no evidence of trouble with Henry before 29th January. Even the impact of the miscarriage might be overstated: Henry had been through this before, with Katherine. Likewise, there was no reason to suppose that Henry's relationship with Jane Seymour was any different from scores of previous dalliances with ladies-in-waiting. The first rumours of a falling out with Cromwell reached Chapuys on 1st April. And yet, barely six weeks later, Anne was dead: Cromwell had destroyed her: and Henry so reviled her memory, he would suffer nobody to speak of her in his presence. Nobody, other possibly than Henry himself (whose capacity for self-delusion was limitless) believed her guilty of the crimes of which she had been accused. So what had happened?

II.

The answer may be as simple as this: Henry "hated her" [Scarisbrick, xii]. Much of the intensity of his infatuation between 1527 and 1532 had stemmed from Anne's refusal to sleep with him. Henry was not a man accustomed to being told 'No' by anybody. Initially, at least, the relationship offered him something unprecedented: a meeting of equals. But once in full possession — legal and physical — of Anne, his attitude changed. Her enemies had always charged that she was willful, ambitious, and meddling. Now Henry came to see the force of the objections. Part of Anne's attraction had been her unconventionality: this had been befitting in a mistress, but was less so in a wife and Queen Consort. It has been suggested that Henry only fell in love with Jane Seymour *after* Anne started scolding him for fooling around with her. If so, this indicates in Anne a real and ultimately fatal naivety. Katherine wouldn't have dared act the scold, or would have recognized the futility of protest

over such matters. In Tudor marriages *male* infidelity was taken for granted, and wives were expected to put up with it. One of Henry's earlier dalliances had been with Anne's own sister, so she can't have been all that surprised by his behaviour. Whatever the cause, Henry's mounting dissatisfaction with Anne's personality, combined with his always roving eye and her failure to produce a male heir, led to a breakdown in their personal relations.

It might be objected that people in the sixteenth-century didn't have 'personal relations' in this sense. Tudor men and women married for all sorts of reasons, but love, passion, and conjugal compatibility were not high amongst them. They married to shore up or advance social status: to pool wealth: to continue the family name [Stone; for timely criticism of Stone's picture of Early-Modern hard-heartedness see Duffy, 14]. At the dynastic level, marriage was a tool of politics. Put crudely, you would be less inclined to attack a country — and it would be less inclined to attack you — if its King was married to your sister. For example, in the first two decades of his reign Henry generally allied himself with his Hapsburg in-laws — Ferdinand, Maximilian and Charles, brother, cousin and nephew respectively to Henry's wife — against the French. From 1527, conversely, the French were Henry's most dependable allies in his struggle to obtain his divorce.

All this is true enough, but these were exceptional circumstances. The Boleyn marriage was unique in the way it confounded contemporary expectations. For Henry, there was little political gain in marrying Anne in 1527, or even 1533, and there was a great deal to be lost, not least the goodwill of the two most powerful men in Christendom: the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V, who was Katherine of Aragon's nephew, and the Pope. That Henry persisted in the match is proof of immunity to considerations of *realpolitik*. He married Anne because he loved her, there is no other explanation. He had her head cut off because he had grown to hate her.

But what this does fail to explain is the extreme *violence* of

Anne's downfall. This was such that it was accounted a 'mercy' when Henry commuted her sentence to beheading: there had been the real possibility that she would be burned alive. And it should not be forgotten that Anne was not the only one to be destroyed. Five men, most if not all of them entirely innocent of the charges against them, were also executed. Two of them (Norris and Rochford) were amongst the highest nobles in the land. Bloodletting on this scale cannot be attributed to personal animus alone. If Henry had simply wanted out of a marriage turned sour that could have been easily arranged. The very scriptural prescription he had alleged to his marriage to Katherine — the injunction in *Leviticus* against marrying a brother's wife — was arguably also applicable to his marriage to Anne. A number of theologians had asserted that a sister couldn't marry a sister's husband, or anybody with whom she had enjoyed sexual relations. It was public knowledge that Henry had slept with Anne's sister, Mary, in the late 1510s. When in fact the Boleyn marriage *was* pronounced invalid, by Cranmer on 17th May, this was the reason given. So why had it been necessary for Anne and the others to die?

III.

Politics at the Henrician Court were personal in a double sense [Starkey, Ives]. First, political power was measured by physical proximity to Henry. Being in the King's presence counted for much, if not quite everything. Tudor court architecture and administration reflected this by calling the grandest rooms of state 'presence chambers'. Being with the King when he was off-duty — and with Henry that was most of the time — counted for most of all. Paradoxically, membership of the Privy Chamber, the group with whom Henry sported and played, and who were supposed to provide diversion from the exercise of royal authority, was considered the benchmark of political influence. The King's closest attendant, and the

holder of the most widely coveted 'political' position in England (Groom of the Stool), was the man who helped him go to the toilet.

