



Elizabeth's Women

**Friends, Rivals, and Foes Who
Shaped the Virgin Queen**

Tracy Borman

*King's Mistress, Queen's Servant:
The Life and Times of Henrietta Howard*



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Who Shaped the Virgin Queen*

TRACY BORMAN



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Title-page illustration: Coronation portrait of Elizabeth I, modern reproduction of a lost original, by Peter Taylor.

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To my parents, John and Joan Borman,

*with love and thanks for
all their support*

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Introduction

Elizabeth once famously declared: “I know I have the body of a weak and feeble woman. This line, and the apparent regret with which she uttered it, has been taken to represent her conformity to the view that her sex was naturally subject to “womanly weakness.” Although she is often hailed as a shining beacon for womanhood, the embodiment of feminism before that term was even invented, Elizabeth was deeply conventional in her views of the female sex. When a foreign visitor to court complimented her upon her ability to speak many languages, she retorted “that it was no marvel to teach a woman to talk; it were far harder to teach her to hold her tongue.”¹

It is partly for this reason that Elizabeth is universally accepted as being a man’s woman. As well as taking every opportunity to deride her sex, she loved to flirt with the many ambitious young men who frequented her court. Her liaison with Robert Dudley is well documented, as is her infatuation in old age with his stepson, the Earl of Essex, and her more sober relationships with trusted advisers such as Lord Burghley. Yet this tells only part of the story. Elizabeth deliberately showcased these relationships in order to carve out a place for what was essentially a man’s world. In her own private world, the story was very different. Here it was the women, more than the men, who held sway.

Elizabeth was born into a world of women. No man had been admitted to the presence of her mother, Anne Boleyn, during her confinement at Greenwich Palace, childbirth being strictly female mystery in the sixteenth century. As a child, she was served by a predominantly female household of attendants and governesses, interspersed with occasional visits from her mother and the wives who later took her place. As queen, Elizabeth was constantly attended by ladies of the bedchamber, maids of honor, and other members of her household. They clothed her, bathed her, and watched her while she ate. Among her family, it was her female relations who had the greatest influence: from her half sister, Mary, who distrusted and later imprisoned her, to her cousin Mary, Queen of Scots, who posed a constant and dangerous threat to her crown for almost thirty years.

Elizabeth met, corresponded with, and was influenced by hundreds if not thousands of women during the course of her long life. I have focused the story upon those women who help to reveal Elizabeth the woman, as well as Elizabeth the Queen. From her bewitching mother, Anne Boleyn, to her dangerously obsessive sister, Mary Tudor, and from the rivals for her throne such as the Grey sisters and Mary, Queen of Scots, to the “flouting wenches” like Lettice Knollys, who stole her closest male favorite, these were the women who shaped the Virgin Queen, and it is through their eyes that the real Elizabeth, stripped of her carefully cultivated image, is revealed.

Researching the life of Elizabeth and the women who surrounded her has taken me to some fascinating places, including magnificent palaces such as Hampton Court and Hatfield House and the treasure trove of national and local archives containing her correspondence, most notably the British Library. I have consulted both original material and the wealth of published correspondence that exists for the period. When an original manuscript is cited,

have retained the contemporary spelling. This may be idiosyncratic in places, but it also reveals something of the writer. Elizabeth often referred to Mary Tudor as “sistar” in her letters, which provides a clue to the way that she might have spoken. Where possible, I have therefore preserved such details because they give a wonderful sense of the period.

There are no doubt many other women whose stories could have been told in this book—women such as the tragic Amy Robsart, whose death effectively put paid to any hopes that Elizabeth might have had of marrying Robert Dudley; Sybil Penn, the woman who helped nurse her through an attack of smallpox that almost killed her; or Lady Mary Herbert, a brilliant writer and literary patron whose intellectual talents were on a par with Elizabeth’s own. But I have focused upon those women who had the greatest influence on Elizabeth: those who forged her opinions in childhood, trained her for queenship, and helped her to achieve legendary status as Gloriana, the Virgin Queen. I hope that the women whose lives are explored in this book will delight and intrigue the reader in their own right, as well as for the light that they shed upon one of the most iconic women in history.



Mother

Giovanni Michiel, the Venetian ambassador to England during “Bloody” Mary Tudor’s reign, noted with barely concealed distaste that the Queen’s younger sister, Elizabeth, “is proud and haughty ... although she knows that she was born of such a mother.”¹ Clearly he, and many others like him at the Marian court, believed that the Lady Elizabeth ought to be ashamed of being the offspring of Henry VIII’s disgraced second wife, the infamous Anne Boleyn—variously referred to as “the concubine” and “the whore.” After all, Mistress Boleyn had usurped the place of the rightful queen, Mary’s mother, Catherine of Aragon. Her subsequent alleged infidelities had led to her downfall and execution, and to her only child, Elizabeth, being declared a bastard. Little wonder, then, that the Venetian ambassador marvelled that this child should grow up apparently either oblivious to or, worse, not caring about the scandal of her mother’s past. Surely she ought rather to hide herself away in perpetual shame at being the daughter of an infamous adulteress? Yet here she was, displaying all the traits with which Anne had so beguiled her male courtiers—not to mention King Henry himself. And her coal-black eyes were an uncomfortable reminder that for all her Tudor traits (most notably her abundant red hair), she was very much her mother’s daughter.

