WOMEN IN LOVE HISTORIES

Justine Levinsohn-Devereaux

Old Romance Stories that Still Make Us Dreaming and... Shivering

feat. Anne Boleyn, Henry VIII, Elizabeth Woodville, Edward IV, Isabella of Castile, Ferdinand of Aragon, Gareth, Lynette, Henry Tudor, Elizabeth of York, Robert Guiscard, Sichelgaita, William The Conqueror, Matilda

... and Its Intriguing Dangerous Splendour

INTEGRAL

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INTEGRAL

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The Cruel Henry VIII and the Surprising Anne Boleyn, a 16th Century Unlucky Feminist

With a complex biography, Anne Boleyn is for sure the most famous of Henry VIII's six wives, executed by a French swordsman on May 19, 1536, after being arrested for adultery and incest. But she nearly died of the sweating sickness before and she was the second cousin of Jane Seymour, who became the king's third wife after Anne Boleyn's execution. Historian Elizabeth Norton brings a lot of surprising facts about Henry VIII's second wife.

The Boleyn family had humble origins in the Norfolk village of Salle. Early ancestors were relatively prosperous peasants, with Anne's great-great-grandfather, Geoffrey Boleyn, several times finding himself hauled before the manorial court for trespassing on his lord's land, ploughing through field boundaries and taking water from the manor without payment.

He was affluent enough to set up his younger son, another Geoffrey Boleyn, as a hatter in London in the 1430s. This second Geoffrey made a success of his career, joining the prestigious Mercer's Company in 1435 and growing wealthy.

In 1457 he served as Lord Mayor of London while his second wife, Anne Hoo, was the daughter of a baron. He also purchased the manor of Blickling in Norfolk, becoming a solid member of the gentry by the time of his death.

Although Anne is remembered for the role she played in the English Reformation, her family claimed to have a family connection to Thomas à Becket, the saintly 12th-century Archbishop of Canterbury.

Anne's great-grandfather, Thomas Butler, seventh Earl of Ormond, who died in 1515, was buried in the church of St Thomas Acon in London. The church was reputed to have been built on the site of Becket's birthplace by one of the archbishop's sisters. The Butlers claimed descent from another of Becket's sisters, who had married an Irish gentleman.

They were proud of this illustrious ancestor, with the 7th Earl bequeathing his soul to the "glorious martyr Saint Thomas" in his will. He also possessed a treasured family heirloom—a white ivory horn, garnished with gold, and which was claimed to have been the cup from which Becket drank.

The 7th Earl bequeathed the horn to his grandson, Sir Thomas Boleyn, instructing him to pass it on to his own male heirs.

Anne originally returned from France early in 1522 to marry her cousin, James Butler. Both her father, Sir Thomas Boleyn, and James's father, Piers, claimed the Earldom of Ormond, which had belonged to her great-grandfather.

Anne's uncle, the Earl of Surrey, suggested to the king that the dispute be settled by a marriage between Anne and James. The Boleyns were unenthusiastic, however, and the proposal was eventually dropped. Thanks to Anne's relationship with the king, an agreement was finally reached in 1528 with Thomas Boleyn becoming Earl of Ormond and Piers Butler Earl of Ossory.

When Anne returned to England in 1522, she joined the queen's household. It was soon noticed that Henry Percy, the young heir to the Earl of Northumberland, began to seek out Anne when he came to court. According to William Cavendish, a contemporary of Percy's who was also in the service of Cardinal Wolsey, "a secret love" grew between the couple and they planned to marry.

When Wolsey discovered the relationship, he berated Percy for seeking to marry beneath him and sent for his father. Anne was banished from court for a time.

While it is well known that Anne's sister, Mary, was the king's mistress, there were also contemporary rumours that their mother, Elizabeth Howard, had shared the king's bed. In 1533 Elizabeth Amadas, who was the wife of a London goldsmith, declared publicly that Thomas Boleyn "was bawd both to his wife and his two daughters", while Sir George Throckmorton told Henry to his face that "it is thought you have meddled both with the mother and sister".

