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Rebecca Ries-Roncalli

John Carroll University, rriesroncalli18@jcu.edu

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Patriarchal Dynamics in Politics: How Anne Boleyn's
Femininity Brought her Power and Death

Rebecca Ries-Roncalli

Senior Honors Project

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I. Adding Dimension to an Elusive Character

The figure of Anne Boleyn is one that looms large in history, controversial in her time and today. The second wife of King Henry VIII, she is most well-known for precipitating his break with the Catholic Church in order to marry her. Despite the tremendous efforts King Henry went to in order to marry Anne, a mere three years into their marriage, he sentenced her to death and immediately married another woman. Popular representations of her continue to exist, though most Anne Boleyns in modern depictions are figments of a cultural imagination.¹ What is most telling about the way Anne is seen is not that there are so many opinions, but that throughout over 400 years of study, she remains an elusive character to pin down. Vixen or victim? Did she desire power or did she love King Henry VIII? In studying Anne Boleyn, it is clear that the academic field is generally divided into two fields of thought. There are those who see Anne as a conniving manipulator who led Henry on in order to gain more power, either interpreted as a feminist quest for agency or as a personal desire for power. Others view Anne as a woman who genuinely loved Henry and was a victim of circumstance, painting a rather passive picture of her.

While these are two extremes, there has been some recent effort to bridge the divide between these stances and to find an interpretation that is not tainted by the polarized nature of her character and her fall. Historians have come to understand that in order to gain an increasingly holistic understanding, it is necessary to focus on specific aspects of her life such as family, court life, and societal norms, and whether or not they shaped the way Anne responded to her situation. Anne's actions can be analyzed in two ways: her own complicity in the patriarchal

¹ Susan Bordo, "Victim or Vixen?" *Chronicle of Higher Education* 54, no. 31 (April 11, 2008), 1.

structure in which she was raised, and the amount of agency that she displayed. An analysis that combines the ways she was passive or active in her own agency must also be cross-referenced to the ways in which Anne was or was not a product of her social norms.² The historians who argue that Anne displays agency do not adequately address the question of her own acceptance and perpetuation of patriarchal norms, though they all have different interpretations of Anne in terms of seeing her either as a victim of circumstance or as unable to play the political game when she was in over her head. Those who do not argue that she has agency also tend to see Anne as relatively complicit in the structures that prevented her from acting freely.

David Loades' work *The Boleyns: The Rise & Fall of a Tudor Family* takes the most fatalist view on Anne's character, seeing her as not only a passive tool for her father's exploitation, but also as a victim of circumstance due to her own acceptance of societal norms. He does so by focusing on the importance of family within the Tudor courts, because "it was through the sexuality of his daughters that Sir Thomas Boleyn became a great man."³ While illuminating the importance of family life in political spheres of the time, Loades automatically assumes that the patriarchal norms that dominated the atmosphere of court meant that Anne was completely exploited by a cold and calculating father. He does not adequately frame the issue of filial duty and assess the complexities of Thomas Boleyn's actions towards both of his daughters, instead focusing on the ways that he benefited from Anne's rise to power.

² It is worth noting that historians that have analyzed Anne Boleyn do not do so through the lens of agency and complicitness with her own society. Besides Karen Lindsey there has been little effort to navigate the complexities of the opportunities for female agency. Rather, David Loades, Retha Warnicke, Eric Ives, and Alison Weir focus on familial politics, court dynamics, factional politics, and interpersonal relationships that can provide insight into Anne's character and motivations.

³ David M. Loades, *The Boleyns: The Rise & Fall of a Tudor Family*, (Stroud: Amberley Publishing, 2011), 8.

In the same vein, Retha Warnicke focuses on Anne's passivity both through familial relationships and the patriarchal nature of politics of the Tudor courts in her historical writings. Anne is neither an agent of her own destiny, nor is she a woman that is complicit and responsive to this system. She argues that both Anne and Queen Catherine of Aragon, Henry's first wife, "became the involuntary victims of the king's drive and ambition for his own lineage, and of the rules of their Church and society."⁴ In Warnicke's view, Anne's only fault was not being able to have male children in a society that was obsessed with preserving and advancing lineages. Furthermore, Warnicke explicitly addresses patriarchal norms within court by focusing on the ways that the patriarchy dominated Anne's life through the examination of female sexual norms. Warnicke portrays Anne as a woman that was constrained by her family's desire for advancement and Henry's desire for children. Warnicke does not sufficiently examine the ways that the patriarchal society shaped and formed Anne from her very birth, and the ways in which Anne herself not only followed those norms, but appropriated and perpetuated them.

Eric Ives wrote one of the most well-balanced books in the field, *The Rise and Fall of Anne Boleyn*. In his eyes, Anne did display agency, particularly in the realm of Tudor factional politics. He did not see Anne as a victim of circumstance, but instead portrays Anne as being conscious of the way that society was structured. For him, Anne was "a woman in a society, which was, above all else, male dominated, who broke through the glass ceiling by sheer character and initiative," and "sharp, assertive, subtle, calculating, vindictive, a power dresser and a power player, perhaps a figure more to be admired than liked."⁵ While he does address the fact that her society was male dominated, he does not focus on the ways in which Anne herself

⁴ Retha M. Warnicke, *The Rise and Fall of Anne Boleyn*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 5.

⁵ Eric William Ives, *The Life and Death of Anne Boleyn*, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2004), XV.

had to play by specific rules as a woman. Believing that Anne and Henry married for love and attempted to “have an affectionate marriage, with perceptible hints of modernity in the context of a Tudor court,”⁶ Ives does not adequately interpret the ways in which Henry’s pursuit of Anne was dominated by the intertwining of politics and patriarchy; Anne in the end had no choice but to give in.

Moving towards the more optimistic opinions on Anne’s agency, Alison Weir sees Anne as both displaying agency and going against the grain of societal norms. Through her study of court dynamics and interpersonal relationships at court when Anne, King Henry, and Queen Catherine all resided there, Weir portrays Anne as “an ambitious adventuress with a penchant for vengeance.”⁷ She characterizes Anne as manipulative and irritable, placing emphasis on her inability to satisfy the king after their marriage, and therefore unable to keep the power that she desperately wanted. Seeing Anne as a woman that “merely lacked the necessary modesty, circumspection, and humility of manner; thus it was easy for her contemporaries to believe her of moral laxity,”⁸ Weir depicts Anne as a woman that tried to be an agent in a society that went against her. Weir does not, however, study the ways in which Anne herself actually strictly adhered to the eras’ notions of modesty. Moreover, in her attempt to show that Anne displayed agency and was not compliant with patriarchal norms Weir implies that Anne was to be blamed for her eventual downfall.

In her groundbreaking work *Divorced, Beheaded, Survived*, Karen Lindsey sees Anne as an agent of her own destiny, but still portrays Anne as a victim of circumstance and societal norms because of the way that she had to succumb to King Henry in the end. Lindsey sees Anne

⁶ Ibid., XV.

⁷ Alison Weir, *The Six Wives of Henry VIII*, (New York: Grove Press, 1991), 3.

⁸ Ibid., 9.

as a woman who “pursued by a king whose advances she at first resisted, she turned the lust from which she could not escape into a means of achieving power for herself: captured, she became the captor.”⁹ This feminist reinterpretation of the Tudor era, has transformed the way that events such as Henry’s break with the Catholic Church and his pursuit of Anne have been interpreted without attention to the exigencies of the patriarchal nature of their society. Lindsey delved into the complexities of navigating a female identity in a structurally patriarchal world that was obsessed with keeping power in the hands of men. While this book is essential in understanding the complexities of female agency in the male spheres of power and politics, it nonetheless does not acknowledge that it is difficult to establish any of Anne’s of behavior as feminist. Lindsey omits the ways in which Anne was shaped by her society to adhere to these patriarchal norms; she instead focused on the few ways in which women displayed agency in a limited manner.