Yet the common view of Elizabeth that has developed over the centuries since her death is that she had little regard for Anne Boleyn, preferring to gloss over that shady side of her history and instead boast about the fact that she was the daughter of England’s “Good King Hal.” “She prides herself on her father and glories in him,” remarked one observer at court. The many references that she made to Henry VIII, and the way in which she tried to emulate his style of monarchy when she became queen, all support this view. By contrast, she is commonly believed to have referred directly to her mother only twice throughout the whole of her life, and neither of these references is particularly significant or revealing. Unlike her sister, Mary, she made no attempt to restore her mother’s reputation when she became queen, either by passing an act to declare Anne’s marriage to Henry lawful or by having her remains removed from the Tower and reburied in more fitting surrounds. One might therefore be forgiven for concluding that Elizabeth was at best indifferent toward, and at worst ashamed of, her mother. Far from it. It would be her actions rather than her words (or lack thereof) that would betray her true feelings.

Anne was the second of three surviving children born to the ambitious courtier Thomas Boleyn and his wife Elizabeth, daughter of Thomas Howard, second Duke of Norfolk. A combination of shrewd political acumen and advantageous marriages had transformed the

Boleyn family from relatively obscure tenant farmers into titled gentry with a presence in court. Thomas's marriage to the Duke of Norfolk's daughter had served him well, both politically and dynastically. "She brought me every year a child," he noted, and even though only three of these survived into adulthood, there was the vital son, George, to carry on the family line. The two daughters, Mary and Anne, might prove useful in the marriage market.

The date of Anne's birth was not recorded, but it is estimated at being around 1500 or 1501.³ From the outset, she and her sister, Mary, were groomed to make marriages that would boost their family's aristocratic credentials and enable Thomas to move further up the political ladder. Anne soon emerged as the more intelligent of the two girls, and her father noted that she was exceptionally "toward" (an adjective that would later be applied to her daughter, Elizabeth), and resolved to take "all possible care for her good education." As was customary for girls at that time, Anne received a good deal of "virtuous instruction," but it was in the more courtly accomplishments of singing and dancing that she really excelled. She played the lute and virginals with a skill beyond her years, and also became adept at poetry and verse. The more academic subjects of literature and languages completed her education, and by the age of eleven, she could speak French extremely well.

All of this was quite typical of the education received by other girls of her class, but in 1512 an opportunity arose to set herself apart from her peers. It was in this year that her father was appointed ambassador to the Regent of the Netherlands, Margaret of Austria. Margaret's court was renowned for being the most sophisticated and prestigious in Europe, an ideal training ground for young aristocratic men or women who wished to enhance their social standing. Thomas used his skills in diplomacy and charm to persuade the archduchess to take Anne under her wing. And so, at the tender age of twelve, Anne set sail for the Netherlands. She was quick to absorb the full range of skills expected of a court lady. By all accounts, Margaret was delighted with her and wrote how "bright and pleasant" she was for her young age.

But it was in France that Anne's education in court life reached its zenith, and her experiences there would have a profound effect upon her character and demeanor. This time Thomas Boleyn used his political contacts to secure places for both Anne and her elder sister, Mary, in the household of Mary Tudor, sister of Henry VIII, who had recently been betrothed to the aged King Louis XII. The Regent Margaret was sad to lose this lively and engaging addition to her court, but Anne shared her father's ambition and was delighted at the prospect of serving Henry VIII's sister, a renowned beauty. She travelled straight to France from the Netherlands, arriving there in August 1513. It was to be a brief service, however, for Louis died just three months after the wedding (some said the exertion of satisfying his young bride had led to his demise), and Mary caused a scandal by marrying her brother's best friend, Charles Brandon, in secret, before hastily returning to England. Anne had acquired a taste for life in France, however, and so remained there after Mary's departure, transferring her service to Queen Claude, wife of the new king, Francis I.

Her sister, Mary, preferred the diversions on offer at the king's court, which was one of the most licentious in Europe. Francis was even more notorious a philanderer than his great rival across the channel, Henry VIII, and it was not long before the alluring Mary Boleyn caught his eye. She proved so easy a conquest that he nicknamed her his "English mare" and

“hackney,” whom he had the pleasure of riding on many occasions. By the time she returned to England, her reputation had preceded her, and, never one to be outdone by his French rival, Henry VIII also took her as his mistress. Like Francis, he quickly tired of a bait so easily caught.