Second, one's loyalty lay with those who you could trust to be loyal to you. Closest of all were members of your family, in all its ramifications. The most distant of relations, by blood or by marriage, could lay powerful claims upon each other. To be sure, the instinct for self-preservation could override family loyalty, as Anne discovered to her cost: when the crisis came neither her father, the Earl of Wiltshire, nor her uncle, the Duke of Norfolk, exerted themselves greatly in her cause, although the latter had the decency to shed a public tear on her behalf. One of the chief architects of her ruin, Nicholas Carewe, was a cousin by marriage. In general, though, family ties were paramount.

Next came those whom in age, temperament and upbringing one considered one's peers. The motley collection of rakes and adventurers whose company Henry had enjoyed in his youth — and who had dominated his Privy Chamber — fell into this category. Last, and traditionally least, although perhaps not quite least in those troubled times, came people with whom one shared a cause. In 1530s England that meant the cause of Katherine and Mary, Henry's first wife and elder daughter, and resistance to the split from Rome: or that of Anne, and support for the Royal Supremacy, and in most cases a conviction of the need for further religious reform.

These interlocking groups at Henry's court, — of people who by and large trusted one another and worked for one another — historians call 'factions'. This word was not unknown at the time, but neither was it in general currency, which has led some [e.g. Warnicke] to question whether they existed.

Eric Ives, G.W.Bernard and others have argued that Anne's downfall came about when one court faction — loosely associated with the Seymours, relatives of Henry's wife presumptive, but actually steered by his secretary, Thomas Cromwell — conspired to destroy another — the Boleyns. Cromwell was a remarkable and

sinister man, for whom plotting came as naturally as breathing [Elton]. The main problem with this argument is that he had previously been one of Anne's staunchest supporters. They shared a commitment to evangelical Reform, and were in the years 1532-1535 its most powerful patrons. But, it is claimed, by the beginning of 1536 Anne had become a liability. Cromwell may have had three reasons for thinking this:

1. Cromwell had staked his reputation on the controversial legislation now before Parliament for the Dissolution of the Monasteries. Anne was no friend of monks and nuns, but she worried about the uses to which the appropriated clerical revenues would be put. Like the good evangelical she was, she wanted the money to be spent on education and the spreading of the Word. Cromwell wanted the money to go to the Crown, and to buy political loyalty: unsurprisingly, Henry agreed. Skip's sermon on 2nd April was deliberately engineered by Anne to thwart the Secretary and to shame the King into good works. Cromwell, by Chapuys' report, was furious.
2. In foreign affairs, Cromwell was increasingly suspicious of the French and favourable towards the Empire. After Katherine's death on 7th January the main barrier to a *rapprochement* with Charles V had been removed. But Anne remained a sticking-point. Charles had never acknowledged her as Henry's wife (in Chapuys' dispatches she was variously described as a companion, a mistress, a plaything, and a whore) and family pride would prevent him from doing so now. In Cromwell's view, the greatest threat to the progress of Reform in England was Papal-Imperial intransigence re: Henry's marital affairs. If Charles could be lured into a binding alliance — one which implied acceptance of the Royal Supremacy — the bulwark of conservative opposition to reform in England would be undermined. But this would not happen while Anne was still Queen.

3. Cromwell was a commoner. He had risen from nowhere — nobody seems to have known what his father did — to prosper in the service of Cardinal Wolsey, Henry's *eminence grise* in the 1510s and 1520s, and had managed to escape the wreckage of Wolsey's fall in 1529 over the Aragon divorce. His value to Henry was his mastery of the administrative detail Henry found so tedious. But he was not, and could never hope to be, a member of the royal 'inner circle' (centered, as noted, on the Privy Chamber). Thus, while he had supported and been supported by the Boleyn faction, he was not *of* that faction. There is evidence that by late 1535 his reliance upon them had begun to chafe. Rochford, Norris and Wyatt were able enough in their way — Wyatt, of course, was a genius in his way — but they were not Cromwell's sort of men, and he was not one of theirs. Their Protestantism was aggressive, masculine, licentious and proud: Cromwell's was slow, pragmatic, and bureaucratic. His new allies — the reform-minded Seymours, the conservative Nicholas Carewe — were no more simpatico than the Boleyns. The point, for Cromwell, was that he didn't have loyalties as such things were commonly understood. He was loyal to the King, to the principle of good governance, and to himself, and that was all. When Anne and others of the Boleyn faction were no longer means to his ends, but obstacles, they had to go.

IV.

The 'faction' account of Anne's downfall attributes it to rational political self-interest on the part of Thomas Cromwell, Edward Seymour, Nicholas Carewe and others, who managed to persuade Henry that the Queen's death was in *his* interest as well. But was rational self-interest the driving force in Tudor politics? Or is it rather an imposition by later historians, anxious to mould the messy

stuff of history with some of the coherence demanded by hindsight?