It is dangerous to read into Anne’s journey to power a personal quest for agency, when it was rooted in a society that depended on female complicity. Anne was a product of her court experience and education, and though she exhibits some agency, it is not a consciously feminist agency that many modern scholars are looking for or would like to see. In fact, historians prefer to research resistance to authority that is present, and not the way that people of the time submitted to and reproduced structures of authority at the time.¹⁰ The large majority of people in history were complicit in the structures of authority in their times; that is why they were persisting and successful systems of authority. This is essential in the study of Anne Boleyn, because most studies of her focus either on the way in which she defied traditional authorities or was overcome by them. It does not examine the ways in which she complied with and upheld

⁹ Karen Lindsey, *Divorced, Beheaded, Survived*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Perseus Press, 1995), 48.

¹⁰ James Daybell, "Gender, Obedience, and Authority in Sixteenth-Century Women's Letters," *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 41, no. 1 (2010): 49.

these structures. This does not mean that Anne did not display agency, but rather that her agency or passivity must be viewed through the lens of learned complicity in patriarchal power structures.

Anne was not completely passive in her life, but she was shaped by an education that instilled the patriarchal foundations of her society. It is therefore necessary not only to de-emphasize the agency that historians such as Lindsey have given to her, but also to highlight the ways in which Anne's education would instill patriarchal values of demure and submissive femininity and modesty. Having spent time in two courts in Continental Europe, Anne was more worldly and educated than any of the above scholars indicate. They brush over her education and formation to get to the parts of Anne's life they deem interesting and do not look at the ways in which her education is inherent to her later course of life. These courts were not only opportunities for improving Anne's marriage prospects; they were highly structured settings that taught women early on what their position in society was and how they were to see themselves. Integrating Anne's education into her actions later in her life is essential to understand how she approached the tricky situation into which she was placed. Looking at Anne outside of her education will only reveal a partial answer.

In placing Anne into cultural context, it will also be essential to take a look at the education of young women of her time, and the way that Anne stood out amongst them because of her unique educational opportunities. By exploring her early years, it is possible to see Anne accepted the institution of marriage and the ideals of filial duty of her culture. While I agree with historians such as Lindsey and Ives in terms of Anne being an exceptional woman, she was also formed to adhere to norms that would make her much less revolutionary than is often seen.

Anne was not on a Machiavellian pursuit of political power; she was an assertive woman who knew her own mind. Despite the fact that she had strong opinions and exerted power in some ways that weren't perceived as traditional, she was responsive to the patriarchal concepts present in her educational and political context, such as following norms of female modesty and filial duty. Anne is not a proto-feminist, but is a clear example of the ways that women were not only constrained, but also shaped, by a patriarchy in which woman still could only use the tools that were available to them.

II. Court Life: a Paradox of Pleasure and Virtue

While most scholars brush over Anne's education as background information, it is instead the key to understanding how Anne saw herself in relation to the societal structures of her time. Education is the way in which children are introduced into the way that society works, and is a highly formative experience; Anne's education is therefore central in her own development as a person, especially as educational opportunities for females were largely centered around social advancement through marriage. Born in 1501,¹¹ the second child of Sir Thomas Boleyn, Anne was fortunate enough to spend a large amount of her childhood in Continental European courts. As expected, Anne was not able to choose this; her placement in these courts was decided by the men in her life. This lack of agency in her choice of education sent subliminal messages that she, as most women of the time, would not have a say in shaping her own life. After examining Anne's education, it will be necessary to look at her refusal of King Henry, her position of power and its influence at court, her religious views, and her eventual death through

¹¹ There is scholarly debate about Anne's date of birth, but most scholars think this earlier date is more contextually accurate.

the lens of this patriarchal education. This will allow a different portrait of Anne to emerge that takes into account the intricacies of feminine existence in a world concerned with placing moral and cultural restraints on women.

From 1513 to 1521, Anne lived in two of the most influential courts in Europe, the Burgundian court and the French court, in which she learned all of the skills that were required to become an accomplished and successful noblewoman, among those the importance of modesty.¹² In order to be considered accomplished, a woman had to be able to embroider well, and to play the lute and the virginals. She was to learn to write beautifully, and to enjoy poetry. Above all, she was to be entertaining, pleasant, and a good conversationalist.¹³ Though these skills may be avenues of fostering agency, their purposes were largely passive and decorative. Women learned how to be accessories, ornaments to their future husbands. These skills would not only help them obtain a man in the marriage market, but also were ways in which women were taught from a young age that their purpose in life was not to gain power or shape their own destinies but to engage in virtuous and modest activities. If their hands were occupied, they could not engage in sinful behavior.

Even though the intention of Anne's education was enforcing a subordinate role, her experience abroad would give her some sense of independence and confidence, as it set her apart from other women of her time. Anne's exposure to different courts at a tender age would clearly influence and shape not only her education, but also her identity and the very way that she saw herself. Her experience in several courts would allow her to understand the inner workings of courts more easily, as she would have to adapt to different court structures. Her time abroad at

¹² Retha M. Warnicke, "Anne Boleyn's Childhood and Adolescence," *The Historical Journal* 28, no. 4 (December 1985): 943.

¹³ Weir, *The Six Wives of Henry VIII*, 148.

such a young age would also give her a sense of independence and self-reliance as she was sent alone, without her family or an emotional support system. These experiences gave Anne a polished education that was not possible in England, as well as helped her become more confident and independent than most women who stayed in their own court. Even reports of people who did not like Anne admitted that though she was not traditionally beautiful, she was witty and confident in a way that set her apart from other women at the court. It was reported that “albeit in beauty she is to any inferior, but for behavior, manners, attire, and tongue she excelled them all, for she had been brought up in France.”¹⁴ Even reports that were hostile to Anne had to admit that she danced and played the lute well.¹⁵ Her time in France gave her a distinct fashion and her personality was vivacious, witty, and graceful.¹⁶ At the French court, Anne also was encouraged to pursue her love for poetry and literature by the blue-stocking sister of King Francis I, Margaret of Alençon.¹⁷ Her confidence and ease in sophistication set her apart from other women, and were learned from her time in foreign courts that not only taught her traditional virtues such as modesty, but would have been a growing experience for her.

Anne’s experience at Margaret of Austria’s court exposed her to the challenges and delicate intricacies that came with female power, which Margaret overcame by her premium on chastity and modesty. Widowed from two previous marriages to Catherine of Aragon’s brother Juan and Philibert II, Duke of Savoy, Margaret decided she did not want to be married again, and was head of her own court as the regent Netherlands.¹⁸ Because of society’s innate suspicion of women in positions of power, Margaret was strict with her maids of honor; they could not flirt or

¹⁴ Kelly Hart, *The Mistresses of Henry VIII*, (Gloucestershire: The History Press, 2009), 90.

¹⁵ Ives, *The Life and Death of Anne Boleyn*, 29.

¹⁶ Weir, *The Six Wives of Henry VIII*, 151.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 153.

¹⁸ Lindsey, *Divorced, Beheaded, Survived*, 49.

engage in gossip with men. Concern for preserving the innocence of women at court was common; at a court that was run by a woman, who would have been considered unable to keep political and social control, it would be all the more important. Margaret would therefore have to be exceedingly careful about what her ladies were exposed to. Courtly love was acceptable, but courtly love and sexual affairs were two different realms entirely.¹⁹ The result was that Anne's first experience of court would be more careful about modesty and virtue than other courts, despite the fact that the main culprit for seduction, a king, was not present. Though her time in Margaret's court was only about a year, Anne would have seen at this time how a queen would be able to exert her own power if she was smart enough.²⁰ She would also have seen, however, the importance and emphasis that was placed on virtue and chastity that was necessary for Margaret to maintain respect in the eyes of other European courts.

Further evidence of Anne's lack of agency in her education is her transferral from Margaret's court to the French Court. This was for political reasons more than the quality of education offered at Margaret's court. Though there is no evidence that Henry had met Anne Boleyn at this point, he still had a great deal of influence in her life as her sovereign. He was most likely the reason that Anne was moved to France, as the evidence suggests that he wanted both Boleyn sisters to accompany his sister to France for her marriage.²¹ Anne went to the French court in 1514 not only at the behest of the king, but also that of her father. Being at the most elegant court in Europe was sure to be advantageous for the Boleyn family. Thomas Boleyn thought that as a result, Anne could make a prosperous marriage, at least to an Earl.²² Though it

¹⁹ Hart, *Mistresses of Henry VIII*, 83.