Meanwhile, in stark contrast to her sister, Anne was earning a reputation as one of the most graceful and accomplished ladies of the queen’s household. She thrived in the lively and intellectually stimulating French court and developed a love of learning that continued throughout her life. Among her closest companions was Margaret of Navarre, sister of Francis I, who was regarded as something of a radical for her views on women, and she encouraged Anne’s interest in literature and poetry. It was here that Anne also developed a love of lively conversation, a skill that would set her apart from the quieter, more placid ladies at the English court when she made her entrée there.

So entirely did Anne embrace the French manners, language, and customs that the court poet, Lancelot de Carles, observed: “She became so graceful that you would never have taken her for an Englishwoman, but for a French woman born.” Another contemporary remarked, “Besides singing like a syren, accompanying herself on the lute, she harped better than King David and handled cleverly both flute and rebec.”⁴ Anne was particularly admired for her exquisite taste and the elegance of her dress, earning her the praise of Pierre de Brantôme, a seasoned courtier, who noted that all the fashionable ladies at court tried to emulate her style, but that she possessed a “gracefulness that rivalled Venus.” She was, he concluded, “the fairest and most bewitching of all the lovely dames of the French court.”⁵

Anne had certainly blossomed during her years in France. Her slim, petite stature gave her an appealing fragility, and she had luscious dark brown hair, which she grew very long. Her most striking feature, though, was her eyes, which were exceptionally dark—almost black—and seductive, “inviting conversation.” But for all that, she was not a great beauty. Her skin was olive colored and marked by small moles at a time when flawless, pale complexions were admired. The Venetian ambassador was clearly bemused by Henry VIII’s late fascination with her. “Madam Anne is not one of the handsomest women in the world,” he wrote, “she is of middling stature, swarthy complexion, long neck, wide mouth, bosom not much raised, and in fact has nothing but the English King’s great appetite, and her eyes which are black and beautiful, and take great effect on those who served the Queen when she was on the throne.”⁶ Even George Wyatt, who was to write an adulatory account of Anne during Elizabeth’s reign, admitted: “She was taken at that time to have a beauty not so whitely as clear and fresh above all we may esteem.”⁷ She also had small breasts, a large Adam’s apple “like a man’s,” and, most famously, the appearance of a sixth finger on one of her hands.⁸ But it was undoubtedly her personal charisma and grace, rather than her physical appearance, that gave her the indefinable sex appeal that was to drive kings and courtiers alike wild with frustrated lust. Wyatt observed that her looks “appeared much more excellent by her favour passing sweet and cheerful; and ... also increased by her noble presence of shape and fashion, representing both mildness and majesty more than can be expressed.”⁹

Anne Boleyn’s allure, honed to perfection at one of the most sophisticated courts in the world, set her apart when she made her entrée into Henry VIII’s court in 1522. Her father had secured her a position in Catherine of Aragon’s household, and she swiftly established

herself as one of the leading ladies of the court. While the women admired and copied her fashions, the men were drawn to her self-confidence and ready wit, but more particularly to her provocative manner, which made her at once playfully flirtatious and mysteriously aloof. George Wyatt later said of her: "For behaviour, manners, attire and tongue she excelled them all."¹⁰ She had first come to notice in a court pageant organized by Cardinal Wolsey for the king on Shrove Tuesday 1522, in which she played the part of Perseverance—particularly fitting given the events that later unfolded.

Among Anne's suitors was the poet Thomas Wyatt, whose ardent expressions of love were hardly restrained by the fact that he was already married. Rather more eligible was Henry Percy, later sixth Earl of Northumberland, who grew so besotted with her that he tried to break a prior engagement in order to marry her. It was apparently some time, though, before Anne attracted the attention of the king himself.

The early relationship between Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn showed little sign of the intensity that it would later develop. The very fact that Anne had been at court for some four years before there was any sign of an attachment suggests that it was hardly a case of love at first sight. Rather, the affair appears to have developed gradually out of a charade of courtly love. By late 1526, all the court knew that Lady Anne was the king's latest inamorata. But this was very different from Henry's previous infidelities, for Anne proved to be the most unyielding of mistresses. She persistently held out against his increasingly fervent advances, insisting that while she might love the king in spirit, she could not love him in body unless they were married. It was a masterstroke. Perhaps having learned from the example of her sister, who had given way all too easily and had been discarded just as easily, Anne sensed that Henry would lose interest as soon as she had succumbed to his desires, so she kept her eyes focused on the main prize: the crown of England. It was an extraordinary goal even for one born of such an ambitious family, for Henry already had a queen—and a popular one at that. But Anne knew that he was tiring of his wife, Catherine of Aragon, who, at forty, was some five years older than himself and now unlikely to bear him the son he so desperately needed. Anne, meanwhile, was in her midtwenties, with every prospect of fertility.