In 1989 an American academic, Retha Warnicke presented a quite different interpretation of Anne's downfall. *The Rise and Fall of Anne Boleyn* argues that this came about not because Cromwell had decided to rid himself of a political liability, but because the idea had taken hold of Henry's mind — from which it could not be uprooted, and soon spread to others — that Anne was a witch. Counter-Reformation Catholic polemic — exemplified by Nicholas Sander's notorious *De origine et progressu schismatic Anglicani* (1585) — regularly painted Anne in diabolic colours. But for obvious reasons the idea had never appealed to Protestant historians, even those with reservations about Anne's conduct. Warnicke revived the idea not to suggest that Anne *did* dabble in witchcraft, but because these were the terms by which, in the early 16th Century, women like Anne — high-spirited, independent, sharp-tongued, sexually confident — tended to be judged. Particularly, Warnicke goes on, when they had difficulty conceiving children.

Central to Warnicke's argument is the claim that the baby Anne miscarried on 29th January (for reasons that need not detain us Warnicke antedates this to c. 20th January) was not only dead, but deformed. In both popular and learned traditions women who miscarried deformed fetuses were suspected of being witches. Handicaps generally, it was believed, arose from moral culpability in the mother. Severe deformities and stillbirths were the consequences of procreation with the Devil. Henry, naturally suspicious, and probably already out of love with Anne, was not slow to jump to the conclusion. Within a few days of being informed of the miscarriage, he had convinced himself that Anne was practicing witchcraft.

Witches were also supposed to have the power to afflict men with impotence. Warnicke suggests that Henry had indeed suffered a decline in his sexual appetite, which would not be terribly surprising, given his age, gluttony, and increasing ill-health. But clearly this could not enter into the public indictment of Anne. The royal dignity

was an important and fragile thing, and Henry could not afford to expose it to ridicule. Thus, Cromwell was given the task of concocting a cover-up.

Another trait traditionally ascribed to witches — their licentiousness — showed him the way forward. If Anne was a witch then it stood to reason that she was licentious, and if she was licentious, she must have had people to be licentious with. The obvious candidates were the members of her close circle, not least because these were amongst the few who would have had the opportunity: the lives of Tudor Queens were sequestered. Furthermore, it is indisputable that Henry's court was a pretty louche place, and that Anne for all her religiosity had done little to discourage this. All of her co-accused, Warnicke contends, had reputations for sexual excess, including homosexuality — in ecclesiastical eyes a capital offence in itself. That they included Anne's own brother was so much to the better, for Cromwell's purposes. By now there were, in Henry's mind, no depths to which his hag-Queen would not sink.

Out of these ingredients Cromwell cooked up a beguiling legal fiction. This gave the scandal the appearance of being about treason and adultery — a more or less 'political' scandal, in other words — whereas in fact it was about witchcraft. But Cromwell also had to make sure that Henry was satisfied that Anne's co-accused really were guilty. Thus, the victims had to be chosen with care: sexual deviants of exactly the sort a witch would be attracted to, and who in turn would be attracted to her. The result was Cromwell's most Machiavellian triumph — so successful that for over four hundred years its true nature remained hidden to historians.

Warnicke's hypothesis is intriguing, but not without problems. The most serious is the question of evidence. It is in the nature of successful cover-ups to leave no traces. But traces are exactly what historians have to work with [Ginzburg], and Warnicke offers almost no positive evidence that in 1533 either Henry or anybody else thought Anne was a witch. The one thing that does lend credence to

the idea is a passage in a report sent by Eustace Chapuys to Charles V on 29th January, before Chapuys heard tell of the miscarriage. Henry, Chapuys wrote, had been heard complaining that he had been “seduced and forced into his second marriage by means of sortileges and charms.” Sortilege means ‘divination’, but the sense here is sorcery in general. Even so, the comment — tittle-tattle of a sort Chapuys delighted in — hardly constitutes proof. What is worse, Warnicke elsewhere stresses Chapuys’ unreliability as a source on happenings at Henry’s court, and takes her fellow historians to task for using him uncritically. Chapuys aside, the other rumours to which Warnicke refers are those spread by Nicholas Sander in *The Anglican Schism*: that Anne had six fingers on her right hand (a clear sign of witchery), and that she had given birth to “a shapeless mass”. But if Chapuys is to be taken with a grain of salt, Sander - writing decades after the event, and with all the polemical spitefulness of the age at his disposal — is not to be trusted at all.

Certain other details in Warnicke’s story might also be doubted. Was Henry superstitious? It is difficult to tell, but he was not *notably* superstitious by the standards of the time. His reservations about astrology are well-attested, and he had little patience with the more outré superstitions popular devotion had attached to the sacraments. Did Rochford, Norris et al have a reputation for licentiousness? Probably some of them did: Thomas Wyatt, for example, led an exciting love life, as poets will. But no more than any other set of Tudor bucks, and as Eric Ives has pointed out, the evidence for a reputation for actual deviancy is spurious. Was Henry impotent? It may be that his sexual prowess had always been exaggerated, and there must have been times when he felt his age. However, he betrayed no such anxiety in his pursuit of Jane Seymour, and once married to her, wasted no time in getting her pregnant. The story, then, has its attractions: but it doesn’t quite add up.

