

Six Wives

The Queens of Henry VIII

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To tell the story of the six wives of Henry VIII is an oblique way of telling the story of Henry VIII himself, a story which is far more compellingly interesting than any of his wives. It is notoriously hard to bring historical personages of long ago to life, there simply is too little documentation. In the case of Henry VIII there is admittedly a fair amount and he has engaged the imaginative curiosity of generations. Supposedly the image of Henry VIII is the one most likely to engender a recognition by the British Public. A pity Shakespeare never wrote a play on him. Probably it was too politically sensitive¹.

David Starkey has trawled the historical documents assiduously, and like most biographer he cannot resist the temptation to display almost everything he has caught in his nets. The result is a very thick tome thin on substance. There are a lot of events recorded, as well as individuals making more or less sustainable appearances, but the general effect is numbing rather than instructive. The real charm of reading about the past is to make it come to life, to appreciate both the similarities of the present (after all human nature is supposed to be constant) and the profound differences. The latter are only of interest as far as we can relate to them ourselves, i.e. to refer to the aforementioned reference to the constancy of human nature. The character of Henry VIII as we glimpse through the reading is certainly one we may recognize among our friends. A truculent nature, easy to take offense, vain and conceited, yet capable of great generosity and even empathy, including pride of parent-ship. A lot of energy, a devious mind, a passionate appreciation of the charms of women. But of course Henry VIII was blessed with circumstances denied our friends, he had power, which tend to emphasize personal idiosyncrasies, and the option of having his personal enemies, or merely obstructions, disposed of in definite ways (executions) certainly effects your freedom of action and the degree in which your associates are willing (or compelled) to indulge your whims.

The first wife of Henry was Catherine of Aragon. She was the youngest daughter of Ferdinand and Isabelle, the founding couple of the subsequent Spanish Empire. That the father of Henry VIII - Henry VII, was able to bring about a match with his eldest son and throne-apparent - Arthur, was a feat of dynastic match making, He was shrewd as well and struck a hard bargain. In the end the poor princess had to travel with her entourage to England to marry the young prince. At the time at least she knew no English, a tongue of minor repute, but she was well educated, fluent in Latin and French in addition to her native tongue. Her marriage with the young prince was of short duration. He soon caught

¹ In fact he did. It is admittedly one of the most obscure of Shakespears plays, and is to be found in his late output and assumed to be the result of a collaborative effort. Its relation to Henry VIII is further obscured by the fact that it is generally known as 'All is true'.

some disease and died. This was not unusual at the time. When Young Henry became King upon the death of his father, he decided to marry the widow of his brother. To do so was not entirely uncontroversial, she was after all his sister-in-law. Marriage is a formality, its consummation, however, is not. So while ties of marriage may be respected if they reflect definite realities, the mere formal ceremony is not. This would later become a moot point.

Catherine was young and pretty, and in fact she even had some English blood running in her veins, showing up in blue eyes and fair skin. Henry might very well be charmed on the carnal level as well, it was only as she aged and was getting fatter, that his lust may have cooled. She conceived a number of times, some of those leading to delivery (in fact six times), a few times even of sons, one of whom lived enough weeks to be touted as the young male heir, for whom the French King was prevailed to act as a Godfather. But only one pregnancy resulted in an issue to survive childhood, that of Mary, later to act as Queen of England. The King himself did not inhibit his straying nature after all this is the prerogative of the male, to say nothing about the King. One such dalliance gave birth to a son, on whom he showered honors, but significantly enough abstained from relieving him of his bastard nature and making him a real heir. Otherwise the marriage may have been seen as a success. While Henry was down in France waging war, a favorite past-time along with jousting and hunting, she acted as regent at home and actually led armies to the north staving off an attempt at an invasion by the Scottish King James IV, who was routed at an border engagement at Flodden paying with his life.