Later in the 16th century it was claimed by the Jesuit Nicholas Sander that Anne was Henry VIII's own daughter. Elizabeth was some years older than Henry, and it is improbable that she actually was his mistress, particularly since he denied it to Throckmorton, declaring "never with the mother" when challenged.

The sweating sickness, which may have been a type of influenza, plagued Tudor England, and was notable for the speed in which it could kill an otherwise young and healthy victim. As Cardinal du Bellay, the French ambassador, put it, "it is the easiest in the world to die of".

Henry VIII was terrified of the disease and when, in June 1528, one of Anne's ladies succumbed to the sweat, he fled 12 miles away, before ordering Anne home to Kent. Henry's precautions, although unchivalrous, were sensible, since Anne did indeed prove to have been infected.

Both she and her father became ill at Hever, with Henry sending his second-best doctor (since his first was unavailable) to treat her. Given the dangerous nature of the disease, Anne and her father were both lucky to survive—her brother-in-law, William Carey, died in the outbreak, as did many other members of the court.

Anne was a popular name in the Boleyn family, with her great-grandmother, Anne Hoo, being one of the first Anne Boleyns. Queen Anne Boleyn also had an aunt called Anne Boleyn, who married Sir John Shelton.

She was close to her niece and with her sister Alice Boleyn, Lady Clere, was appointed to the household of Princess Elizabeth. As part of her role, Lady Shelton was also placed in charge of her niece's stepdaughter, Princess Mary, who refused to recognise the royal marriage.

In February 1534 Anne wrote to Lady Shelton to ensure that Mary no longer used her title of princess, telling her to "slap her face as the cursed bastard that she was" if she persisted. Lady Shelton lived in terror that people would think she had poisoned the elder princess if she fell ill, and she gradually began to befriend her charge. She and Anne had become estranged by the time of the Queen's arrest in May 1536.

Surprisingly, Anne's mother, Elizabeth Howard, was the first cousin of Jane's mother, Margery Wentworth. The cousins were raised together at Sheriff Hutton Castle in Yorkshire, under the governance of Elizabeth Howard's mother, Elizabeth Tylney, Countess of Surrey, who was the half-sister of Margery's mother.

While there, both Elizabeth Howard and Margery Wentworth attracted the attention of the poet John Skelton. He called Elizabeth "lusty to look on, pleasant, demure and sage", while Margery was "benign, courteous, and meek".

There is little evidence for a relationship between Anne and Jane, although both were close to their mutual cousin, Sir Francis Bryan, who was responsible for first securing a court post for Jane.

Anne Boleyn was uncomfortably aware of the growing relationship between Henry and her maid, Jane Seymour, in the early months of 1536. As he had done early in his relationship with Anne, Henry gave Jane his picture, which she wore around her neck.

When the queen saw this, she snatched it from her rival so violently that she hurt her hand. Jane Dormer, who later served Princess Mary, also claimed that there was often scratching and blows between Anne and Jane.

Mark Smeaton, a musician in Anne's household, was arrested on 30 April 1536 and interrogated. A series of arrests followed, with Anne taken to the Tower on 2 May, accused of adultery and incest. While there, she spoke unguardedly, mentioning conversations that she had had with Mark Smeaton and another of the accused men, Henry Norris—all of which was noted down and reported to Henry by the lieutenant of the Tower.

Anne unwittingly also brought Sir Francis Weston into the investigation, when she claimed that he had once professed his love for her. Weston, who was a popular young man at court, had not previously been included in the investigation, but this was enough to ensure that he, and four other men, were executed on 17 May 1536. Anne was beheaded two days later.

Relatively little is known about Anne Boleyn's sister, Mary, though she was at the heart of the Tudor court. But we do know, explains Tudor historian Suzannah Lipscomb, that while married to William Carey Mary conducted a discreet affair with Henry VIII, and that years later, when her sister, Anne, was queen, she married a lowly man 12 years her junior for love, writing about him, rather pointedly, "I had rather beg my bread with him than be the greatest queen christened".