V.

Warnicke and her detractors are agreed on two points. First, Anne was not guilty; second, the architect of her ruin was Thomas Cromwell. Anne cannot have committed all the adulterous acts with which she was charged, and only one modern historian [Bernard] has taken seriously the supposition — common in the nineteenth-century — that she probably *had* been unfaithful to Henry on occasion. And it has become an article of historical faith that, whatever the genesis of the scandal, Cromwell worked it to his political advantage.

In the latest contribution to the debate Greg Walker has proposed another ‘cultural’ reading of Anne’s downfall, one more solidly grounded than Warnicke’s, and less dependent on a scheming, Machiavellian, Thomas Cromwell. On that fateful Mayday weekend, Walker argues, Anne fell victim not to Royal superstition, nor to factional intrigue, but to her and certain of her courtiers’ overstepping the bounds of courtly romance.

Flirtation was endemic to the Tudor court. It was a game played by men and women who knew full well what they were about. The rules demanded lovers be artful and aloof, not spontaneous and frank: the players proceeded by means of sighs, coy glances, semi-public assignations, gifts, candies, riddles, songs, and honeyed words.² The

2 Thomas Wyatt was the great troubadour-figure of this culture; his most famous poem, ‘Who so list to hunt I know where is an hynde’, is commonly and probably correctly read as being about Anne. It portrays her playing the game with a kind of fated brilliance; her skill is matchless, but there is something inherent in her situation that dooms her to ultimate defeat. The poem ends with the lines: “*noli me tangere* for Cesars I am / and wyld for to hold though I seme tame.” *Noli me tangere* means ‘Touch me not’. ‘Cesar’ is a figurative address to a ruler or king. In other words, the lady will never be Wyatt’s — or anybody else “Who list her hount” — because she belongs to the King — Henry. It is obvious why Wyatt didn’t write ‘for Henrys I ame’ — Wyatt could be reckless, but not so reckless as to offend against Henry’s notorious *amour propre* by a direct public admission of rivalry in love. On the other hand, there cannot have been much uncertainty amongst those of Wyatt’s contemporaries who read the poem as to what it was all about.

A (quite well-documented) story tells of a day sometime in 1526 when Henry, Wyatt and other courtiers were playing bowls. In one close game the winning bowl appeared to be Wyatt’s, but Henry pointed to his own bowl, with a finger bearing a ring given him by Anne Boleyn, and said: “Wyatt, I tell thee it is mine”. There had ↗

been rumours of an affair between Wyatt and Anne earlier in the year (for what its worth, Eric Ives, Anne's latest biographer thinks these were well-founded), before Henry had become interested in her. Wyatt thus understood what Henry was telling him: 'Keep away. She belongs to me now.' But he was nothing if not courageous. Taking out a ribbon attached to a jewel that Anne had given *him*, Wyatt proposed to measure the respective distances of the two bowls to the jack, saying: "If it may like your majesty to give me leave to measure it, I hope it will be mine." Henry immediately understood what Wyatt was saying, but he was less emollient than his courtier, and stormed off. Whether it was at this point that Wyatt realized he had overstepped his mark, or whether it was as a result of a later interview with Anne, Wyatt would subsequently adopt a more cautious stance: the tone of weary resignation — never quite amounting to relinquishment — of poems like 'If waker care, if sudden pale colour' and 'Who so list to hount'.

Anne is conspicuous for her absence from the 'bowling' scene. One should not read too much into this. Henry was a 'man's man'. There was an aggressive *sportif* element to his character that he indulged with younger male courtiers like Wyatt; the ensuing horseplay was probably less than enticing to the self-respecting ladies of the court. Nonetheless, on this occasion one can discern a sinister quality to the badinage (or is this only in retrospect?): "I tell thee *it* is mine", "I hope *it* will be mine." There is a sense of a political game is being played in which ultimate power lies with the one man who can, without fear of penalty, ignore the rules (that is, Henry). The best that Wyatt can do is insist on a fair contest, but Henry is under no compunction to accede (and here refuses). But if Wyatt is frustrated by his powerlessness, what of Anne? Is the lesson to be learned from this exchange that, like a jack in a game of bowls, she must remain passive, static, at the centre of attention, while the men maneuver around her? Was she just a trophy to be won, a mark to be achieved? (Alternatively, one might note that in this particular game neither player has succeeded in touching the jack, although Wyatt has gotten closer. From what can be pieced together of Henry and Anne's relationship at this stage, it seems very likely that she had refused him all but the most perfunctory of sexual favours [for an opposing view see Bernard (2005), 4-9], and would continue to do so for some time to come. Wyatt, on the other hand, might already have slept with her. Is this what he was trying to tell the King?)