At first she rebuffed the king's advances altogether, refusing to accept either his spiritual or physical love. Henry complained that he had "been more than a year wounded by the dart of love, and not yet sure whether I shall fail or find a place in your affection," and begged Anne to "give yourself, body and heart, to me."¹¹ He even promised that if she assented, he would make her his "sole mistress," a privilege he had afforded to no other woman. But Anne was determined to hold out for more, and told him: "I would rather lose my life than my honesty ... Your mistress I will not be." She proceeded to play the king with all the skill and guile that she had learned at the French court, giving him just enough encouragement to keep him interested but rebuffing him if he tried to overstep the mark. Thus, one moment Henry was writing with gleeful anticipation of the prospect of kissing Anne's "pretty dug [breasts]," and the next he was lamenting how far he was from the "sun," adding mischievously, "yet the heat is all the greater."¹²

The longer their liaison went on, the greater Anne's influence at court became. She was constantly in the king's presence, eating, praying, hunting, and dancing with him. The only thing she did not do was sleep with him. As her status grew, so did her pride and haughtiness.

She became insolent toward her mistress, Catherine of Aragon, and was once heard to loudly proclaim that she wished all Spaniards at the bottom of the sea. A foreign visitor to the court noted with some astonishment: “there is now living with him [the king] a young woman of noble birth, though many say of bad character, whose will is law to him.”¹³ But Henry cared little for the resentment toward Anne that was building at court, and as his love for her drove him increasingly to distraction, he began to think the unthinkable: if marriage was the only way he could claim her, then he would seek an annulment from the Queen. This was precisely what Anne had been angling for, and she encouraged the king in his new resolve. It would take him almost six years to achieve it, and nobody could have predicted the turmoil that would ensue. Inspired by his pursuit of marriage to Anne, Henry would overturn the entire religious establishment in England, wresting the country from papal authority and appointing himself head of the Church. The religious, political, and social ramifications would be enormous, reverberating for decades and laying the foundations for discord in all of his children’s reigns.

Anne actively supported the king in his religious reforms, realizing that they held the key to her future. She introduced Henry to William Tyndale’s writings and kept a copy of his English translation of the New Testament in her suite for anyone who wished to read it. She also befriended a number of leading reformers at court, and it was through her influence that they were later appointed to powerful bishoprics. It was said that men such as Hugh Latimer, Nicholas Shaxton, Thomas Goodrich, and even Thomas Cranmer, who was appointed Archbishop of Canterbury in 1533, owed their positions to her. A posthumous account of Anne, written by the reformist cleric William Latymer, described her as “well read in the scriptures” and “a patron of Protestants.”¹⁴

In espousing the reformist religion, Anne made some dangerous enemies at court. The Catholics were in no doubt that the king’s alarmingly radical religious reforms were down to her. Eustace Chapuys reported to his master, Charles V, that “the concubine” had told the king “he is more bound to her than man can be to woman, for she extricated him from a state of sin ... and that without her he would not have reformed the Church to his own great profit and that of all the people.”¹⁵ Anne also alienated large swathes of the population who were already sympathetic to Queen Catherine.

Catherine’s daughter, Mary, was herself the subject of pity. She had returned to court in 1527, aged eleven, after a two-year sojourn in Wales, as was traditional for the heir to the throne. Until then, she had been the king’s cherished only child, “much beloved by her father,” according to the Venetian ambassador.¹⁶ She had been feted at court and proudly shown off to foreign ambassadors, who all praised her appearance and intelligence. Her long red hair was “as beautiful as ever seen on human head,” and another observer complimented her delicate, “well proportioned” figure, as well as her “pretty face ... with a very beautiful complexion.” Gasparo Spinelli, a Venetian dignitary, told of how the young princess had danced with the French ambassador, “who considered her very handsome, and admirable because of her great and uncommon mental endowments.”¹⁷

From the tender age of two, Mary had been a highly prized pawn in the international marriage market, betrothed first to the Dauphin of France, and three years later to the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V. Young as she was when all of these negotiations were being

conducted, she had learned to cherish high expectations of her future life. Her education had reinforced this view. During her early years, she had learned the typical court accomplishments of playing the lute and virginals, singing, dancing, and riding. She had later been tutored by the celebrated humanist Juan Luis Vives.

Upon her return to court in 1527, Mary learned that her father had become enamored of Anne Boleyn, but it did not cause her any immediate concern—there had been mistresses before, and no doubt there would be more to follow. Mary's ally Chapuys warned that Anne "is the person who governs everything, and whom the King is unable to control."¹⁸ Still Mary clung doggedly to the belief that her mother's position was unassailable.