Reviewing Alison Weir's 2011 book *Mary Boleyn: 'The Great and Infamous Whore',* Lipscomb told *History Extra*: "Arguably the greatest question about Mary is whether she bore Henry VIII's children. Weir argues decisively that Henry Carey was not Henry VIII's son, pointing out that this is based on just one fragment of malicious gossip from John Hale, vicar of Isleworth. Weir provocatively, though, asserts the 'strong possibility' that Katherine Carey was Henry's daughter, although the evidence she provides confirms that it is quite simply that—a possibility".

There is no concrete evidence that Anne Boleyn had six fingers. George Wyatt, grandson of court poet and ambassador Sir Thomas Wyatt, made reference to an extra nail on one of Anne's fingers, which may be plausible, although no other reference exists.

Nicholas Sander, a Catholic Recusant who was living in exile during Elizabeth I's rule, went even further, describing Anne's numerous deformities, including a sixth finger, effectively labelling her a witch. But Sander was writing with a political and religious agenda: he resented the schism with Rome and his account was intended to taint not only Anne's name, but Elizabeth's as well.

It is widely held that Anne, with whom Henry fell in love in the mid-1520s, was prepared to accept his advances only if he married her, following the annulment of his marriage to his first wife Catherine of Aragon. George Bernard tests the argument that Anne demanded a crown upon her head.

Henry VIII's passion for Anne Boleyn has never been in doubt. In one of his love letters to Anne, Henry lamented her absence, "wishing myself specially an evening in my sweetheart's arms whose pretty dukkys [breasts] I trust shortly to kiss", noting that the missive was "written with the hand of him that was, is and shall be yours". But while his desire isn't in question, other aspects of the beginnings of their relationship need to be reassessed.

By then Henry had been married to Catherine of Aragon for nearly 20 years and she had borne him a child, Mary, though no surviving son. Could it be true that Anne suggested to Henry that his marriage to Catherine, widow of his elder brother Arthur, had always been invalid—that it was against divine law? And did she steadfastly refuse to yield to Henry until his marriage to Catherine was annulled, leaving him free to marry Anne?

For centuries, historians have reiterated this theory. Yet, when you look at it closely, it does not make sense. Imagine Anne as a lady of the court who was wanted by the king as his mistress. In a world in which divorce on the grounds of the irretrievable breakdown of a relationship did not exist, could such a lady realistically hope to persuade Henry to abandon his wife in order to marry her? Most probably not.

Can Anne Boleyn—the second wife of Henry VIII—be considered a feminist? While the word 'feminism' may not have existed in the Tudor period, the concept of equality between the sexes was very much a subject of debate at the time, says historian Alison Weir.

“In recent years, Anne Boleyn has acquired almost celebrity status. Henry VIII’s second wife has become many things to many people, and, in the process, controversial. When I asked readers on Facebook why they admired her, the overwhelming response was that they revered her as a feminist icon. This rather surprised me, as feminism was an unknown concept in early Tudor England.

In discussion with historian Sarah Gristwood, who was then researching her ground-breaking book, G*ame of Queens: The Women Who Made Sixteenth-Century Europe*, I dismissed the view of Anne as feminist as wrong and anachronistic, whereupon she replied ‘Well, actually’…”

Sarah Gristwood’s research encompassed the ‘*querelle des femmes*’ (‘the woman question’), an intellectual and literary debate that questioned traditional concepts of women and called for them to enjoy equality with men. Nowadays, we call this feminism, but even if the word did not exist then, the concept did. Many scholars use the term ‘Renaissance feminism’. In the 16th century, all the arguments for equality of the sexes were in place. This debate was lively in Europe, where Anne Boleyn spent her formative years at the beginning of the century. This was an age of female rulers and thinkers, and in the royal women she served, Anne had two shining examples before her: Margaret of Austria, Regent of the Netherlands; and Marguerite of Valois, Duchess of Alençon. In her novel, *Anne Boleyn: A King’s Obsession*, Alison Weir portrayed Anne in this European context, “because we cannot hope to understand her without being aware of the early cultural influences to which she was exposed”.