This kind of analysis can be taken too far; passivity might have been the average Tudor gentlewoman's lot, but Anne was not an average Tudor gentlewoman. Nevertheless, sex, courtship and marriage were matters of state at the Henrician court, and for all her talents Anne would find — at the crucial juncture — that there was nothing she could do to counter the malevolence of powerful men, or keep her hold over the King. We will come to this later. For now, let us return to the final three lines of Wyatt's poem:

"There is written her faier neck rounde abowte
noli me tangere for Cesars I ame
and wylde for to hold though I seme tame."

It is difficult not to think of the jewel or necklace around the woman's neck proclaiming her to be Caesar's as a chain, and her 'taming' to be a form of slavery. I doubt this is what Wyatt intended; but there is a shift in focus at the end of the

relationships so formed were sweetly illicit (especially, of course, when one or more of the principals were married), but basically chaste. That, at any rate, was the chivalric ideal. Anne played the game as well as any: after all, it was through such devices that she had first ensnared the King. But, having spent much of her girlhood in the more nakedly libidinous atmosphere of the courts of Burgundy and France, she may not have known where to draw the line. With a husband as proud as Henry, this spelt disaster.

For Walker, the crucial event — following which Henry's misgivings about Anne's 'looseness' with her courtiers crystallized into the murderous decision to destroy her — was Anne's argument with Henry Norris on or around 29th April. Walker interprets this as follows. Norris was genuinely in love with the Anne, or at least that is how she chose to understand the situation. (Mark Smeaton appears to have been in the same predicament. By Anne's own testimony his mooning about irked her, and she humiliated him. He was a commoner, not someone whose advances could be taken seriously. Subsequently, he was the only one of the co-accused to confess to sexual relations with the Queen: his motives can only be guessed at.) In some fashion Norris made his feelings clear, to which Anne

↳sonnet, from the somewhat tendentious self-pity of the octet, to an acknowledgement that the person he — and Caesar — have been pursuing might be damaged in the course and aftermath of the pursuit. It was the role of the deer, once cornered, to fall to the huntsman, and furnish his table; it was the role of the woman, once captured, to yield herself up — physically, mentally, politically, legally — to her capturer. "Wylde for to hold though I seme tame" — this suggests that Anne has not done — indeed, cannot do — what her King and culture expect of her. The irony of the sestet is that Anne is not Caesar's for the same reason that she was not Wyatt's; her nature is such as to elude all attempts at capture. The sadness is that, as Wyatt seems to have intuited (after all, he knew her pretty well), what in his case gave rise only to sonnets, in the case of the king would have far graver consequences.

(In the Petrarchan original, Rime 190, the topaz and diamond motto around the Deer's neck reads: "Libera farmi al mio Cesare parve", or 'My Caesar's will has been to make me free'. This runs counter to the reading of Wyatt's intentions given here, which stresses the futility of either the poet or the lady ruing their entanglement in the King's desires. But consider: had Henry wanted a 'tame' mistress, there were plenty of candidates. Wildness might have been something he — like Wyatt — wished to cherish, not crush.)

responded by playing the coquette, teasing Norris about his on-off engagement with Madge Shelton, one of the ladies of her chamber. But then she made a fatal mistake. "You look for dead men's shoes," Anne admonished Norris, "for if ought came to the king but good, you would look to have me." That is, if Henry were to die, then Norris would want to take his place in Anne's bed. Not only did this raise the sexual stakes in the relationship far too high, it was also treasonous. In Tudor jurisprudence, imagining the death of the King was the first step towards effecting the death of the King. Almost immediately the words were out, Anne saw the danger, as most likely did Norris. Their encounter became heated, and ended with Anne demanding that Norris make an oath before God that Anne was a faithful wife to Henry. But news of the row soon reached the King (there were ears everywhere at Tudor courts). He confronted Anne the next day, a famous occasion on which Anne was reported to have brandished the two-year-old Princess Elizabeth in her husband's face, then Norris on the ride back from the Greenwich joust on 1st May. By this time, under threat of torture, Smeaton had already confessed to a relationship with the Queen. On 2nd May Anne, Norris, and the five others were arrested.

VI.

In his study of the art and culture of late medieval Northern Europe, *The Waning of the Middle Ages*, the great Dutch historian Johann Huizinga counsels against an over-easy presumption of familiarity with the past. "There is not a more dangerous tendency in history than that of representing the past, as if it were a rational whole and dictated by clearly defined interests." It is all too simple to assume that the things that obsess us — money and power, for example — must equally have obsessed and driven the people of the past. Their own words and deeds will usually belie the assumption. In Huizinga's case reason, he held, would make little headway with the

strange efflorescence of courtly and ecclesiastical forms of life witnessed in the 15th Century, as the high tide of medieval culture began to recede. Yet it was in this crepuscular, fantastical world — a world of Round Tables and *pas d'armes*, of Orders of the Golden Fleece and fountains of rosewater — that Henry and Anne (though not, perhaps tellingly, Thomas Cromwell) had been nurtured.

