

# The Six Wives of Henry VIII

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Henry VIII has a definite Bluebeard reputation. But, as is pointed out, as a royal parsonage he may be unique in having fewer mistresses than wives. Could it be that his sexual appetite and performance was actually under par? Sexual matters are supposed to be private, yet their fruits, be it in terms of marriages and children, of great public concern. Did he see his inability to sire male heirs as something that reflected badly on himself? For most of his reign he was in competition with the French king François I, who did not suffer either from a host of women nor from a number of heirs, be they male or female.

Any account of the six wives of Henry VIII must inevitably circle around the king himself, after all this is the main thing which links those women to each other. The King is often presented as a human monster, a Caligula of Modern Western history. On the other hand what is so monstrous about him? In his youth he was stunning. Equipped with a frame of 6 foot two inches<sup>1</sup> he must have towered above his contemporaries. Add to that broad shoulders and narrow hips and you have the makings of powerful athlete. And an athlete he was addicted to a variety of sports, jousting being the most regal and appropriate. In addition he had a fair complexion, red hair and beard and blue eyes. He was well educated, well versed not only linguistically but with a genuine interest in and talent for music, testified both by his enjoyment and his modest efforts of composition<sup>2</sup> Yet his physical prowess took priority over his mental, for one thing he could not easily be bothered to write letters, unless there were pressing personal reasons for doing so, as we will have occasion to return to. As the years went by his powerful physique went to pot and he grew monstrously fat, for which one may attribute genetic reasons (the growing corpulence of a grandfather) as well as an unchecked supply of food and drink. Like many healthy individuals, he author remarks, he had a tendency towards hypochondria. And like all hypochondriacs he was eventually proved right, suffering in his older age from a variety of ailments, festering sores and its likes, which if anything only made his physical presence even more monstrous. The King had many a head chopped off, not sparing those of close associates, including spouses. Such things are hard to condone especially in retrospect and from a modern western perspective. On the other hand explanation is not the same thing as an excuse, and one must realize that at the time paranoia was not (if ever) an irrational response, and in a political age in which you had the choice of either eat or being eaten, such extreme measures did not require any particular perverse or sadistic temperament only a ruthless one, which is not the same thing. Henry VIII

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<sup>1</sup> The actual measurements of the King as they evolved through time can be fairly accurately determined by his changing carapaces - his armors.

<sup>2</sup> In this regard the tragic case of the Swedish King Erik XIV comes to mind, also a talented musician, and intellectually probably the superior of the English King.

was not present at the executions of his wives, nor at those of others of his associates. One may presume that he found no particular pleasure in those necessities. Of course depending on how posterity will judge your victims, you may either be classed as a hero or a villain. (And one should not forget that while the hero may demand our admiration the villain is satisfied with our fascination. And it is also more demanding to admire than to let yourself be fascinated.). True, Henry VIII was no saint and his shortcomings were obvious, but also very human. He was of course spoiled, not used to not to have his way. He was, as noted a hypochondriac, and also very vain. His self-knowledge was primitive, and his attitude naive. In short he was in many ways very childish, an occupational hazard of hereditary monarchies. Children, famously can be very cruel, and children in authority will of course become petty tyrants, without, as noted, needing to be in any way perverse, not even having to compromise their basic innocence.

The first wife was Catherine of Aragon, the fourth daughter of that Spanish Royal couple Ferdinand and Isabella. She was actually older than Henry, and at first married to his unfortunate elder brother Arthur, who was too weak for that wicked world of his times, and succumbed as a mere teenager to an undiagnosed affliction. Did that sickly boy, who may or may not have entered puberty properly, have the strength and ability to consummate the union? It is no mere rhetorical question, the answer one way or another, would have momentous political consequences. She had been brought to England as a young girl and would remain there until her death, her extended tenure being brought about by the subsequent marriage to the new King. A marriage which for dynastic reasons had been in the making ever since the demise of the first bridegroom, and had resulted in haggling over dowry between the King Henry VII of England and his counterpart in Aragon. The young dowager, later queen, was very much appreciated both for her beauty and her learning, exceptional even for a royal princess at the time. Her beauty resided mostly in her fair complexion and the reddish luster of her abundant hair<sup>3</sup>, while her short stature would count against her and in due time exaggerate her tendency to corpulence. In the beginning all was happiness, the King showing evident pleasure in his queen, a pleasure that was translated into a sequences of pregnancies, one even of a male heir who lived on for almost two months, but which in the end would amount to only one viable issue, a girl, the future Queen Mary. A more touching episode of their early marriage, if such a term is not considered too frivolous for the tragedy it refers to. While the King was down in France waging war against the French, as a kind of extension of his jousting, the Queen was left in charge of the kingdom back home. The Scots had essayed another invasion and been flogged at Flodden, a battle which proved to be a disaster for the country, having most of its nobility left perished on the field of battle, including the king James IV himself, brother in-law of the King and his queen, whose body was brought in triumph to London. The Queen formally in charge could claim the fruits of the victory, and how would the Kings own skirmishes, the results of which were but ephemeral, compare to this event, which proved to be the beginning of the downfall of the Scottish Nation<sup>4</sup>

The Queen failed to do her duty, i.e. giving birth to a male heir, in the meantime

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<sup>3</sup> She had actually English ancestors claiming descent from John the Gaunt.