²⁰ Lindsey, *Divorced, Beheaded, Survived*, 51.

²¹ Loades, *The Boleyns*, 28.

²² Retha M. Warnicke, "Anne Boleyn's Childhood and Adolescence," 949.

was Anne's education, again we see that it was not up to her where she was to be educated. It was decided by the men in power: the king and her father. The tool of education that is often seen as a form of liberation was still modulated by the males in her life; Anne was not consulted, and her own opinion about her education did not matter. Her father was presumed to know what was best for her, and there is no evidence that Anne ever complained or resisted the way these decisions were made without her.

The emphasis of virtue found in Margaret's court was continued into Anne's stay at the French court of Queen Claude. Anne remained in France after Henry's sister, Mary, went back to England after her husband's death. Modesty and virtue were stressed in Queen Claude's court, where she led a relatively secluded life for a queen.²³ Anne was specifically noted for her modesty and discretion by Francis I, who thought that she was going to become a nun.²⁴ If she was able to fend off Francis, then Anne must have been very convinced of the importance of virtue as he was known for his seduction. She most likely used this as a defense mechanism to keep herself safe from advances at a court that was known for its licentiousness and lends credence to the fact that Anne was being genuine when she told Henry that she was not interested in premarital conjugal relations. Regardless of her reasons, it is clear that Anne was buying into the importance of a woman's modesty that is modeled in her experience at court. In some instances, this practice of modesty was a form of agency, as seen with King Francis I, and later King Henry VIII. But it was still formed in a patriarchal context that emphasized that a female's value was intricately intertwined with her chastity.

²³ Ives, *The Life and Death of Anne Boleyn*, 30.

²⁴ Weir, *The Six Wives of Henry VIII*, 154.

With this extensive educational experience, it is no surprise that when Anne returned to England she was already used to standing out in court and would continue to do so. Anne was often called upon to translate French and English encounters at a young age.²⁵ This would have given Anne a sense of importance, as well as agency. Instead of relying on men in this world of politics, they needed a woman to communicate. Moreover, it would have placed Anne in a position of importance, as well as helped her to become accustomed to living in a court where she would have been well-known. Anne learned in the French court that it wasn't about her looks, but how she acted in the company of others that would lead to her being noticed. This would be later a factor in Henry's fascination with her, as well as help form her confidence to reject a monarch.

III. Reading the Writing on the Wall

While court was a place of female accomplishment and inculcation of societal norms, it was reinforced by an education that centered around patriarchal norms. It was common for the children of English nobles to be educated by patrons or nobles who were well-off or had prestige in the arts. These patrons would then provide the young noble with a suitable marriage. Girls were frequently first instructed by female teachers, and often were taught to read by their own mothers.²⁶ After the age of twelve, girls could come to court which was the way in which they were introduced into polite society.²⁷ It is therefore significant that at a young age Anne was introduced into polite society in two powerhouses of culture and arts. Her perception of culture

²⁵ Ives, *The Life and Death of Anne Boleyn*, 31.

²⁶ Elizabeth Mazzola, "Schooling Shrews and Grooming Queens in Tudor Classrooms," *Critical Survey* 22, no. 1 (2010): 10-11.

²⁷ Warnicke, "Anne's Childhood and Adolescence," 944.

and court was therefore heavily influenced by her exposure to highly sophisticated and complex courts in her youth. She was not introduced to court life in her own home country, which meant that she had experience in several courts and most likely knew herself quite well.

Female education generally mirrored male education, though with emphasis on running a household. While women were learning how to read, it was often what they were reading that was more damaging than not as they often learned to read through exercises or verses emphasizing docile and submissive behavior for women.²⁸ Among nobility, where women were often taught to write, letter writing to parents was used as an educational tool for children in order to inculcate patriarchal ideals such as filial obedience.²⁹ In learning to display deference and obedience in these letters, the educational system was set up to form children to a specific mold that did not teach critical and analytical thinking.³⁰ Thus material that women were learning to read from and were copying often had messages that promoted a certain image of femininity, one that was submissive, quiet, and docile. Here is an example of verses that were written by a maid under the age of fourteen.

With God the Lord would I could walk,
Then shall I should not tormented be
But I should live in quietnesse,
And he should be glorifi'd by me.³¹

The most obvious slant to these verses is religious, yet there are patriarchal elements intertwined into the religious themes, emphasizing an ideal Christian woman as virtuous and quiet. A

²⁸ It is interesting to note that among lower classes of well-off subjects, many women were not taught to write. They were only to read as this was seen as less dangerous. While this is not important to the research done here on Anne, it is another example of how women's education was tailored to benefit the men of that society. Women who could not write could not contribute to intellectual discussions.

Mazzola, "Schooling Shrews and Grooming Queens," 11.

²⁹ Daybell, "Gender, Obedience, and Authority in Sixteenth-Century Women's Letters," 51.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 53.

³¹ Mazzola, "Schooling Shrews and Grooming Queens," 12.

woman's way to glorify God was by submitting to the patriarchal norms that dominated every element of society at the time. She was not just pleasing her male family; she was being what God intended her to be. However, there were conflicting models of authority and agency that women received, as they were taught in the classroom how to be submissive and dutiful wives that were good at managing the homes, yet put them into a court whose politics often allowed women like Anne to see how far this political agency could carry them.³² In Henry VIII's reign, women had an unusual amount of political learning and room to maneuver. Henry's last wife, Katherine Parr was very well-educated and organized the education for Mary Tudor.³³

This confusion and uncertainty about female roles are what make studying Anne's influence in court particularly difficult, as often women had to use agency through the power of a man. Margaret of Austria, for example, only had her own court because Emperor Maximilian supported her position there.³⁴ While she clearly exhibited agency and was the center of the court, her own political power and very position depended on the favor of a man in power. This is reflected throughout court and familial dynamics, in which women were educated to submit to men's wills, but were often needed to influence other men and to engage in politics for the men of their family. Even if they gained power, it was because it was given to them by a man; a woman could never possess power from her own inherent right to do so. Education was a way in which women would come to learn what was and was not appropriate power for a woman to exercise.

Conduct books were another way in which education was disseminated in higher circles of European society. These books socialized women to equate femininity with obeying male

³² Ibid., 18.

³³ Ibid., 15.

³⁴ Lindsey, *Divorced, Beheaded, Survived*, 49.

family members and following the footsteps of a dutiful daughter and wife.³⁵ A particular conduct book that will help illustrate what Anne Boleyn was learning is Juan Vives' *A Verie Fruitfull and Pleasant Book called the Instruction of the Christian Woman*. Ironically, this extensive conduct book was written as a favor to Queen Catherine of Aragon in order to inform Mary Tudor's education. The focus of this volume is women's behavior, specifically regarding how Christian women are to remain meek and obedient. Anne was born too early for this to be a cornerstone of her education, but Vives writes common sentiments about Christian female duties of the time. He is not plucking these insights out of thin air; these currents of thought were common enough to be widely accepted in a conduct book. It is therefore not unreasonable to think that her education would reflect the basic elements that are seen throughout this work. These kinds of conduct books enforce the assumption that there was much preoccupation with females places in society as they often emphasize what roles a "good" woman is to fulfill in society.

Juan Vives' book focuses on giving guidance to a woman throughout her life, from puberty even through widowhood. The book, before anything else, emphasizes the virtue and chastity of a good Christian woman. When Vives speaks about the education of women and their place in society, he asserts that "shee hath no charge to see too, but her honesty and chastitie."³⁶ As seen earlier, Anne took care to avoid the sexual relations in the French court. She clearly believed that while her education was essential in moving up the social ladder, the most important thing she had was her honor and virtue. Other than learning to stay chaste and

³⁵ The fact that conduct books were so widespread and so obsessed with docile femininity suggests that there was still a concern about women's behavior. It is clear that many women were not inherently following the forms of femininity that were required of them without these reminders.