But one third of the way into the sixteenth-century and Northern Europe had changed. Secular state power of a kind unknown to medieval jurists was on the rise, and its wielders — men like Thomas Cromwell — were far cannier in their manipulation of language and loyalties. Their vade mecums were the works of Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Art of War* (published in 1521) and *The Prince* (1532). The diplomatic arts were being honed, and with them the concepts of 'state' and 'national' interest: a new breed of men, exemplified by the likes of Jean de Dinteville (the proud, comely French diplomat who came to London in 1533 to attend Anne's formal anointment as Henry's wife and Queen, and who is so powerfully and ambiguously portrayed in Holbein's *The Ambassadors*)³ and Thomas Wyatt, were charged with their protection and furtherance.

Reform was opening a window onto another kind of interest, that of the self. Preachers enjoined church-goers to attend to their consciences, on pain of eternal damnation.⁴ In the secular sphere, doubtless to the despair of the more other-worldly of the clerical estate, men and women presented, or fashioned, themselves *knowingly*, for the audience of their peers, in ways they had not done before [Greenblatt]. Holbein, trained in the depiction of piety, made

3 The cosmatic pavement on which the two ambassadors stand is from Westminster Abbey, and marks the exact spot where Anne became Queen [North]. With the benefit of hindsight, the painting's famous anamorphic skull presages doom not for the two young ambassadors (both of whom lived to relatively ripe old ages), but for England's new Queen. Interestingly, Ives argues that Anne was one of the painting's intended 'readers' [234-35].

4 Diarmaid MacCullough argues that this new sense of interiority was not reserved for Protestant communicants; for several decades *before* the Reformation there had been an increasing emphasis on problems of the self.

a career out of the depiction of personality pressed into the service of power. Here Anne was in the vanguard, highly skilled at marshalling appearances — her dark eyes, Burgundian manners, quick wits and finery — to political benefit. So, we might think that whatever the force of Huizinga’s warning with reference to the ‘children’ (his word) of the late Middle Ages, Tudor adults must be measured on an appropriately adult scale. These were people who knew where their interests lay, and acted accordingly.

Against this, we must remain wary of the temptation to make the people of the past too modern, too much like us. Anne’s last words, on the scaffold, are deeply moving, but they are also, in part, impenetrable; in a certain sense, it is because they are impenetrable that they are so moving:

“Good Christian people, I am come here to die, according to the law, and by the law I am judged to die, and therefore I speak nothing against it. I am come here to accuse no man, nor to speak anything 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 with my case, I require them to judge the best. And thus I take my leave of the world, and I heartily desire you all to pray for me. O Lord have mercy on me, to God I commend my soul” [Qu. in Hall].

This speech was taken to be exemplary, and was surely intended to be so: over a distance of nearly five hundred years, we can appreciate the courage it must have taken to utter it. But Anne’s peroration was nothing like what a modern person would consider exemplary in such circumstances. A modern would want to show hurt, or contempt, or defiance, or even forgiveness, and while we might feel justified in thinking that some or all of these were what Anne *felt*, none of them were what she *said*. Instead, Anne saw it as

her final task to burnish the image of sovereign virtue that gave her life, and the life of her Kingdom, all of its lustre, and much of its meaning. The majesty that was crushing her was a condition of her being. She could not bring herself to admit her guilt, which is what some of the watchers were waiting for, but still, the best, the only, way for her to die was in acknowledgment of the sovereignty of her killer. *Realpolitik* is not sufficient for an understanding of what was going on here.⁵

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- 5 What is most remarkable about Anne's speech is the absence of self-pity — indeed, of any discernable affect whatsoever. Was this deliberate sang-froid on Anne's part? Or was it rather that the time had not yet arrived when pathos would be an acceptable response to the rituals of juridical murder?

They are representative of different genres, but it is instructive to compare Anne's scaffold speech to two poems, the first, Thomas Wyatt's 'Who list his wealth and ease retain' composed a few months after the events of May 1536 that had cost Anne her life, and had so very nearly cost Wyatt his; and the second written some fifty years later by a man of the eve of his own execution — Chidiock Tichborne's 'My prime of youth is bit a frost of cares'.

To begin with Wyatt:

Who list his wealth and ease retain,
Himself let him unknown contain.
Press not too fast in at that gate
Where the return stands by disdain,
For sure, *circa Regna tonat*.

The high mountains are blasted oft
When the low valley is mild and soft.
Fortune with Health stands at debate.
The fall is grievous from aloft.
And sure, *circa Regna tonat*.

These bloody days have broken my heart.
My lust, my youth did them depart,
And blind desire of estate.
Who hastes to climb seeks to revert.
Of truth, *circa Regna tonat*.

The bell tower showed me such sight
That in my head sticks day and night.
There did I learn out of a grate,
For all favour, glory, or might,
That yet *circa Regna tonat*.

By proof, I say, there did I learn:
Wit helpeth not defence to yearn,
Of innocency to plead or prate. ↗

\Bear low, therefore, give God the stern,
For sure, *circa Regna tonat*.