<sup>4</sup> James IV left an infant son James V, who in his turn would die young leaving a female heir - the famed Mary Queen of Scots, who was eventually ousted from her throne, fled unwisely to England, where

Henry had dallied with the ladies in waiting of the queen, a bunch of nubile ladies, who had nothing better to do than romantic intrigue, and sired a male child, a bastard of course according to the iron-clad conventions of the time, and with no prospects of royal assent, yet open to the reception of titles and honors. But his continued dalliance had led him to Anne Boleyn, a remarkable woman, who knew how to play hard to get to the King, reducing him literally to tears and occasional letter writings<sup>5</sup>. It is easy to imagine that this was in fact the first time that the King felt any erotic passion, this being a new and unexpected experience to him, he lost his head.

To extricate himself from his wife was a delicate business, which every man learns to his peril, and one which he would rather forego, would it not be for the demands of the girl-friend. Anne Boleyn, unlike her older sister, would not grant her favors (or at least not to their fullest extent) unless she was made queen. Henry VIII was essentially not different from your average suburban male confronted with an unobliging situation, but unlike the average male, his conundrum had international complications. In short, the King had thought out an unanswerable argument. His marriage to the Queen was illegal, having been consummated her initial betrothal to his brother prevented him from marrying her. In short they had been living in sin, and the Pope, whose predecessor had provided a dispensation, would now have to declare it invalid. Of course, the king added disingenuously, he had nothing personally against the Queen, he loved her dearly, and would there be a way to make their union legal, he would jump at the opportunity, The Queen refused to play along in this preposterous charade. First she vehemently denied that there had been any consummation at all, thereby undercutting the main thrust of the Kings argument, which was weak from the beginning, as the authority of the Bible on the issue of marrying your brothers wife was contradictory. The Pope dithered, in principle he would have been willing to give any kind of dispensation to the King, including his marriage to his own flesh and blood in form of his daughter, would the political situation have so demanded. Most of all he would have preferred not to have to present any opinion on the matter, the most obvious solution to the situation would be for the Queen to quietly give up her claims, divorce the King and become a nun, a prospect the King dangled in front of her, with the promise, no doubt to be honored, that she would be set up handsomely. But the Queen resisted such a bribe and held her grounds, much to the fury and consternation of the King. The latter set up a commission to look into the matter, one to which both were summoned, and during which the Queen abased herself in front of the husband on her one attendance yet steadfastly refusing to give way, then leaving the court never to respect it again. Her strategy was simply to have the matter deliberated upon not on English ground, where the King could call the tune, but by an impartial papal court, trusting that her nephews, the all powerful Charles V would exert his pressure. But the latter naturally gave priority to political expediencies at the expense of sentimental ones. The upshot was a process that took several years. The King was taunted by his mistress, that whenever

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she was incarcerated by Queen Elizabeth I and eventually put to death, while her son James VI would inherit both the Scottish and the English throne (the latter as James I), so while formally swallowing the English the Scots became incorporated, a state of affairs finalized by the formal Union of 1707. As may be know, the Scots have in recent years tried to repel that union and regain full independence.

<sup>5</sup> The fruits of which, for some inscrutable reason, being deposited in the Vatican library

he went into argument with his wife, she always got the better of him. The King was a smart fellow, but in arguments his lady was definitely sharper, and that he had to swallow. In the meantime the King maintained two parallel households, reluctantly respecting the claims of his consort. The situation was untenable in the long run and the Gordian knot was simply cut by making the King the supreme head of the Church in England, thus dispensing once and for all with the authority of the Pope. Thus the English Reformation was ultimately based upon the Kings personal passion.

Now this is of course a misleading simplification. With the advent of Luther, many princes and kings in Northern Europe had seen an opportunity and grabbed it. The pickings were good consisting of the spoils of the riches of the church. Luther had of course attacked the Catholic church from a standpoint of conscience, inveighing against it because of its corruption, and such sentiments carried significant intellectual weight among elites, but counted for little among the men of power, who of course were not about to turn down any arguments which came their way. King Henry himself, who in latter years dabbled into theological writing, was if anything a Catholic, and it is also significant that the Liturgy of the Anglican church differs little from its catholic precedents. But religious discord was a useful and natural conduit for political factions, which explains the bitterness of the religious conflict which would plague the English for generations to come, and only being resolved by the end of the 17th century.