Anne agreed to become Henry's wife later that year, but she continued to refuse his advances throughout the long years during which he and his ministers tried to secure the annulment of his first marriage through protracted negotiations with the Pope. Henry's sexual frustration mingled with Anne's increasing bouts of temper to often explosive effect. Keenly aware that time was passing her by and that she could have been married with children by now, Anne threatened to leave the king. Her behavior became increasingly erratic, and she lashed out at the slightest provocation, such as when she discovered that Catherine of Aragon was still mending her husband's shirts. Even though she had triumphed over the beleaguered queen, she had no sympathy for her and told one of Catherine's ladies that "she did not care anything for the Queen, and would rather see her hanged than acknowledge her as mistress."¹⁹

By 1529, with the prospect of success still frustratingly out of reach, Anne fixed her wrath upon the king's chief minister, Cardinal Wolsey, whom Henry had appointed to secure the annulment, but whom she suspected of deliberately impeding matters. She threw her weight behind the faction at court (led by her father and uncle, the Duke of Norfolk) that was plotting to get rid of Henry's chief minister. In the event, she helped secure his downfall, but not the divorce.

In 1531 Catherine of Aragon was banished from the court, and Anne was established as queen in all but name. Princess Mary was now forced to choose between her duty to Henry as her father and her king, and the love and loyalty that she felt for her mother. For her, it was an easy choice. She instantly sided with the beleaguered queen and avoided any accusations of disobedience to the king by placing all of the blame on that "concubine," Anne Boleyn. But while she professed her continuing devotion to her father, this once cherished daughter was gradually slipping from his favor. Anne exacerbated the situation by doing everything she could to keep them apart, determined to focus her royal lover's mind on her annulment from Catherine and marriage to her—and with it, the promise of his longed-for son. She treated Mary with barely concealed disdain, emphasizing the power that she now had over her. "The said Anne has boasted that she will have the said Princess for her lady maid ... or to marry her to some varlet," reported Chapuys, "but that is only to make her eat humble pie."²⁰

Although Mary steadfastly defended her mother and suffered no weakening of resolve, the psychological toll of watching her parents' marriage unravel and the ever more cruel indignities inflicted upon her mother had a devastating effect upon the young girl's health. She suffered increasing bouts of nausea and on one occasion was unable to keep any food

down for three weeks, causing panic among her attendants. In the spring of 1531, when she was recovering from one of her frequent stomach upsets, she wrote to her father, saying that nothing would speed her recovery more than to visit him at Greenwich. Her request was peremptorily refused, as Chapuys believed, "to gratify the lady [Anne], who hates her as much as the Queen, or more so, chiefly because she sees the King has some affection for her."²¹ It seemed that Henry, too, had become cruelly indifferent to his daughter's suffering. Knowing how much comfort she derived from spending time with her mother, later that year he banished her from Catherine's presence. He even forbade her from writing to her mother.²² Thenceforth, the two women were forced to be strangers.

Mary wondered how she had suddenly come to this after being cherished and lauded throughout her childhood. Coinciding with her most formative teenage years, this first great crisis of her life had a profound effect. The formerly confident, lively young girl was now beset with melancholy and depression, worn down by fear about what the future would hold. But the crisis also strengthened certain aspects of her character and beliefs. As a show of support for her sainted mother, she identified herself strongly with the Spanish cause, throwing in her lot with Chapuys and his Imperial master, Charles V. She also fervently embraced her mother's Roman Catholic faith. Both of these moves set her in direct conflict with Anne Boleyn.

Meanwhile, the subject of Mary's hatred had made a decision that would turn the course of history. Late in 1532, Anne Boleyn resorted to what was for her the most desperate of all measures: to relinquish her former strategy and sleep with the king. In so doing, she was gambling on the by no means certain prospect that if she became pregnant, he would overcome all of the remaining obstacles and marry her. After all, even though he had pursued her for years, the fact that she had remained just beyond his grasp was a large part of her allure. If she gave that up, then she might well lose his interest for good.

But the gamble seemed to have paid off. Henry was, at least initially, even more besotted with Anne now that she had become his mistress in body as well as in name. The Imperial ambassador, Eustace Chapuys, was aghast when he discovered that "the King cannot leave her for an hour." By December, she was pregnant. Her royal lover now had to act fast if the baby was to be born legitimate. He therefore set aside the ongoing wranglings with the Church and married Anne in secret on January 25, 1533, in his private chapel at Whitehall. His marriage to Catherine was annulled shortly afterward.

Anne was formally recognized as queen on April 12, 1533, and her coronation followed six weeks later. This was a lavish affair, full of iconography and symbolism designed to emphasize the legitimacy of her position and her suitability as queen. The theme was the Assumption of the blessed Virgin Mary. Throughout the procession, the city of London was displayed as a kind of "celestial Jerusalem," with Anne as the Virgin, dressed in white and with her long dark hair worn loose around her shoulders.

Along the route, a tableau was built with a castle in the foreground against the backdrop of a hill. As Anne's procession passed by, a stump on the hill poured out a mass of red and white roses (symbolizing the Tudor dynasty), and then a painted cloud opened up to release a white falcon, which swooped down onto the flowers. As a final touch, an angel descended from the same cloud and placed an imperial crown upon the head of a white falcon. Anne had adopted

this bird as her emblem in 1532, in preparation for her marriage to Henry, when she had been granted a crest of her own: a white falcon alighting upon roses. The message was clear. With the accession of Anne, already pregnant, new life would burst forth from the Tudor stock.

