

A king in love

It was now 1526; Anne was twenty-five and had been back in England some four years—and with each year her marriage prospects declined. The proposed match with James Butler had fallen through, and although she had plenty of suitors none, it seemed, had been considered a suitable match to progress the ‘family firm’—or perhaps none had offered marriage. Anne was a noticeably opinionated and independent young woman and this would not have gone down well with some. But it did with the King. When he first took a romantic interest in Anne is not known, but there is an account of a bowls match he had with Thomas Wyatt where he revealed his feelings for her. Wyatt had ‘stolen’ an item of jewellery from Anne and wore it round his neck, teasing Anne about it and suggesting that she claim it back; it was all part of the flirtations of court dalliance. Similarly the King had taken from her a ring and wore it on his little finger.

Ives tells the story, quoting from an account by George Wyatt (grandson of Thomas):

Playing bowls with Thomas and some other courtiers, Henry claimed that his wood held shot when it clearly did not; pointing with his little finger with the ring on it, ‘he said, “Wyatt, I tell thee it is mine”, smiling upon him withal.’ The point was taken, but Wyatt, ‘pausing a little, and finding the king bent to pleasure’, decided on a bold response. He produced Anne’s jewel and proceeded to use the ribbon to measure the distances, remarking, ‘If it may like your majesty to give me leave to measure it, I hope it will be mine.’ The king’s good humour vanished—‘It may be so, but then am I deceived’—and he stalked off to see Anne. She, discovering what was wrong, explained the business of the jewel to Henry, and sunlight was restored.¹

What was the nature of Henry’s interest in Anne? He had recently finished his relationship with Mary Boleyn and probably thought that he could start a similar relationship with her sister. Although his marriage to Catherine of Aragon at first appeared to have been a good one with genuine affection on both sides, there had been no sexual relations for the past two years. She was now thirty-nine—nearly six years older than

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Henry. Her petite figure was no more, and some considered the ritualistic observance of her religious duties obsessive—she certainly had no time for court frivolities. Anne was a vivacious woman of twenty-five who sparkled at court, Henry's playground. He was smitten.

Thomas Wyatt now knew that he had no chance of winning Anne; Henry had her marked out for himself. In his most famous poem Wyatt refers to this new situation:

Whoso list to hunt, I know where is a hind.
 But as for me, alas I may no more:
 The vain travail hath wearied me so sore.
 I am of them that farthest cometh behind.
 Yet may I by no means my wearied mind
 Draw from the deer, but as she fleeth afore
 Fainting I follow. I leave off therefore,
 Sithens in a net I seek to hold the wind.
 Who list to hunt, I put him out of doubt,
 As well as I may spend his time in vain,
 And graven with diamonds in letters plain
 There is written her fair neck round about.
 'Noli me tangere, for Caesar's I am,
 And wild for to hold, though I seem tame.'²

Caesar is Henry, and 'Noli me tangere' is a quote from the Latin Vulgate text of the New Testament where Jesus in his newly resurrected body says to Mary, 'Touch me not'. Wyatt's poetry does not disguise a sinister element in Henry's pursuit of her. Anne is the hind running from the hunter; her fate is to be caught and slain. Perhaps to underline her new position, one of Henry's earliest gifts to her was a buck he had killed in a hunt. He suggested she might enjoy eating it, but the symbolism could not be missed.

There exist in the Vatican library in Rome seventeen letters that Henry wrote to Anne, probably secretly taken from Anne in her lifetime by a representative of the Church in an effort to prove that the real motivation for the King's 'divorce' from Catherine was a sexual relationship with

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Anne. But instead they show Anne resisting this most powerful of monarchs as he pleads with her in increasingly desperate terms. Anne's replies have not survived; they were almost certainly destroyed on her death by those wishing to eradicate any memory of her. Unfortunately none of Henry's letters are dated, but from their content an approximate sequence can be deduced. In the first three, writing in his own hand, Henry is trying to woo Anne. Although he uses the language of courtly love, it is clear that he proposes more. In the first (extant) letter, probably sent in 1526 (Anne is most likely away from court at Hever), he complains that she has not replied to an earlier letter; it is obvious from the content of Henry's next letter that Anne has now replied and made clear that she is wary of this new suitor. In the third letter he begins to show the depth of his feeling for Anne, and his confusion at what he sees as mixed signals from her:

Debating with myself the contents of your letter, I have put myself in great distress, not knowing how to interpret them, whether to my disadvantage, as in some places is shown, or to advantage as in others I understand them; praying you with all my heart that you will expressly certify me of your whole mind concerning the love between us two. For of necessity I must ensure me of this answer having been now above one whole year struck with the dart of love, not being assured either of failure or of finding place in your heart and grounded affection. Which last point has kept me for some little time from calling you my mistress, since if you do not love me in a way which is beyond common affection that name in no wise belongs to you, for it denotes a singular love, far removed from the common.