After the Kings open defiance, things moved quickly. The Queen was banished to the country and was never to see her estranged husband again, Anne Boleyn, who headed a strong Protestant faction whose influence became marked as a result of her ascent, was made pregnant, married and gave birth to a healthy daughter - the future Queen Elizabeth, and was crowned ostentatiously. The poor daughter Mary was reduced to a lady-in-waiting for her half-sister. But the rapid rise of Anne Boleyn fortunes would come to a dramatic end in the fateful year of 1536. First the old Queen died, much to the rejoicing of the new queen and the relief of the King, However, quickly he became disenchanted with his new queen, paid court to one of her ladies - Jane Seymour, thus paving the way for another family to exert influence. Anne Boleyn was disposed of on trumped up charges (having had incestual relations with her brother and having dallied with other men) and was eventually beheaded after a short sojourn in the Tower (a different experience and location from her more triumphal sojourn shortly before in anticipation of her crowning). And that year a new royal marriage took place, and thus it would be the year of three Queens. Jane Seymour gave birth to a male heir, but succumbed from the effort a few days later, a state of affairs not unusual at the time. The King is supposed to have grieved her more than any other of his queens, which is not surprising , given that he had not yet had time to tire of her.

By this time, half of the famous rhyme had been completed 'divorced, beheaded, died..' The King was in an unprecedented situation, in the past his previous affairs had overlapped, now he was without any consort. Who could he marry? In effect the king sought to acquire a bride by post-order. Feelers were struck out all over European courts, but after the beheading of his second wife, his reputation had suffered. One lady, whose court he sought, explained that if she had had two necks she would have been delighted to offer one to his majesty. She had other offers and protectors, and thus could be so free-spoken. Eventually

he choice fell on a certain Anna of Cleves. The court portrait painter *par excellence* - Hans Holbein, was sent on a mission and returned with a likeness that pleased the King. However when the young woman was brought to England for the wedding, the King did not like her at all. The match had of course been made political grounds, masterminded by his aide - Thomas Cromwell, but the King nevertheless, as a love-struck teenager also entertained sentimental expectations. Anyway things had been carried too far and the King felt obliged to go through with the marriage. Many explanations for the disappointment of Henry can be presented, apart from her supposed ugliness. While the first three queens had been accomplished, speaking foreign languages, knowing Latin, playing instruments. None of that was to be found in the new queen. King Henry had in a way come down in the world. Anyway he was not able to rouse himself to the necessary action, and she was still innocent enough not to suspect that something was amiss. Eventually he had enough and offered her a deal she could not refuse. Unlike queen Catherine, who had regal bearing, the poor girl from the Low counties had nothing to oppose him with. The King was delighted by her compliance, such a contrast to his first queen, and made good his promises, treating the rejected queen as his dear sister, and was free to marry the teenage Catherine Howard. She was but a foolish teenage girl who so far had had a good time in her life and was a bit to susceptible to the charms of young men, and maybe not entirely captivated by an old gross man as Henry himself. (Although of course she put a good face to it.) Then her potential unfaithfulness, present as well as previous, became known. The King made short shrift with her and had her beheaded, a course of affairs, being so brutal and unexpected, that the poor girl probably never understood what was happening to her. Her life was obscure, but for that one fatal incident of briefly being married to the king. In fact no surviving likeness of her remains, and we do not even know how she looked like<sup>6</sup>. Finally the King married a common-sensical woman - Catherine Parr, who had been divorced twice, and hence there was no question of previous infidelities to mar the imagination of the King. By this time the king was old and quiet, at least domestically, and the scene was serene and the queen, who actually survived her husband, acted as a mother to the three previous offsprings of her consort. The king died after an extended sickness and Parr was eventually made free to marry again after thrice being widowed. This time she choose an old love - a certain Thomas Seymour, brother to a former queen, and uncle to the heir and now present king. And lo and behold, the old lady, already in her mid-thirties and with no previous pregnancy, gave birth to a healthy child, but just as her posthumous sister-in-law, she succumbed<sup>7</sup>. Thus the one lady who would survive the king for the longest, would turn out to be the unfortunate Anne of Cleves who had spent a life of material comfort in England. But as with many who are spoilt by unearned income, her appetite eventually outrun her supply and she complained of her situation. But who would be prevailed upon to take financial responsibility for her? She never returned to her homelands but died a stranger in England.

So this is the second book I have read on the subject. It differs from the first by not going into such excruciating detail. With Strakey you get the feeling that the author has

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<sup>6</sup> Fraser speculates that perhaps a likeness on a stained-glass window in Cambridge may be hers.

<sup>7</sup> Her issue survived, but for how long? The early life is documented, but then she is lost to posterity. The author speculates that it could only mean a premature death.

put down everything he has dragged up. Still Fraser belong to the British aristocracy, and with that goes a fondness of genealogies, which after all provides the *raison d'être* of aristocracy. Tudor England is a small country, and everybody who is someone, is related to everybody else, who is somebody. Except of course the talent that is dragged up from the lower classes and are given the opportunity to serve and run things. Fraser is very much aware of those linkings, and brings them up on almost every page. It admittedly has some fascination, yet hardly to the extent that the author seems to feel.

She ends her book by presenting where the different queens are buried, the burials of Boleyn and Howard naturally being secondary affairs after having first been dumped into the ground. This might give a nice suggestion for a future touristic pilgrimage for the reader.

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