Playing around with other women may be considered an innocent past-time in enlightened circles but it carries with it a definite risk, that of seriously falling in love. And this is what supposedly happened to Henry when he caught eye of Anne Boleyn, a lady in waiting on the queen, and whose sisters favors he already had savored. It was not necessarily so that Anne was a virtuous woman, but she was definitely a shrewd one and determined not to sell herself too cheaply. If the King was to enjoy access to her bed, he better make her a queen first. And that was a tall demand indeed, as the King would find out for himself for the next six years. On the basis of Catherine having been his sister-in-law he tried to argue that the marriage was illegal and had in fact never taken proper place. The queen on the other hand naturally fought against such a stratagem intended to strip her of her honor and position, claiming that she had never slept with her first husband and thus undercutting the main thrust of Henrys argument. Her first line of defense was to deflect the threat of having the matter settled within the English realm and make it an international issue to be settled by the Pope. As her nephew had become the powerful King Charles I, she naturally expected a lot of support on the international scene. When it came to an an engagement with the King, she stood her grounds and bested him in every legal argument. She also acquired the sympathy of the public. Thus Henry was forced to swallow his pride and plead with the Pope who dragged his feet being beset on all sides by incompatible pressures. This if after all what politics is all about. Henry tried all his ingenuity and involving the best legal minds and ambassadors he could lay his hands on. One particular case being Cardinal Wolsey, who did the Kings bidding with great aplomb. But it was all to no avail and in the end he decided to cut the Gordian knot and settle the matter internally, pressured no doubt by Anne and his own frustrated carnal desire.

Anne was an aristocratic lady at court, who had received her own education at the French court, and would remain a francophile. No doubt she had been introduced to the religious reform movement while in France and she greatly abetted its adherents to work and proselyte in England. Her immediate relatives also benefitted from her spectacular rise, which was not only common at the time but expected, as it still is in the Third World. Henry became more and more demonstrative in his championship of his new woman, whose role would more and more appear as that of the Queen, while initially during the extended courtship he was eager to keep up appearances with his formal Queen. There was a wedding, and more significantly the birth of a daughter - Elizabeth, the effect of which was to demote more or less definitely (but not as it would in the end turn out) Mary herself, who was invited by Anne to join in the attendance to her daughter. An invitation Mary haughtily turned down, until she was compelled to mend her ways. Anne Boleyn was eventually coronated as a queen, in a sumptuous ceremony designed to outdo that of her predecessor.

The affair with Anne was of course on the personal plane just a sexual passion, an infatuation that refused to go away, but it had momentous consequences, namely the repulsion of the Catholic church and the English embracement of the Protestant movement. What was really going on? And was that transformation of the English society, which would lead to deep conflicts up to the beginning of the 18th century really the result of such frivolity? While in Northern Europe the spread of Lutheranism was mostly due to the political ambitions of local princes, enabling them to confiscate the riches of the Church (this definitely was the main motivation in Scandinavia at the time). Calvinism may have been another case in this regard, its opposition to the Catholic church was not the same as that of Luther and the religious wars in France were of a different nature. Anne certainly was a Protestant and abetted the introduction of seditious Lutheran literature into the Kingdom. She was also instrumental in engineering the downfall of Wolsey, the trusted confidant of Henry and have him replaced by the more pliable Cranmore. What the Kings personal opinion was on theological matters, the book gives little guidance, although one suspects that the King was not indifferent to theological speculation. Anyway while the movement was gaining a foothold he took advantage of it and had various monasteries ransacked and dismantled appropriating their riches.