³⁶ Juan Vives, *A Verie Fruitfull and Pleasant Book Called the Instruction of the Christian Woman*, (Bruges: 1523), 4.

virtuous, Vives believed that “when shee is of the age to learne anything, let her begin with that which pertaineth to the ornament of her soule, and the keeping and ordering of an house.”³⁷ It is possible to affirm, therefore, that within these conduct books, a woman’s education surrounds the management and keeping of a house and her own virginity.

Though chastity was a large part of his work, Vives also emphasized motherhood as it was seen as an essential element of female identity. The need to reproduce well so that some children made it to adulthood was especially present in society’s concerns. Vives was especially concerned with the ways that a mother’s bad habits and sinfulness could be transmitted to the child. He states “We sucke out of our mothers teat together with the milke, not only love, but also conditions and dispositions.”³⁸ It is of course implied throughout this conduct book that in order for the mother to be fit and to impart good and wholesome conditions to her children, she must be submissive, docile, and chaste. Through this interpretation the role of motherhood becomes subordinate to the wishes and desires of the men of society.

As children were seen to inherit good or bad virtues that were passed on by their mothers, it is not a surprise that there was such a deep concern about women’s sexual habits. If it was commonly believed that a child from a promiscuous woman would in turn lead a life of debauchery and sinfulness, it adds another dimension to Anne’s perception as “The Great Whore.” She was popularly perceived to have ensnared Henry with her sexuality, and therefore as someone who would have questionable virtues to pass on to her child. Despite this, Anne herself wanted to breastfeed Elizabeth when she was born.³⁹ Since at the time that meant passing

³⁷ Ibid., 19.

³⁸ Ibid., 14.

³⁹Weir, *The Six Wives of Henry VIII*, 260.

on one's habits, Anne must have been quite sure that she had good virtues to pass on to her daughter.

IV. Blood is Thicker Than Water: Familial Dynamics in Anne's Life

As formative as her education was, Anne would have understood that it was not to make her a better person; it was to make her a more attractive marriage prospect and advance her family's fortunes. Her time abroad was not to make her more sophisticated or the belle of the English court. It was expected that she would return to England and use all of the ways she stood out at court to find an excellent match. This seems cold and calculating from the 21st century point of view, but at the time it made sense that the familial unit was to support one another in doing one's duty to advance the family. For women, the way to participate politically was through marriage and its arrangement.⁴⁰ It was therefore no secret to Anne through her time in courts and her exposure to patriarchal ideals through education that all of this work was for a higher purpose: to fulfill her destiny as a wife.

By looking at Anne's relationship with her father, it is possible to see the way that education and society enforced their relationship instead of pitting them against one another; they worked together to advance the family. It has been thought, by historians such as Loades, that Thomas Boleyn was a grasping and calculating man that was willing to throw both of his daughters at the king for his own social advances, but it is necessary to look at the context of familial relationships in society to understand Anne's familial motivations in her interactions with Henry. As seen in Juan Vives' book, it was a daughter's filial duty to do her part in

⁴⁰ Barbara J. Harris, "Women and Politics in Early Tudor England," *The Historical Journal* 33, no. 2 (June 1990): 260.

advancing the family's social status. Women were taught through education not only how to behave in society and in the family, but also how they were seen in relation to the men in their lives. The family's hierarchical structure was seen as a representation of authority within the State, which is why submitting to the patriarchal family structure was seen as being obedient to the Crown.⁴¹ Thomas was not a cold and calculating man hell-bent on using his daughters' sexuality to gain more land and titles; he was trying to ensure the best life that he could for his daughter in the way that most fathers were at the time. Other than being sent to European courts for her education, Anne was not being treated differently than other daughters of the time.

Thomas was already a man that had gained much through his older daughter Mary Boleyn's four year relationship with the king and his successes as a diplomat. It seems unlikely he would be willing to upset that balance by having Anne continually play the king and make a fool of herself at court when she could make an advantageous and unquestionably legitimate marriage with the charms that she had learned at foreign courts. In 1509, Thomas Boleyn was only a knight. By 1529, he had the earldoms of Wiltshire and Ormond.⁴² By 1524, he could count himself a member of the major nobility, as his household was about £1,100.⁴³ He achieved this via a thorough application of himself to the king's services, as well as having the luck to have not one, but two of his daughters catch the eye of the king. It is therefore difficult to believe that he would put that in jeopardy by attempting the seemingly impossible task of getting Anne on the throne.

Though Anne is often seen as a woman who defies social norms of docility and chastity, it is actually Mary Boleyn who fills that position, a warning to Anne of the dangers of resisting

⁴¹ Daybell, "Gender, Obedience, and Authority in Sixteenth-Century Women's Letters," 49.

⁴² Warnicke, "Anne's Childhood and Adolescence," 951.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 42.

the oppressive rules and requirements of the patriarchal power structure. Mary was sent to the French court at the age of 15, possibly because she was already getting attention at court and Thomas wanted her to spend time in France. Regardless of the reasons, she most likely witnessed a good deal of sexual maneuvering, beginning with Henry's sister Margaret, who ended up in the arms of Charles Brandon very shortly after the death of her recent husband, the French king. She was then transferred with Anne to the court of Queen Claude.⁴⁴ Mary was well-known for her promiscuity, gaining a reputation '*per una grandissima ribalda et infame sopra tutte.*'⁴⁵ Once Thomas learned of this, she was then brought back to England as he was concerned about her reputation, but not before having engaged in relations with Francis I. Thomas did not put her in the way of the king, rather she enjoyed a rather promiscuous life more. Mary was not a woman manipulated by her father, but rather disobeyed her father in cultivating such a sexually available image. In her refusal of feminine ideals of purity and obedience, she was expressing a form of agency that is not seen in Anne.

Anne would have sought to distance herself from Mary's shadow, and seemed to have been able to avoid adverse sexual attention at the French court, seeing the way that it affected her sisters' standing. It was not only from courts that she would have learned this. In conduct books such as *Les Enseignements*, noblewomen were warned that if they were to have female relatives engaged in affairs, it would reflect badly on them, and their reputations could suffer.⁴⁶ Anne most likely learned from conduct books and her education, but also by seeing the way in which Mary was seen at court that she did not want to follow in her sister's footsteps.

⁴⁴ Loades, *The Boleyns: The Rise & Fall of a Tudor Family*, 48-49.

⁴⁵ Some have attributed this quote to King Francis I; *Ibid.*, 50.

⁴⁶ Retha M. Warnicke, "The Fall of Anne Boleyn Revisited," *The English Historical Review* 108, no. 428 (1993): 658.

Mary herself had an affair with Henry that lasted about four years, a considerable period of time for Henry. Both her husband and her father were well rewarded for this.⁴⁷ This is an example of a broader pattern: women were not discouraged from being unfaithful and acting in an “unvirtuous” way if it could gain advantages for the family. For all that the Tudor era cared deeply about women staying pure and chaste, there was much to be gained when your daughter or wife caught the attention of the king. For women of the time, their sexuality was one of the only ways that they could gain favor. Despite this, it was often their male relatives that benefited more from this moral transgression. The fact that Mary did not accept the sexual and familial norms of the time suggests that it was in fact Mary who exhibited more female agency than Anne. Mary is not her counterexample, but rather shows that a woman acting on her own agency is never rewarded. Mary’s story is not one of a daughters prostitution by her father for favors, but rather a fathers’ failure in containing Mary to her defined gender role.

Anne seems to have been more concerned with her own image and how she was to behave herself in society than Mary was. We know that Anne understood the importance of her future good marriage from the very beginning of her education. In a letter she wrote to her father very shortly after joining Margaret of Austria’s court, she stated:

Sir, I understand from your letter that you desire me to be a woman of good reputation [*toufs onette fame*] when I come to court, and you tell me that the queen will take the trouble to converse with me, and it gives me great joy to think of talking with such a wise and virtuous person. This will make me all the keener to persevere in speaking French well, and also especially because you have told me to, and have advised me for my own part to work at it as much as I can.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Hart, *The Mistresses of Henry VIII*, 57.