The coronation ceremonies lasted for four days and were clearly intended to enhance Anne's status: For all that she had recently been created Marchioness of Pembroke, she was still just the daughter of an English aristocrat—only the second such queen since 1066. The coronation was also a test of loyalty for the court and the people. Although the only notable not to attend was Sir Thomas More, the lord chancellor (who thereby helped seal his own fate—he was executed for high treason two years later), most of the others were there under duress and bitterly resented the woman whom they viewed as a usurper. The citizens of London who turned out to watch the procession evidently felt the same. Chapuys described the coronation as “a cold, meagre and uncomfortable thing, to the great dissatisfaction, not only of the common people, but also of the rest.”²³ Dissatisfaction soon turned to open mockery. Everywhere along the processional route were Henry's and Anne's initials intertwined. But this cipher was turned to parody, and as the new queen passed, cries of “ha ha” could be heard among the disdainful crowds.

Another reason for their scorn was that this new queen was very obviously pregnant, and further advanced than one might expect for a lady who had been married for barely four months: a bastard child growing within a usurper's belly. Yet this child was Anne's chief hope of securing her position as queen and of retaining the king's notoriously fickle affections. The pregnancy was announced in May, by which time it was already widely known. The addition of an extra panel to Anne's skirts to accommodate her increasing girth removed any lingering doubt. The following month, Archbishop Cranmer told an acquaintance that the Queen “now somewhat big with child.”²⁴

Although she triumphed in the expectation of giving Henry a son and heir, Anne was distracted by more immediate concerns and complained about the loss of her famous slender figure. This may have been due to more than her accustomed vanity, for she no doubt feared that as her attractiveness waned, the king would seek diversion elsewhere. Her fears were well grounded. In August 1533, as Anne entered the eighth month of her pregnancy, rumors of a secret liaison between the king and a “very beautiful” woman began to spread throughout the court. By the time they reached Anne's ears, the tale had been embellished. Henry had slept with at least one other woman, probably more. Lying in her chamber, her body heavy and ungainly, Anne must have been tortured by the thought that her husband had strayed so soon after the marriage. Chapuys noted with barely concealed satisfaction that the new queen was “very jealous of the King, and not without legitimate cause.”²⁵ Furious at such humiliation, Anne confronted Henry with what she had heard. Rather than comfort his heavily pregnant wife, he spat back that she must “shut her eyes and endure,” as his betters had done. Just a few short months before, Anne had been the sole focus of the king's attention, the woman whom he had worshipped for years and moved heaven and earth to attain. Now it seemed that she was just like any other woman to him. As Chapuys observed, “She ought to know that it was in his power to humble her again in a moment, more than he had exalted her before.”²⁶ For Henry, it seemed that the thrill had been entirely in the chase

The quarrel between King Henry and his new wife lasted for several days and was the talk of the court. Having made many enemies on her path to the throne, there was little sympathy now for Anne, who was left to seethe and fret in the confines of her chamber. Perhaps she reasoned that the only way to regain her husband's affection and avoid sliding into obscurity would be to give him the son for which he had so long craved.

In the middle of August, Henry and Anne moved from Hampton Court to Windsor, and from there to Greenwich, the king's favorite palace, which had been appointed for Anne's confinement, or "lying in." His daughter, Mary, was ordered to join the ladies who had assembled there to attend Queen Anne. Mary's feelings at being so cloistered with the women whom she saw as the architect of all the evils that had befallen her and her mother can only be imagined. Thanks to Anne, she was no longer a princess but simply "Lady Mary," the king's bastard daughter. And now she was forced to stand by and witness firsthand the whore's ultimate triumph as she gave birth to a prince.

Meanwhile, there was frenzied activity at Greenwich Palace as preparations were made for Anne to "take to her chamber." A queen's confinement was subject to an elaborate set of conventions—part religious, part medical—that stretched back hundreds of years. They had been refined in the fifteenth century by Lady Margaret Beaufort, who had drawn up strict ordinances for "the deliverance of a queen." These dictated that a queen would effectively go into seclusion some four to six weeks before the birth was expected. As one foreign observer noted with some bemusement: "This is an ancient custom in England whenever a princess is about to be confined: to remain in retirement forty days before and forty after."²⁷ She would be confined to her chamber, which was actually a suite of rooms based upon the private chamber apartments usually found at court (to which only the most privileged persons would gain access), but with certain modifications. For example, an oratory would be installed so that prayers could add necessary succor in an age when knowledge of obstetrics was limited, together with a font to provide a quick baptism for a sickly baby.