The old Queen Catherine eventually died in humiliating reclusion with few confidants and friends left of any possible influence save the Spanish ambassador, whose dispatches provide a gold mine for future historians such as Strakey. This was of course a cause for rejoicing both for the King and even more so for Anne herself. But as is often the case, the moment of triumph is not seldom followed by disaster. Not many months later Anne found herself on the scaffold to be beheaded. What was the reason? The love of Henrys life and still subject to such an extreme manifestation of displeasure. Maybe the King had simply tired of her. She was a strong-willed character, probably not so easy to handle. When he had sought he favors for six long years, making his wooing have reverberations on the international scene, finally attaining his goal, may have made for an anti-climax. And then there was Jane Seymour, a rather mousy little character according to contemporary witnesses, but maybe of a sufficiently submissive nature to appeal to the King. Anne had to be disposed of and that quickly. No more drawn out affair of six years. And in fact

there really was no reason for that. His marriage to Anne was not dynastic it was a purely domestic, not to say private affair, which could be taken care of accordingly. Trumped-up charges of infidelity, which in the context of a queen was indistinguishable from treason led to the expected verdict². Her erstwhile ally - Thomas Cromwell, whom she had plotted with to overthrow opponents (such as Thomas Moore) was instrumental in her downfall. The court of Henry VIII and the sudden turns in the fortunes of its players, may make one think of Stalin and his sham trials. Nothing is, as we all know, new under the sun, And by now most of the pages of the thick tome have been filled, what is left is a rather quick perusal of the fates of the remaining four, none of which had the personality or clout of the first two.

Jane Seymour delivered. That means she delivered a boy - Edward. But at a price. A few days later she succumbed from the vagaries of childbirth, a real danger to women up to the end of the 19th century. Anne of Cleves was the result of Henry's 'internet-dating' and with many of that type it came to sudden grief when clashing with reality. Diplomatic feelers had been sent out and the charms of Anne had been abundantly praised and the court painter Holbein sent on a mission to fix her appearance on canvas. Henry was delighted, sure that he was landing a jewel. However, the first encounter with her turned out to be a disaster. Playfully the King appeared to her in disguise confident in his conceit that true love would see through the concealment, but that the new pending queen refused to play along, hurt him to be quick. He sought ways of aborting the wedding plans but was unable to do much more than postpone them for a few days. Not surprisingly he found himself unable to consummate the marriage, she simply failed to arouse him, something he also found deeply disturbing as to his potency. The King who had been strong and handsome started to age quickly in his forties and became grossly fat and with a number of unseemly blemishes some of which gave cause to real discomfort to himself and not only to his surroundings. A few months later he managed a divorce, and Anne submitted without too many remonstrations, and begged to remain in his affection as a sister. Instead the aging King was taken by a young lusty teenager - Catherine Howard. The affair was doomed from the start. Not only did premarital dalliance emerge, but also that she in all likelihood had been deceiving the King behind his back. A new law was enacted in parliament retroactively applied to her. She and every young man having bragged about carnal relations were summarily disposed of in gruesome ways. In the case of Catherine there was a repeat of the beheading of her predecessor Anne Boleyn.

Finally the King married Catherine Parr, a twice widowed lady of some influence. The king was old and the marriage rather tranquil as far as his royal marriages were concerned. Already Jane had championed Mary and had brought about a reconciliation between the King and his three children and re-instituted Mary at court. This had been continued by her successors especially by Catherine Parr who continued this process and in particular established very good relations with Elizabeth, whom she had properly tutored³. The King finally died and about a year later, Parr third widowed married to the love of her youth, gave birth to a son in her mid-thirties (her first child) only to suffer the fate of

² Burning at the stake was transmuted to decapitation, which was further glorified by being effected by a sword and not an axe

³ The result of which may have made the future Queen a staunch champion of Protestantism.

her predecessor Jane and die in the aftermath of childbirth. She, who is usually referred to as the one queen to survive him, did not live many months to savor her good luck.

Henry VIII	1491-1547	<i>1509-1547</i>
Catherine of Aragon	1485-1536	<i>1509-1533</i>
Anne Boleyn	(1501-07)-1536	<i>1533-1536</i>
Jane Seymour	1508-1537	<i>1536-1537</i>
Anne of Cleves	1515-1557	<i>1540</i>
Catherine Howard	(1518-24)-1542	<i>1541</i>
Catherine Parr	1512-1548	<i>1543-1547</i>

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