⁴⁸ Ives, *The Life and Death of Anne Boleyn*, 19.

It is clear from this letter that Anne at the very least pretended to submit to her father's will, and most likely actually believed that it was her duty to become as accomplished as possible in order to make an advantage match. Throughout her entire education it was clear that it was for a purpose: making a good marriage. Her education in different courts only ended because it had succeeded in finding her a good candidate for marriage. The efforts that had gone into educating her were not for her own development as a woman, but because it would train her to make a good marital match, and then to be a good wife.

Anne was brought back to England in 1521 because there was some discussion of her marrying James Butler, heir to the seventh earl of Ormonde, but the negotiations ended and the Boleyns moved on to finding another possible husband for Anne.⁴⁹ Thomas Boleyn's pain in educating Anne was not for nothing; Anne had her fair share of suitors. Henry was the most powerful and well-known suitor she had, but only one of them. She came close to secretly marrying Henry Percy, which would have made her the next countess of Northumberland. There are no reports as to how Thomas Boleyn reacted to this, but he no doubt would have been pleased with the marriage as it would have been quite advantageous for Anne.⁵⁰

V. It's Complicated: the Delicate Task of Refusing a Monarch

When Anne did return to the English court in 1521, her education and vivaciousness caught the attention of many. Her first known appearance at court was in 1522, playing *Perseverance* in a pageantry that had an ironic kind of foreshadowing considering the way in which Henry would persevere in his pursuit of her until she succumbed to his attentions.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Warnicke, "Anne Boleyn's Childhood and Adolescence," 949.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 949.

⁵¹ Ives, *The Life and Death of Anne Boleyn*, 37.

Despite reports of her homeliness, it is clear that Anne turned heads and that she was well aware of it. She was known for speaking Latin and French well, though she modestly lamented her inadequacy with Latin as was expected of a respectable woman. She was not only linguistically capable, but also had a polished and graceful attitude.⁵² Thomas Wyatt is known to have been besotted, writing poetry to her. As he was a married man, he was out of the question as a marriage prospect.⁵³ Anne's transition to English court went as well as hoped, and she received her fair share of male attention.

George Cavendish, Cardinal Wolsey's secretary and biographer, suggested that Henry began to be interested in Anne in 1523, while he was still with Mary Boleyn.⁵⁴ However, the first letter that we have from Henry to Anne was written sometime in 1526, most likely in the fall sometime, after Henry made the decision to pursue her.⁵⁵ The king's letters show a shift from a traditional pursuit of a sexual interest couched in courtly language to an increasingly serious king as Anne attempts to fend him off. In the winter of 1526, Henry asked Anne to become his official mistress, but she again denied his request. According to George Wyatt, the grandson of Thomas Wyatt, Anne had said:

To ease you of the labour of asking me any such question hereafter, I beseech your Highness most earnestly to desist, and to take this as my answer in good part. I would rather lose my life than my honesty, which will be the greatest and best part of the dowry I shall have to bring to my husband.⁵⁶

From this very response, it seems that Anne was attuned to the patriarchal norms of the time and to the importance of female chastity. She does not refuse for her own self, but for her future

⁵² Ibid., 44-45.

⁵³ Ibid., 71.

⁵⁴ Weir, *The Six Wives of Henry VIII*, 156.

⁵⁵ Ives, *The Life and Death of Anne Boleyn*, 90.

⁵⁶ Weir, *The Six Wives of Henry VIII*, 160.

husband. It is difficult to know how much this was from genuine belief in the importance of such ideals, and how much of it was out of necessity because Henry would respect a future husband more than he would accept Anne's wishes. He nevertheless persisted, and in the end, Anne succumbed. Henry offered her marriage, and she agreed to marry Henry in the summer of 1527.⁵⁷

Since the love letters that Henry wrote to Anne are some of the only direct evidence that remains from their relationship, it is necessary to examine them in order to glean an understanding of why Anne was attractive to him, and how she responded to his advances.⁵⁸ In doing so, these letters will allow us to understand Anne's motives in initially refusing the king, as well as see the ways in which Anne lines up with the patriarchal ideals of her time, and where she does not. First, it is significant to mention that Henry almost never wrote his own correspondence. He depended heavily on Wolsey at this point in his life to write his letters and keep up his correspondence.⁵⁹ The fact that Henry wrote these letters to Anne is significant because it indicates the strength of his affections, and are more likely to express Henry's genuine feelings, instead of being couched in the general language of courtly love that prevailed at the time.

The first letters are written in French, which fit the norms of courtly love; it was traditional to woo a woman with French. It would be all the more appropriate considering Anne was perhaps one of the people most fluent in French at court, and Henry was the kind of king

⁵⁷ Ives, *The Life and Death of Anne Boleyn*, 90.

⁵⁸ Only copies of Henry's letters to Anne survive. No letters that Anne wrote to Henry remain. It is also interesting to note that these letters only exist due to the fact that they were stolen from Anne Boleyn by an ambassador to the Vatican, and were kept in their archives. If the ambassador in question had not risked a great deal in stealing Anne's personal property, it is very likely that we would not even have these letters. Anne's mode of death means that Henry most likely tried to destroy any proof that she existed. Though it would be much more useful to have Anne's responses to Henry, they are lost and therefore historians have to attempt to interpret her responses to the king by how he writes to her.

⁵⁹ Lindsey, *Divorced, Beheaded, Survived*, 57.

that sought to impress people. His first letter to Anne was written when she had left court to go to Hever, most likely to retreat from Henry's increased attention at Court.⁶⁰ From this first letter, it is clear that Henry is sticking to the conventions of courtly love. This letter was quite didactic in style, explaining to Anne how her absence relates to astronomy, saying:

Reminding us of a point in astronomy, which is that the longer the days are the farther off is the sun and yet the hotter; so it is with our love, for although by absence we are parted it nevertheless keeps its fervency, at least in my case and hoping the like of yours...⁶¹

Clearly he is still using courtly language of metaphors and polite lamentation of her absence to make his attentions known. The fact that he is using astrology also further reinforces the assumption that Anne was quite well-educated, and had a broad basic knowledge of Renaissance thought.

In the second letter, it is implied that Anne is not quite as passionate about Henry as he would have liked, as he starts out by saying:

Because the time seems to me very long since having heard of your good health and of you, the great affection that I have for you persuades me to send this messenger the better to ascertain your health and wishes; and because, since our parting, I have been advised that the opinion in which I left you has been wholly changed, and that you will not come to Court either with madam your mother or in any other way ... if you love me with such good affection as I hope, I am sure that the estrangement of our two selves must be a little wearing to you ... Ponder well, my mistress, that absence from you is very grievous to me, hoping that it is not by your will that it is so....⁶²

⁶⁰ Weir, *The Six Wives of Henry VIII*, 163.

⁶¹ Original: "En nos faisant rementevoire ung point deastronomie qui est telle: tant plus longe que les jours sont tant plus eloine est le solelle et nonobstant plus farvent; ainsi fait il de nostre amoure, car par absens nous sumus eloinies et neanmoins elle arde sa farveure, amoins de nostre choste, aiant enespoire la parrayll du votre..."
Ed: Henry Savage, *The Love Letters of Henry VIII*, (London: Alan Wingate Ltd, 1949), 27-28.

⁶² Original: "Pur ce quil me semble le temps estre bien longue depuis avoire euye de votre bon sante et de vous, le grand affection que jay vers vous ma persuade de vous envoyere ce porteur pur estre mieux asserten de votre sante et voloire; et pur ce que depuis mon partement deavec que vous on ma averty que lopinion en quoy je vous laissoye est du toute asture changye, et que no voulies venire en court ni avec madame votre mere ni aultrement ausi... et si vous me aimes de si bon affection comme jespere je suis sure que la eloignement de nos deux parsones vous seryot ung peu ennuieuse... panse bien, ma mestres que labsens de vous fort me grefe, esperant quil ne pas votre volonte que ainsi se soit."