The expectant queen would herself select the room in which she wished to give birth. The room received the greatest attention, being hung with heavy tapestries—"sides, roof, windows and all"—depicting scenes from romances or other pleasant subjects, so as not to upset mother or child. The theme for the tapestries in Anne's chamber was the story of Saint Ursula and her eleven thousand virgins. It would prove a peculiarly fitting one. Once the tapestries had been hung, the floor would be "laid all over with thick carpets," and even the keyholes would be blocked up to keep out any glimmer of light from the world beyond. Finally, a specially constructed bed of state upon which the precious infant would be born was installed. This would comprise a mattress stuffed with wool and covered with sheets of the finest linen, and two large pillows filled with down. The bed prepared for Anne's confinement at Greenwich was bedecked with an elaborate counterpane, "richly embossed upon crimson velvet," lined with ermine and edged with gold. It was rumored to have formed part of the ransom of the Duke of Alençon, who had been captured at Verneuil in 1424. If this was true, then perhaps Queen Anne wished to be reminded of the country in which she had spent so much of her youth.

A crimson satin tester and curtains embroidered with gold crowns completed the effect, with the Queen's arms being added as another reminder of her lineage—and, therefore, her

right to the throne. The final touch was the installation of two cradles: one a “great cradle of estate,” richly upholstered with crimson cloth of gold and an ermine-lined counterpane to match that of the Queen’s bed; the other a more modest carved wooden cradle painted with gold.

The whole effect of this richly arrayed birthing chamber was designed to impress. But it would also have been stifling and oppressive for those within, with its heavy tapestries that shut out all light, and the thick velvet fabrics that smothered the bed, especially given that it was the middle of August. This was made worse still by the braziers, which were lit some days before the Queen entered her chamber, and also by the rich perfumes that filled the air from the unstoppered bottles that were scattered around the room.

While these preparations were under way, Anne made a request of her own regarding the birth of her child. She asked her husband to procure from his former wife the “rich triumph cloth” that Catherine of Aragon had brought with her from Spain for the baptism of her future children. This cloth, a painful reminder of all her children who had been stillborn or died within days of birth, was one of the few possessions that Catherine had left, and she was outraged when she heard of Anne’s request. Although it was undoubtedly a callous, cold-hearted act on Anne’s part, she was perhaps driven by more than sheer vindictiveness. As the hour of her lying-in grew closer, she was determined to prove the legitimacy of her child, which she knew was the subject of increasingly vociferous whispers that it was a bastard conceived out of lawful wedlock. In her jaundiced view, the baptismal cloth of her predecessor, who was still revered by the people as their true queen, was a symbol of legitimate royal blood, and she was desperate to secure it for her unborn child. But Catherine held firm, and Anne was eventually forced to relent, perhaps aware—for once—of the widespread resentment that would follow if she got her own way.

On August 26, Anne formally took to her chamber. As custom dictated, she heard Mass in the palace chapel before hosting a banquet for all the lords and ladies of the court in her great chamber, which had been richly decorated for the occasion. There “spices and wines were served to Anne and her guests, and soon afterward she was escorted to the door of her bedchamber by two high-ranking ladies. Here she took formal leave not just of the king but of all the male courtiers, officials, and servants, and entered an exclusively female world, in which women were to take over all the positions in her household usually occupied by men. As Lady Margaret Beaufort’s ordinances dictated: “women were to be made all manner of officers, as butlers, panters, sewers.”²⁸ Any provisions or other necessary items would be brought to the door of the great chamber and passed to one of the female attendants within. Even the king was refused entry.

All of this was intended to emphasize that childbirth was a purely female mystery. In a male-dominated society, this was the only sphere in which women held precedence. But there was a price to pay for this temporary superiority: at the end of the elaborate, exclusive female ritual, the Queen must produce a male heir. Anne herself seemed confident enough of this. She had ordered a letter announcing the birth to be written in advance. Clearly not overly concerned about tempting fate, she thanked God for sending her “good speed, in the deliverance and bringing forth of a prince.”²⁹ The king shared his wife’s optimism and had already decided that the boy would be christened Henry or Edward. He also spent what

should have been anxious days awaiting news in planning a splendid joust to mark the safe delivery of his son. One courtier remarked that he had never seen His Majesty so “merry.” If the astrologers and soothsayers were to be believed, then he had good reason, for all bar on had predicted the birth of a prince. The exception was the renowned “seer” William Glove who had dared to tell Queen Anne that he had had a vision of her bearing “a woman child.” This had not been well received.

Quite apart from the sex of her child, there must have been some concern about its chance of survival. Childbirth was fraught with danger in Tudor times and often resulted in the death of the mother, child, or both. Around a quarter of children died at birth, and the same number died in infancy. Worse still, Anne’s closest female relations had suffered a most unfortunate history in this respect. Her mother had lost several babies in infancy, and her sister, Mary, had borne a son with mental disabilities whom Anne would not suffer to be at court. But in her favor was the fact that her health was generally good, and as one observer remarked, she seemed “likely enough to bear children.” What was more, she had become pregnant almost immediately after becoming Henry’s lover, which surely augured well—for both this and all future conceptions.