The historian remember sus that aAs a young—and no doubt impressionable—teenager, Anne served at the court of Margaret of Austria, regent of the Netherlands, between 1513 and 1514. Margaret’s library included the works of the influential French poet and author Christine de Pizan (1364–c1430), Europe’s first professional female writer. At that time, women were regarded as inferior in every way to men. For a female to question her role in this male-dominated world, in which women were legally infants, was revolutionary.

Christine de Pizan had become famous for daring to say that the celebrated poem, *Le Roman de la Rose*, slandered women, portraying them all as seductresses. In 1405, she published her most famous work, *The Book of the City of Ladies*, the first book written about women by a woman, and one of the earliest examples of feminist literature. The book was an attack on stereotypical, misogynistic perceptions of women by male historians of the time. It celebrated female achievements throughout history, and advised women how to counter masculine prejudice and negative portrayals of their sex. Christine de Pizan concluded that patriarchal attitudes hampered women achieving their full potential.

“Not all men share the opinion that it is bad for women to be educated,” she wrote, “but it is very true that many foolish men have claimed this because it displeased them that women knew more than they did.” This must have come as a revelation in an age when most women were taught that men, by the natural law of things, were the cleverer sex. But Christine de Pizan disagreed. “Just as women’s bodies are softer than men’s, so their understanding is sharper. If it were customary to send girls to school and teach them the same subjects as are taught to boys, they would learn just as fully and would understand the subtleties of all arts and sciences. As for those who state that it is thanks to a woman, the lady Eve, that man was expelled from paradise, my answer would be that man has gained far more through Mary than he ever lost through Eve.”

She took a dim view of marriage: “How many women are there who, because of their husbands’ harshness, spend their weary lives in the bond of marriage in greater suffering than if they were slaves among the Saracens?” As for women of rank: “The wives of powerful noblemen must be highly knowledgeable about government, and wise—in fact, far wiser than most other such women in power. The knowledge of a noblewoman must be so comprehensive that she can understand everything. Moreover, she must have the courage of a man.” It is easy to see why Margaret of Austria favoured Christine de Pizan’s works.

In 1513, Anne Boleyn would have been present in Tournai (in modern-day Belgium) when the city fathers presented Margaret of Austria with a set of tapestries woven with scenes from the *The Book of the City of Ladies*. In Margaret’s household, the young Anne would have become familiar with Christine de Pizan’s works, which had spurred the spread of female literacy and ultimately led to early modern women writers and humanists in France, Italy and (later) England advocating female education and attacking the institution of marriage.

Renaissance feminism also had its origins in works written in early 15th-century Italy. These works had fuelled the debate on women and protests about inequality, leading to a new awareness of the female condition, expressed chiefly in women’s literature. Both men and women argued that the female sex had made many praiseworthy contributions to civilization, and therefore should not be excluded from universities, government, politics, employment and owning property.

Rediscovering the literature of the ancient world had inspired the humanist learning of the Renaissance. Intellectuals spoke up for the education of women and defended them from inequality, from Italy to the northern courts of Europe. Female humanists inferred new meanings from ancient texts, and enlightened men—such as Sir Thomas More, Henry VIII and Sir Thomas Boleyn—saw to it that their daughters were well-educated and literate. The 16th century was an age of female European rulers, women who were instrumental in shaping politics and culture, and helped to disseminate new ideas. Some, like Margaret of Austria, were intellectuals and humanists, and questioned traditional norms.

Hundreds of other women were putting pen to paper, thanks to the spread of literacy and the invention of printing, spreading feminist ideals, and contributing to the *querelle des femmes*. Some argued that it was only male tyranny that accounted for the subjection of women, and that men were concerned only to retain their power. Men too—such as Mario Equicola, Agrippa von Nettesheim and Ludovico Ariosto—spoke out in print for women. (Discussions in my novel are based on contemporary quotes drawn from such works.) This was the means through which early feminist thinking evolved. It was a debate that would continue to rage for 400 years. This was the cultural climate in which Anne Boleyn spent her formative years.