Savage, *The Love Letters of Henry VIII*, 29-30.

It seems that Anne had not given the king responses to his letters, because he laments her absence and how long he waited to hear from her. She probably thought the flirtation harmless, and did not answer the King's letters because she did not know how to refuse a monarch.⁶³ It is, after all, a delicate question to refuse a monarch his desires. Anne left court to avoid Henry's advances, and it seems from this letter that she had promised him that she would come back to court, but had since changed her mind and did not wish to return to court. What is striking about this letter is that it contains an element of insecurity underneath the veneer of the submissive lover that was common in courtly language. Henry seems to genuinely be seeking assurance for Anne's affection for him, suggesting that Anne was not very forthcoming on that account. This is further evidence that Anne wanted to ignore the king's interest and move past the entire affair, perhaps hoping that her lack of enthusiasm and staying away from the court would allow the king's love to cool.

In light of a close examination of Anne's education as an inculcation of modesty and virtue, her wait for the divorce once she acquiesced to Henry's wishes can be seen as a reluctance in a moral question rather than wanting to keep Henry hanging. From the beginning of Henry's courtship of her, Anne is clear that she will not engage in sexual relations outside of marriage.⁶⁴ This could have originated from her time in Margaret or Claude's courts, as both queens placed a high importance on genuine virtuousness.⁶⁵ Once Anne agreed to marry Henry in 1527, the evidence shows that he would have been willing to marry her immediately if she were to get pregnant.⁶⁶ She could have instigated the divorce and Henry's break with the

⁶³ Lindsey, *Divorced, Beheaded, Survived*, 58.

⁶⁴ Weir, *The Six Wives of Henry VIII*, 161.

⁶⁵ Hart, *The Mistresses of Henry VIII*, 85.

⁶⁶ Ives, *The Life and Death of Anne Boleyn*, 145.

Catholic Church in a much quicker way than the legal process that took over five years. These actions show that Anne was concerned with maintaining traditions of the time in some sense. If she had become pregnant without marriage, she could feel that her child and her marriage would have less validity. She therefore chose to wait not just so that she could be unchallenged, but because she recognized the importance of traditional marriage that is untainted by previous sexual contact.

Anne had genuine fears of having wasted her time with Henry, not as a challenge to the patriarchal structure, but rooted in her education that taught her a woman's value was through marriage and motherhood. Anne is reported to have reminded Henry of the fact that she had options besides him after having waited several years for his divorce, accusing him of wasting her time. She could have been married and had children in the time that it was taking Henry to obtain his divorce.⁶⁷ Anne feared that the time was running out for her to marry and bear children, and if the divorce fell through she would not be able to make a marriage that would be advantageous to her or to her family. This would be seen as a failure to her own family and as a mark of dishonor. Anne followed the patriarchal norms to point out her unhappiness as a woman: lack of children and a husband. While this instance does show that she was a woman who was comfortable with expressing her opinion and unhappiness to her husband and king, it was still centered around what Anne should want as a woman in a patriarchal society.

In the end, Anne had very little choice in the matter. Henry needed to have Anne for his own ego. No one refused the King what he wanted. That is why he felt that he was entitled to the divorce. God owed him the divorce because he was King of England and had an enormous ego.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ Hart, *The Mistresses of Henry VIII*, 102.

⁶⁸ Lindsey, *Divorced, Beheaded, Survived*, 64.

If Henry would not allow the institution of the Catholic Church, so integral to society at the time, to stand in the way of his conquest, he certainly would not allow a small thing such as a woman's wishes to remain chaste provide any obstacles. After the king showed visible interest in Anne, she would not be able to make a viable marriage because no one would dare make a move on the woman that the king had his eye on.⁶⁹ Societal pressures would require her to take the opportunity that was set before her and her family. She could not refuse him, so she would make sure that she and her family gained from her surrender to Henry's desires.

VI. The Opiate for the Power-Hungry? Anne's Chameleonic Religious Tendencies

Historians such as Eric Ives point to Anne's religion as rather evangelical, and believe she was eager for reform in the English Church. He does so by pointing to the fact that Henry's desire to break with the Church is backed only by Anne and her supporters.⁷⁰ It is not surprising that historians would look towards Anne's religious beliefs, as her presence is a factor in Henry's break with the Catholic Church. Anne's religion has been used both to assert her agency as a woman who thought and advocated for herself, and to prove that she was without morals and only searching for power. She has been seen as a genuine reformer and, in contrast, as someone who only cared about religion for as long as it benefitted her. It has been proven, however, that while Anne may have been a catalyst, she did not manipulate Henry to leave the Church in order to marry him; Henry was already looking for a way to leave the marriage.⁷¹

Historians such as Ives point to the fact that Anne exposed Henry to reformist thought, either to gain from it personally in obtaining a divorce, or from a genuine belief in reform. It is

⁶⁹ Ibid., 59.

⁷⁰ Ives, *The Life and Death of Anne Boleyn*, 131.

⁷¹ Ibid., 83.

admittedly true that Anne exposed Henry to *The Conviction of a Christian Man*, written by William Tyndale, a man whom Henry had banished from England due to his reformist views and writings. However, it seems that this is accidental, as it was lent to a servant and later made it to the hands of Henry before Anne went to him on her knees for the book back.⁷² It is clear that Anne could not have manipulated that situation in order to convince Henry to read the book, and that it was most likely a pure accident that Henry should come across it. This is further evidence that while Anne may have stood to benefit from the break of the Church, she may not have been aware of how ready the king was to break with tradition in order to obtain more power for himself. She therefore cannot have put the book in his way on purpose.

Henry later said on this book that “thys booke ys for me and all kyngs to read.”⁷³ This is most likely because within the book, Tyndale states that “The king is in the person of God, and his law is God’s law.”⁷⁴ It was the answer that Henry had been looking for. He himself was convinced that his marriage to Catherine was unjust, and this book affirmed his own thoughts and beliefs. Anne providing that book for Henry has been seen by some historians as her own attempt at instigating reform, yet it seems to have been coincidental. What her involvement with this book does prove is that Anne was well educated for the time, and had enough intellectual curiosity to read a book that was banned from England. Whether or not Anne actually told Henry to look outside the Church for the divorce is difficult to say, but he was determined to obtain his divorce through any means necessary; Henry would have come to the reformation eventually.

Though it is true that Anne had contact with reform minded people such as Marguerite and Thomas Cromwell, it is unlikely that she was the pure-hearted reformer that Queen Elizabeth

⁷² G.W. Bernard, “Anne Boleyn’s Religion,” *The Historical Journal* 36, no. 1 (March 1993): 5.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 5

⁷⁴ Ives, *The Life and Death of Anne Boleyn*, 133.

would try to characterize Anne to be. This was a propagandic element that was used to rectify Anne's image to the public and legitimate Queen Elizabeth's rule. During her lifetime, Anne was seen as a Lutheran by the populace, inciting much displeasure, and making her a polarizing figure during her lifetime. Chapuys, the Spanish ambassador at Court who had a distinct dislike for Anne called her "more Lutheran than Luther himself."⁷⁵ Perhaps because of this, later in life Anne consciously developed her public image as a devout wife, always holding a book of devotions when she appeared in public.⁷⁶ This later became a common practice among Henry's wives.

Due to her early death, Anne could not have had the opportunity to truly be the genuine Reformer she was later painted to be as the Reformation in England had not even taken proper hold yet. As such, she followed Catholic rituals the rest of her life.⁷⁷ Moreover, while Anne was obviously anti-papal, she was not per se anti-Catholic.⁷⁸ Anne was rather conventional in observing all of the Catholic traditions throughout her life.⁷⁹ In fact, as she was waiting for her death in the Tower, Anne was desperate to receive the Sacrament of Eucharist.⁸⁰ She also did not seem to believe in justification by faith, but rather by deeds, as during her time in the Tower, she asked "shall I be in heaven, for I have done many good deeds in my days."⁸¹ Like Henry, it seems that Anne was comfortable within Catholic identity, so long as the institutional structure were reduced in order to give Henry his divorce. Despite this, most of her support would not come from the Catholic populace, but rather those who favored Reform and supported the king's break

⁷⁵ Weir, *The Six Wives of Henry VIII*, 223.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 280.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 195.