In manuscript the poem bore a superscription, ‘Circumdede runt me inimici mei’, which translates as ‘My enemies surround me’. This is from Psalm 16 in the Vulgate Old Testament (Psalm 17 in the King James Version). In the Psalm the chief amongst these enemies is characterized as “sicut catulus leonis habitans in abditis”, ‘like a lion lurking in secret places’, giving an idea of the paranoia that — understandably — had been gnawing at Wyatt since his imprisonment. “*Circa Regna tonat*” (‘around the throne it/he thunders’) is taken from *Phaedra* by the ancient Roman dramatist — and model of civic virtue — Seneca the Younger. Seneca was famous for committing suicide — somewhat incompetently — after having failed in an attempt to depose the Emperor Nero.

It is assumed that ‘Who list his wealth and ease retain’ was written in the immediate aftermath of Wyatt’s release from prison in May 1536 and retreat to the comparative safety of Allington [For a detailed account of the poem’s composition see Walker (2005)]. The first two verses — also following Seneca — are a warning to would-be courtiers of the dangers of life at court. Wyatt offers up the advice standard to the pastoral mode of court poetry: better not to be here at all, but to stay at home and tend your fields. In the third and fourth verses Wyatt turns to his own recent difficulties. The “bloody days” have encompassed the deaths of five men and a woman, who he might have loved, and he doubts whether what he has seen and experienced will ever be expunged from his memory. (There is debate amongst historians about what it was that Wyatt could have witnessed from his apartments in the Tower; but I don’t think it can be doubted that he saw *something* that shook him terribly.) He is reflecting, as who would not, that life is not as long as he once assumed, and he may be suffering from impotence (the consequences of lust — or the reputation for lust — having been so dire for Anne and her co-accused). This last, if the case, was to prove only temporary; Wyatt was soon back to his old philandering ways. The final verse is, in context, a quite shocking expression of political cynicism. In England, in 1536, Wyatt is saying, neither eloquence nor virtue (in both its sexual and civic senses) will avail you of justice. The thunder of faction, betrayal and deceit roars around the King, who is too deafened to heed the pleas of the innocent. (In another more literal Senecan reading the King is the source of the thunder of faction, betrayal and deceit afflicting his Kingdom; this, of course, would have been even more shocking to Wyatt’s contemporaries.)

A little later Wyatt wrote another poem about the events of May 1536. ‘In mourning wyse syns daylye I increase’ is an encomium to the five men executed with Anne, and an investigation of the causes of their downfalls. The mood is ostensibly sympathetic:

And thus farewell each one in hartye wyse!
The Axe is home, your heads be in the street;
The trickling tears doth fall so from my eyes,
I scarce may write, my paper is so wet.

But in fact, while not losing sight of their basic innocence, Wyatt shifts the ↗

\ burden of explanation onto his protagonists' various moral shortcomings. Thus, William Brereton, it is intimated, was high-handed towards his vassals; Rochford is "prowd"; Henry Norris a coward; Francis Weston deserving of his reputation as a rakehell (and, possibly, a homosexual); and Mark Smeaton — a "rotten twig upon so high a tree" — guilty of possessing ideas above his station. There is a degree of detachment in this poem altogether lacking in 'Who list his wealth and ease retain'. Perhaps it is always easier to contemplate the deaths of others, even after one has narrowly escaped their fate. But I think we can also detect here a retreat from the nihilism of the earlier poem. The force of "circa Regna tonat" is that there was no *reason* for the calamity that befell the court in May 1536. This being so, the only sensible response was withdrawal from the scene of political action, trusting to God that somehow sanity would be restored. But in 'In mourning wyse syns daylye I increase' there *are* reasons, and although they may not be very good ones, and certainly not sufficient to send six people to their deaths, the effect is to render Henry's suspicions (about the five men, if not about Anne) comprehensible — and thus, potentially, justifiable. Exiled at Allington as the winter of 1536 drew on, Wyatt might have found cause to reevaluate the bitterness he had felt towards the King and his ministers during the tumultuous events of the previous spring. Despite everything the court had not loosened its hold upon him; he wanted to resume his political career. But in order to do so, in good conscience, he needed to convince himself that there was someone other than a vengeful Jupiter at the stern of state.

Now to Tichborne:

My prime of youth is but a frost of cares,
My feast of joy is but a dish of pain,
My crop of corn is but a field of tares,
And all my good is but vain hope of gain;
The day is past, and yet I saw no sun,
And now I live, and now my life is done.

The spring is past and yet it has not sprung,
My fruit is fallen, and yet my leaves are green,
My youth is gone and yet I am but young,
I saw the world and yet I was not seen;
My thread is cut and yet it is not spun,
And now I live, and now my life is done.

I sought my death and found it in my womb,
I looked for life and saw it was a shade,
I trod the earth and knew it was my tomb,
And now I die, and now I was but made;
My glass is full, and now my glass is run,
And now I live, and now my life is done.