Then going to the point:

If it shall please you to do me the office of a true, loyal mistress and friend and to give yourself up, body and soul, to me who will be and have been your loyal servant (if by your severity you do not forbid me), I promise you that not only shall the name be given you, but that also I will take you for my only mistress, rejecting from thought and affection all others save yourself, to serve you only.³

Henry seems to be suggesting that Anne should have the position of an honoured mistress, 'maîtresse en titre', in the tradition of the French kings.

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Anne's response to this particular letter is not recorded, but what is told on another occasion is that Anne:

... fell down upon her knees saying, 'I think your majesty, most noble and worthy king, speaketh these words in mirth to prove me, without intent of defiling your princely self, who I find thinks nothing less than of such wickedness which would justly procure the hatred of God and of your good queen against us ... I have already given my maidenhead into my husband's hands.'⁴

In other words, Anne is saying that her virginity is being saved for her future husband. After a long silence (Anne had again retreated to Hever) Henry writes:

Since I parted with you I have been advised that the opinion in which I left you is now altogether changed and that you will not come to court neither with my lady your mother, and if you could, nor yet by any other way. The which report being true I cannot enough marvel at, seeing that I am well assured I have never since that time committed fault ... I could do none other than lament me of my ill fortune, abating by little and little my so great folly.⁵

Henry thinks Anne is staying away from court deliberately to avoid him, something in his vanity he 'cannot enough marvel at'. And what is more, she is offended by his suggestion that she become his mistress—which Henry now sees as a mistake: a 'great folly'.

What are we to make of all this? Henry was a man used to getting his own way—he never had to plead for anything. But here he was not just pleading but recognizing that he was making mistakes. Henry had a strong dislike of admitting any errors, let alone recording it in a letter—it is known that he hated writing anything. In Henry's position women were not to be wooed, but to be negotiated for by diplomats, or simply commanded into his bed as his mistresses. Starkey describes Anne's behaviour as 'audacious' for the times, submitting Henry to a remarkable humiliation.⁶ Certainly Anne was not accepting the conventions of the day; she was making a stand.

Why was Henry subjecting himself to this? He truly was struck by the

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‘dart of love’, and was prepared to go to great lengths to win her. He too was throwing convention to the wind, embarking on this letter-writing tack; he acted as a humble supplicant, not the supreme monarch he was, almost begging for Anne to reciprocate with some sign of affection. It will be seen that eventually his love for Anne Boleyn caused him to cast to one side much more than convention. To get the woman he wanted Henry VIII showed that he was prepared to sacrifice everything: his friends, his allies at home and abroad, his religion, even, as some would see it, his own soul, when he was excommunicated by the Church—its ultimate punishment.

And what about Anne? Did she accept Henry as a suitor—and, if so, why? Henry was one of the most powerful and ruthless men in Europe. It can be seen in this early correspondence that she was desperately trying to keep Henry at arm’s length. For Anne it must have been like being in a cage with a hungry and restless lion. If she antagonized Henry it would damage not only her but also her family—her father, brother, and uncle, all had important places at court. Her frequent absences from court and her ambiguous replies to Henry, which left him confused, show that far from encouraging him, she was trying to avoid the King without offending him. It is difficult to see how she could have handled things differently in these early years.

But there did come a turning point. Henry realized that to have Anne he would have to offer her marriage. In June 1527 Henry told Catherine he was seeking an annulment of their marriage. Ives, in a detailed analysis, makes it clear that Anne up to this point had firmly resisted Henry’s advances.⁷ And certainly at this stage no one at court suspected Anne of being in any sort of relationship with Henry. It was now that she sent Henry a small gift—a model of a ship with a woman on board wearing a diamond pendant. In the symbolism of the day a ship meant protection (as in Noah’s Ark); the diamond was representative of the heart. Henry knew what it meant—the heart was Anne’s, and he was the ship of protection.