⁷⁸ Bernard, "Anne Boleyn's Religion," 4.

⁷⁹ Weir, *The Six Wives of Henry VIII*, 223.

⁸⁰ Bernard, "Anne Boleyn's Religion," 18.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 19.

from the institution of the Catholic Church. Realistically, it seems as though Anne was more concerned with how to appear a devout and virtuous wife than how a religion should be structured. While she may have read Reformist literature and been somewhat involved in political appointments, she was not the genuine-hearted reformer that was created posthumously to legitimize Elizabeth's reign.

VII. Royal Flush: Anne's Access to the King

Anne not only had influence over England's religion, but as the queen and the closest person to the king, she had the opportunity for political influence. The very structure of Henry VIII's court meant that it was the perfect breeding ground for factional politics and political intrigue. Historians generally focus on three elements of Tudor politics: the nobility, the privy chamber, and factionalism.⁸² Court and political life were one and the same, and revolved around the person of King Henry VIII. One of the essential parts of monarchy was distributing favors in forms of lands, titles, annuities, and offices.⁸³ Therefore the success of nobility depended on gaining the King's favor which made court the vying grounds for the king's attention. Women were not as removed from this sphere as some might believe; evidence shows that women were actively involved in the political implications of court life. Most of the ways in which they participated politically, was of course, marriage and its arrangement.⁸⁴ This was the sixteenth century after all, and most women were not able to live "successful" lives if they had not married and had several children. Outside of the realm of marriage, women also were often patrons,

⁸² Natalie Mears, "Courts, Courtiers, and Culture in Tudor England," *The Historical Journal* 46, no. 3 (September 2003): 705.

⁸³ Harris, "Women and Politics in Early Tudor England," 259.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 260.

hosting the children of poorer nobility while they got an education.⁸⁵ In Anne's life, women such as Margaret of Austria or Queen Claude stand out particularly in this aspect.

As Anne became the highest ranking female at court, she was in the position to have access to power and to the king's person in a court where politics tinged all relationships. Women were not considered to have power in the traditional sense due to the way in which they were systematically excluded from positions of power. Yet, the existence of women such as Margaret of Austria proves that women often were able to exert political influence, albeit it was usually attached to the power of a man, like Maximilian I. Even when women were not at court, they still had social contact. Evidence shows that nobility visited each other often, meaning that even women who were left at home while her husband went to Court were not as isolated as stereotypically thought.⁸⁶ Women participated in politically implied social norms such as gift-giving, which was an essential part of Court culture because of the symbolic value that it carried. In fact, twenty seven women sent Henry VIII, Cromwell, or Wolsey gifts in the 1520's and 1530's.⁸⁷ While this is not a astronomically large number, it is significant because it implies that women were not afraid to cultivate contacts in positions of high power in hopes to sway their opinions. This was the way that most women were able to access power: through a male contact.

Traditionally, historians point to three specific instances to prove that Anne had access to power and actively took part in the political atmosphere of Court: Cardinal Wolsey, episcopal appointments, and maintaining and cultivating her influence over the king thereby avoiding a fall from power. The first instance is the fall of Cardinal Wolsey, especially considering that Anne

⁸⁵ Ibid., 263.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 264.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 271.

held a grudge against him for interfering in her relationship with Lord Percy, and because her father had been snubbed by the Cardinal before. Wolsey was the foundation of Henry's reign at the time, as he was in charge of many political and governmental elements of Henry's rule. Anne disliked the Cardinal because he had wanted Henry to marry a French princess, and because of Wolsey's previous move that had denied her father a position in Henry's government.⁸⁸ It is clear then, that even Anne's political moves were still motivated by patriarchal tones as she was exacting not only her own, but also her father's revenge. Anne has been seen as the lynchpin to a political faction that desired Cardinal Wolsey's downfall. The political push was there as Wolsey had built up a large number of enemies, but Anne was needed to open the king's ear to these political players.

Despite this, it seems that initially Anne was willing to work with Wolsey, especially when Henry and Anne came to him about the Great Matter of their divorce.⁸⁹ When Wolsey was unable to follow through on the king's wishes, Anne slowly began to chip away at Wolsey's power through her access to the king's person. Chapuys commented on the situation of Wolsey, saying it would not be impossible: 'to reinstate him in the King's favor would not be difficult, were it not for the lady.'⁹⁰ Wolsey, who had for so long been the right-hand man of Henry was displaced because of Anne's power and influence over the king's thoughts and emotions. It seems that while Anne took direct involvement here and was necessary to the success of the plan to take Wolsey down, she was willing to work with him and only took active participation against him after it became clear that he was only impeding the investigation into the king's divorce. Her primary support came from male nobility, her father among them. She did not take

⁸⁸ Ives, *The Life and Death of Anne Boleyn*, 110.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 110.

⁹⁰ Weir, *The Six Wives of Henry VIII*, 217.

Wolsey down only for herself, but also because it was expected for her to clear the obstacles in the way for her family's advancements and interests. This was not a quest for further power, but rather a filial duty intertwined within her desire to remove a possible enemy from power.

The second way in which Anne shows her direct hand in politics is through episcopal appointments. The most important qualification for an appointment to bishoprics was their stance on the king's divorce.⁹¹ While this does not have directly to do with Anne's influence, it is important to note that only her presence was enough to influence the King. While Anne never asserted to the king that he only appoint people who supported his divorce, she certainly benefited from this policy. She did have a hand in some specific appointments, including those of William Barlowe, Hugh Latimer, and Nicholas Shaxton. William Barlowe was a family friend of Thomas Boleyn and had been appointed the prior of Haverfordwest.⁹² When Anne was in the Tower, she said "I would to God I had my bysshoppys for they wold all go the Kynge for me." This does not display the Protestant attitude towards bishoprics, but instead the tendency towards viewing the bishops as political pawns that she possessed due to the favor she had shown them.⁹³ Though her influence in their appointments cannot be thoroughly proven with evidence, it is likely that she would have had some say in their appointments especially as she later calls them her bishops. Despite this, none of the bishops came to her defence when she was in the Tower.⁹⁴ They understood that while Anne could influence the king, it was the king who wielded true power.

⁹¹ Bernard, "Anne Boleyns' Religion," 9.

⁹² Ibid., 11.

⁹³ Ibid., 12.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 13.

Though Anne's third political task was not an instance, it was nevertheless essential to her role as queen and wife to the king: to keep hold of her political position and Henry's interest, which was in the end would be out of her hands. Ironically enough, though Anne did not actively seek out agency and power, it would be her position in factional politics and her femininity that would lead to her downfall. The Tudor Court only had enough room for one person to have unlimited agency: Henry VIII. Anne was aware of the factional nature of the court, as she herself had participated in it. She thought herself immune to those politics, however, believing that if she kept Henry's attention, she would be safe from the factional politics of the Tudor Court.⁹⁵ It will be necessary to examine this element of Anne's political influence through her loss of power and her death.

VIII. Hold Your Tongue or Lose Your Head

Henry perceived, more quickly than Anne, that though pursuing an assertive and outspoken woman was exciting, he wanted a wife who would be docile and obedient. Catherine of Aragon had provided at least the aura of submissiveness up until her power had been challenged. Her stubbornness in refusing to bend to Henry VIII's will and acquiescing to divorce is the only matter in which she actively resisted Henry's wishes. Anne did not exhibit agency in desire for power and manipulation, but rather her agency manifests through her willingness to speak her mind. Anne was stubbornly defiant when Henry began to be unfaithful, something that Henry had expected her to accept quietly as Catherine had done. Chapuys reports that Henry told Anne that she had to close her eyes and "endure as more worthy persons. [Anne] ought to know

⁹⁵ Weir, *The Six Wives of Henry VIII*, 169.

that it was in his power to humble her again in a moment, more than he had exalted her before.”⁹⁶

Some courtiers thought that Henry had grown tired of Anne by 1536, and his hasty marriage to Jane Seymour, on May 30 1536, certainly does seem to make this point valid.⁹⁷ Jane used Anne’s same method of avoiding the king’s advances by saying that she would remain a virgin until she married.⁹⁸ Henry fell for it again, and this time his wife fulfilled the expectation of submissiveness and docility well and her seemingly tame and docile personality enforced patriarchal norms that Henry liked.