Tichborne was a young English Roman Catholic born in 1558, the first year of the reign of Elizabeth I. (Elizabeth, lest we forget, was Anne's daughter.) He took an active part in the Catholic conspiracies that swirled around Elizabeth and her cousin ↗

↳ Mary Queen of Scots in the 1570s and 1580s. He was arrested in 1586 for his role in the Babington Plot, an ill-starred affair that aimed to spring Mary from her imprisonment at Chartley Hall, foment a Catholic insurrection in the English Midlands to coincide with a Spanish invasion of the south, murder Elizabeth, and return England to the Catholic fold [Guy]. Elizabeth's spymasters, however, knew everything; it is even possible that the plot was of their own devising, to force Elizabeth to repudiate her cousin. If so, Tichborne was one of a number of unlucky Catholic dupes. He was found guilty at a hastily convened court at Westminster Hall, and executed on 20th September 1586. Unlike Anne, it is reported that he suffered greatly in the process. The day before his execution he was permitted to write to his wife, Agnes, and the letter contained 'My prime of youth is bit a frost of cares', as far as we know the only piece of poetry he ever wrote.

The poem is quite conventional in its use of paradox and antithesis, and in the tone of sombre resignation to which it aspires (compare, for example, Howard's 'The soote season' or any number of sonnets by Wyatt). The point here is that in 1536 Anne ascribed her impending extinction to reasons of state — 'Good Christian people, I am come here to die, according to the law' — and commended her soul to God with apparent misgivings that He would receive it sympathetically — as well He might not if Henry were truly His representative on earth. Tichborne in 1586 mentions neither English law, which he held in disdain, nor God, whose (Catholic) purposes he served. Instead he focuses on what might anachronistically be termed the *existential* predicament: 'And now I live, and now my life is done'. What is left for a man to do, who knows that tomorrow he will die, and whose hopes have been crushed in the moral wreckage of conspiracy — other than try to communicate the self-recrimination that has come with the realization that twenty-eight, not seventy, years are to be his lot in life, and that those years were not used wisely.

The nature of Anne's dilemma during the disaster that overtook her in May 1536 was that she could not call upon her God to judge the actions of her King: she had, after all, staked her political life on the creed that Henry was the instrument through which God's evangelical grace operated in England. Hence, possibly, the peculiar stilted anguish of her scaffold speech. Tichborne entertained no such uncertainty, and would have found it easy enough to hurl divine excoriations at his tormentors. (During the anti-Catholic campaigns under Elizabeth and James I plenty of Catholics did precisely that in similar circumstances.) But in 'My prime of youth is but a frost of cares' he took a different path, one that both de-politicized and de-sacralized the coming ordeal.

Perhaps the difference between Boleyn and Tichborne lies in our answer to the questions: who can we say is speaking, and who can we say they are speaking to? Anne was speaking as a quondam Queen to her quondam subjects; if her speech did contain a 'private' message — to Henry, to her father, or whoever — it is well-disguised, and there is no evidence that it found its mark. So exemplary — and now so doomed — what other lines of communication were open to her? To whom could she have appealed, said 'Consider yourself in my shoes'? To whom could her death be a warning, when no other Englishwoman ever had or ever would suffer a comparable fate? Tichborne, on the other hand, was just one of many Catholics sacrificed to the paranoia of the Elizabethan state. He was addressing first, his wife, and through her recusants generally and would-be recusant martyrs in particular. It was thus, as a ↗

“I hertely desire you all to praye for me. O Lorde have mercy on me, to God I commende my soule”: Anne said “praye for”, not ‘remember’, suggesting that for her the intercessory force of prayer still held. This might have been a last barb aimed at Cromwell, as he schemed over his coming assault on the Chantries. But she commended her soul to God and God alone, making no reference to the saints nor, more unusually, to the Virgin Mary. She died, as she had lived, a committed evangelical Protestant. For some amongst her final audience this would have been a comfort. Others will have taken umbrage. One suspects that she wouldn’t have had it any different.

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↳ less than distinguished member of an embattled community, that Tichborne’s existential message had cultural valance. At a time when the blood-soaked ecstasies of Jesuit martyrology lent a certain glamour to the torture-chamber and the scaffold, Tich-borne’s poem was a reminder than even the most doctrinally glorious of deaths could exact a heavy toll in personal despair.

It may be that Tichbourne’s remarkable examination of self in *extremis* took its form from previous victims’ efforts to articulate the events that were overtaking them — a culture of victimhood that, some have argued, can be extended back to the 1530s if not before. One historian has suggested that the Henrician Reformation “inscribed a new sense of alienated interiority into English verse” [Walker (2005), 415], at around the time Wyatt and Howard were burning their fingers on the flame of politics, and writing poems to rue their injuries. But in 1536 at least one of the King’s victims — the King’s *primary* victim — seems to have decided that she had no *strategic* recourse to pathos. By contrast, fifty years later, deep into the reign of the King’s victim’s daughter, pathos had become the principal cultural response to the blood-thirst raging amongst all parties in the Counter-Reformation conflict.

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