On September 7, the eve of the Feast of the Virgin, just twelve days after entering her confinement, Anne went into labor. This was much earlier than anticipated, so it was assumed that either the baby was premature or the midwives had miscalculated. Or perhaps Anne had bent the truth a little when telling them the date of conception. She and Henry had started sleeping together at least a month before their marriage, but of course it would not do to reveal this fact when questions were already being raised about the child’s legitimacy.

The king and his courtiers waited eagerly for news as the labor progressed throughout the morning and early afternoon. Meanwhile, inside the Queen’s bedchamber, women rushed to and fro in the cloistered darkness, bringing the necessary provisions and equipment for the midwives and keeping a tense vigil. The past seven years had been building up to this moment. The waiting, frustrations, turmoil, and hostility that Anne had endured would all be swept away in one glorious moment.

Shortly after three o’clock in the afternoon, the baby was born. Just as Anne had hoped this child would one day bring England to such glory and power that its name would echo down the centuries as one of the greatest monarchs who ever lived. But in the stifling confines of the birthing chamber on that hot September day, none of this could have been predicted, for the child that Anne had borne was not the hoped-for prince. It was a girl.

After all the upheaval that the king and his country had endured to attain an heir, this was surely a disaster. No woman had sat upon the throne of England for centuries, and then it had been a catastrophe, plunging the country into civil war.³⁰ Besides, the king already had a female heir (albeit an illegitimate one, thanks to the annulment of his marriage to Catherine) and he would not welcome another.

Amidst their quiet consternation, Anne is alleged to have declared: “Henceforth they may with reason call this room the Chamber of Virgins, for a virgin is now born in it on the vigil of that auspicious day when the church commemorates the nativity of our blessed lady the Virgin Mary.”³¹ Even if this quote is erroneous, it would have been entirely in character for Anne to have brazened it out. After all, had she not been delivered of a perfect, healthy child?

who, with her flame-red hair, bore all the marks of the Tudor dynasty? Moreover, the labor had been straightforward (albeit “particularly painful,” according to her earliest biographer William Latymer), and there were no signs to suggest that she might not bear the king many more children.

In the meantime, a herald had announced the news to the waiting courtiers that “the queen was delivered of a fair lady,” and the letter that had been prepared to announce the arrival of a prince had to be hastily amended with an additional *s*.³² The king, on the surface at least, showed little of the fury that historians have since assigned to him upon hearing that his long quest for a male heir was still not over. Upon visiting his newborn daughter for the first time, he remarked to the Queen with a sanguinity similar to her own that as they were both still so young, they might confidently expect to have sons in due course. He then announced that the girl would be named Elizabeth, after both his mother and Anne’s.

According to Chapuys, such optimism on the part of the royal couple was little more than a front. On the day of the christening, he wrote to his Imperial master, Charles V: “the King’s mistress was delivered of a daughter, to the great regret both of him and the lady, and to the great reproach of physicians, astrologers, sorcerers, and sorceresses, who affirmed that she would be a male child. But the people are doubly glad that it is a daughter rather than a son, and delight to mock those who put faith in such divinations, and to see them so full of shame.”³³ He later added that the new queen had shown “great disappointment and anger” at the birth of her daughter.

If, as Chapuys claimed, the king was furious when he learned of the baby’s sex, then his reaction would have been understandable: He had, after all, moved heaven and earth in his frustrated attempts to secure an annulment from Catherine of Aragon so that he could marry Anne, and he had done all to achieve his desperate desire for a male heir. But the only direct evidence for his and the Queen’s dismayed reaction to Elizabeth’s birth comes from Catholic or pro-Spanish sources, both of which may well have been layering their own prejudices onto the accounts they gave. The historical narratives written in the centuries after the event have often exaggerated how disastrous it was because they had the benefit of knowing that Elizabeth would turn out to be the only living child that Anne was able to provide her husband. In fact, George Wyatt’s account, written in Elizabeth’s reign, may have carried equal merit. According to him, the king was delighted at the birth of a healthy daughter and “expressed his joy for that fruit sprung of himself, and his yet more confirmed love towards her [Anne].”³⁴

There is very little contemporary evidence to suggest that giving birth to a girl irrevocably damaged the relationship between Henry and Anne. It is therefore tempting to conclude that Anne’s failure to produce the hoped-for male child at the first attempt would have been seen as a temporary setback—albeit a bitterly disappointing one, after all the anticipation—rather than an unmitigated disaster.

But there was more to it than that. Although Elizabeth’s birth had not destroyed Anne’s marriage, it had significantly weakened her position in the eyes of her people—and, indeed, in the eyes of the world. Throughout the arduous negotiations for an annulment of Henry’s marriage to Catherine, whose childbearing years seemed to be over, Anne had represented youth and fertility, and the whole prospect of her marrying the king had rested on the premise that she would give him a son. Without it, she was just the daughter of a family whose prominence

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