Henry was effusive in his letter of reply: ‘For so beautiful a gift, and so exceeding (taking it in all), I thank you right cordially; not alone for the fair diamond and the ship in which the solitary damsel is tossed about, but chiefly for the good intent and too-humble submission vouchsafed in this by your kindness ...’⁸

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Henry was overjoyed. It is clear he had understood the significance of the gift. His phrase ‘so exceeding (taking it in all)’ makes it plain that he knew Anne was offering herself as a potential wife. And here is the crucial question. Why did Anne send this gift and so signal to Henry that she would accept him as a suitor? He was a married man, and she had rightly resisted his advances for at least two years. What had changed?

There are several possible answers:

- Anne had simply given up the fight. She had been worn down by Henry and feared the consequences of resisting him anymore.
- She had become attracted to him. He was undoubtedly an impressive figure—tall, good looking (at least at this stage), and accomplished in many areas including the arts.
- She saw that an annulment was possible and that she could become Henry’s legitimate wife and queen, a tremendously powerful position from which she could advance the reform agenda.

All these things might have been factors. To help answer the question, the dating of the above exchange is important—and the subject of much debate. Starkey dates Anne’s letter 1 January 1527, which would make Anne’s acceptance of Henry as a suitor a catalyst for Henry pursuing the annulment of his marriage with Catherine.⁹ Ives argues strongly for a later date—probably July of that same year—that is, after Henry had written to Catherine in the June telling her that he was to seek an annulment.¹⁰

Based on what is known about Anne’s bold and unequivocal stand against Henry so far, the latter is the more probable timetable. Once Henry had made the first tangible moves to annul his marriage and Anne could see herself as queen, she conceded and began to accept his advances.

Most of the books about Anne Boleyn talk about Henry’s ‘divorce’—but the Roman Catholic Church then, as today, did not accept divorce. Marriage, it taught, was a sacrament. It had been endorsed in heaven and nothing could ‘put it asunder’, not even the pope himself; there was no divorce.¹¹ But if it could be shown that the marriage sacrament had in some way not been performed correctly—or that the relationship was invalid—then nothing had happened in heaven: the marriage was not endorsed there and so did not take place, making Henry a single man. And Henry claimed just that. He said that his marriage to Catherine, his brother’s widow, was

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incest (for reasons we shall see in the next chapter), despite the papal dispensation that enabled it to take place.

This might seem a subtle distinction for many today—but those who concurred with Henry about the invalidity of the papal dispensation by definition accepted that Anne was courting, and eventually marrying, a single man. If the validity of the papal dispensation was upheld, she was not. But it does not do Anne Boleyn justice for us to say, with a 500-year retrospective view, that it can be seen that both Henry's arguments, and those of the Church, were false—and that Anne should have acted differently.

Once Henry made a move to have the annulment of his marriage declared, whatever her personal feelings for him were, she saw the possibility that marriage to Henry offered. The Reformation was gathering apace in mainland Europe and penetrating England. Books were being smuggled into the country that threatened the future of the Roman Catholic Church; many involved were risking their lives. Anne was sympathetic to their cause and the 'new learning' the books contained. Surely even at this early stage Anne could see she could play a great part in influencing the King and so furthering the evangelical cause she believed in, and in using that influence to protect believers who were being actively persecuted. She had the clear example of her mentor Marguerite, sister to the unbelieving French king. Did Anne now see that she could be a Queen Esther to Henry? In the Old Testament book Esther, the Jewish heroine of the story marries the unbelieving King Xerxes (called Ahasuerus in some translations) in order to save her people from persecution. Certainly during Anne's reign many saw her as such.

We simply do not know. 1 Corinthians 13, the great chapter in the Bible about love, tells us that love always trusts. Surely it is beholden on Christian believers to trust that Anne Boleyn's motives were good, especially when we look at her record once she became queen. What is certain is that many people in England, who during her reign, and subsequently, came to love the Bible and the Saviour it speaks about, were grateful for her decision to take on the daunting task of becoming consort to the powerful, mercurial, and unpredictable Henry VIII.

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Notes

- 1 **Ives**, *The Life and Death of Anne Boleyn*, p. 82.
- 2 Quoted by **Denny**, p. 92.
- 3 **Ives**, *The Life and Death of Anne Boleyn*, p. 85.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 **Denny**, p. 63.
- 6 **Starkey**, *Six wives: the queens of Henry VIII*, p. 283.
- 7 **Ives**, *The Life and Death of Anne Boleyn*, pp. 84–90.
- 8 Ibid. p. 87.
- 9 Ibid. p. 282.
- 10 Ibid. pp. 88–91.
- 11 See **Kreeft**, p. 360.