It is clear from the very beginning of the accusations made against Anne that her femininity was a strike against her, specifically concerning her perceived sexuality and her inability to keep her opinion to herself. Though there is almost no evidence that points towards Anne being promiscuous, her position as the ‘other woman’ from the start made her seem immoral, even if she had waited to engage in sexual intercourse until marriage.⁹⁹ Anne was not well-liked; she had de-throned a relatively popular queen, and many women feared that she was setting an example for other husbands who wanted divorces. For this reason, many women were openly against the king’s divorce and played a role in Anne’s downfall.¹⁰⁰ Anne was accused of having sexual encounters with five different men starting in 1533, and most scholars agree that if she were guilty, only one of those men produced a confession that could be taken seriously.¹⁰¹

Just as it was her tendency to speak her mind that Anne lost her the king’s interest as a wife, it was this very quality that most likely implicated her and caused the distrust in her.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 257.

⁹⁷ Greg Walker, "Rethinking The Fall Of Anne Boleyn," *The Historical Journal* 45, no. 01 (2002): 11.

⁹⁸ Weir, *The Six Wives of Henry VIII*, 290.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 144.

¹⁰⁰ Harris, "Women and Politics in Early Tudor England," 276.

¹⁰¹ E.W. Ives, "Faction at the Court of Henry VIII: The Fall of Anne Boleyn," *History* 57, no. 190 (1972): 170.

During these arrests and trials, people accused her of having two different personas: public and private. William Thomas, who would later be a clerk in the Edwardian privy council, said that “Her outward profession of gravity was to be marvelled at...but inwardly she was all another dame than she seemed to be, for in satisfying of her carnal appetite she fled not so much as the company of her own natural brother.”¹⁰² George Wyatt, the grandson of Thomas Wyatt, said “But howsoever she may outwardly appear, she was indeed a very willful woman, which perhaps might seem not fault, because seldom do women lack it, but yet that and other things after cost her dear.”¹⁰³ It is obvious then, that even if she engaged in flirtatious behavior, it would seem from the outside observer that she would not commit adultery. It is obvious then, that the issue with Anne is not her sexual practices, but that she was not easily defined or pinned down by the men in her life. She was distrusted from all quarters, and therefore condemned.

While it was her own sexuality upon which Anne was judged and executed, it was most likely what Anne said about the king that truly sealed her fate. She was undone by her careless speech, as she seems to have joked a good deal about the shortcomings of the king.¹⁰⁴ This most likely indicates that Anne was not completely happy with the king. It is significant that she would not only have those thoughts, but that she would voice them when she knew they could get back to the king. This most certainly was not the wifely model that was coveted at the time. Recent scholarship has proposed that Early Modern marriages tended to have a more equal partnership than was previously thought.¹⁰⁵ Despite the fact that there were most likely many wives that spoke their minds freely about their own marriages, Anne happened to be married to a

¹⁰² Walker, "Rethinking The Fall Of Anne Boleyn," 6.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 26.

¹⁰⁵ Daybell, "Gender, Obedience, and Authority in Sixteenth-Century Women's Letters," 58.

king who was deeply obsessed with his image. It was not only this idle talk and criticism of the king, however, that had serious consequences for Anne. Anne was reported to have had a conversation with Henry Norris, one of the accused, that implied that if the king were to die, she would be able to take Norris as a lover.¹⁰⁶ Anne talking about the king's death severely implicated her. It made her not only a bad wife, but a treasonous subject therefore setting her against two social norms at the same time.

If Anne were willing to talk back to the king and to speak her mind, then to the sixteenth-century mindset, she was most likely sexually promiscuous as well. Warnicke claims that believing Anne guilty of witchcraft allowed people to believe that Anne was capable of the sexual activity that was deeply associated as outside the norm, including incest.¹⁰⁷ While it is true that Anne was seen as a traitor to the norms of the time by being the Other Woman, the argument that Anne gave birth to a deformed fetus does not seem to hold any traction. Her propensity for speaking her mind certainly did not do her any favors on this account. A woman who knew her mind and dared to speak it was considered dangerous; if she was not yet sexually irresponsible, it was expected that she would be due to her nature. The witchcraft claim may be slightly far-fetched, but Warnicke's emphasis on the mentality of the time is essential because it is only through that mindset that one can understand how a woman speaking her mind was dangerous despite her adherence to societal ideals of femininity.

Though there has been lively historical debate surrounding this question, it is not of interest whether Anne was guilty, but rather the how her placement in that situation reflects on the deeply seated suspicions of women who spoke their minds. Most courtiers and historians

¹⁰⁶ Walker, "Rethinking The Fall Of Anne Boleyn," 22.

¹⁰⁷ Retha M. Warnicke, "Sexual Heresy," *The Historical Journal* 30, no. 2 (June 1987): 249.

believe that Anne was not unfaithful to the king, but instead was a victim of her situation. Anne said upon being escorted to the Tower that she was “as clear from the company of man as for sin as I am clear from you, and am the king’s lawfully wedded wife.”¹⁰⁸ Cranmer himself said that Anne had kept her honor and virtuousness well, aware that it was required of her. In fact, there were no rumors of any illicit contact between Anne and other men from her marriage until her trial in 1536.¹⁰⁹ The essence that can be taken from this matter is not whether or not Anne was guilty of adultery and incest, but how her femininity played a role in her implication and her doom.

Even Anne’s death is marked by the patriarchal context that delineates her life by going to her death meekly, accepting Henry’s desire to be rid of her. Despite Anne’s repeated insistence that she did not have affairs outside of her marriage with the king, she was nonetheless condemned and sent to death. Even Chapuys, Anne’s bitter enemy, said that Anne and her supposed lovers, were condemned upon presumption and indication without any valid proof or confession.¹¹⁰ Any form of sexual deviance, especially from the Queen, would not be tolerated. Even if Anne were proven innocent, it is highly likely that she would have been divorced and sent away from Court. Even though many were appalled at Anne’s condemnation and execution, Anne did not take her opportunity on the scaffold to declare her innocence one last time.¹¹¹ She instead conformed to the pressure of society to make peace with the world, and in the end she submitted to Henry’s will. She did not mention her innocence when she faced her death; even her death was shaped by the desires of men to silence her.

¹⁰⁸ Walker, "Rethinking The Fall Of Anne Boleyn," 7.

¹⁰⁹ Warnicke, "The Fall of Anne Revisited," 657.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 25.

¹¹¹ Walker, "Rethinking The Fall Of Anne Boleyn," 9.

Anne's life was demarcated by male desires, and when she spoke her mind she lost her life. Looking at her early life and the norms for female participation and inculcation in the patriarchal norms of the time allows for a deeper examination in which Anne was both upholding the power structures that prevent her from being her own agent and at the same time pushing back against them with her aptitude for speaking her own mind and initially rejecting a monarch. Her ambition was still one that was shaped by the expectations of women's duties and virtues of the time.

Through Anne's story, it is possible to see that the patriarchal system itself was not rigid, and allowed for complexity within social and political relations. The fact that Anne was so clearly maligned after her death proves that there was concern that women would continue to defy the norms of the time. Stories about Anne were greatly exaggerated, and she was pointed to as an example of what could happen if a woman were given power and influence. Her crime was not manipulating Henry or falling in love with the wrong man, but rather being an assertive woman that was pushed into an ambitious and precipitous marriage to a man that expected a submissive and fertile wife. Anne is an example of the way that women were continuously given agency and subjugated for male desires within the political and educational system of the Tudor era.

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