

**Howard Brenton**, whose *Anne Boleyn* premieres at the Globe this July, reveals the heroic qualities of Henry VIII's most talented, many-sided queen.

## Will the Real Anne Boleyn Please Take the Stage?

**A**nne Boleyn, Henry VIII's second wife, was executed in the Tower of London on the 19th of May 1536. She was convicted of adultery, incest and treason. At her trial she had been accused of being her brother's mistress, of being a witch, of sleeping with a hundred men while married to the King. She had been Queen for three years. In the glow of her husband's devotion she was the most powerful woman in the Kingdom, a force in her own right against whom no one dared speak openly. But when the protective veil of the King's affections evaporated she became 'the Concubine', the great whore of the age. It was the devil's work that she could not give the King a male heir. Wild rumours spoke of her third miscarriage delivering a foetus so distorted that the father must have been a succubus, a demon, even Old Nick himself. In the last days in the Tower Anne went to pieces. But her wild spirit did not wholly desert her. From within her spinning hysteria she joked, 'I shall have a nickname: Queen Anne the headless'.

There are many Anne Boleyns. Popular culture – as in the BBC series *The Tudors* – sees her as a bright, sexy girl manoeuvred by an ambitious father and his friends into the King's bed. Historians disagree. David Starkey sees her as 'a brutal and effective politician' who was, after all, able to bring down the King's first Minister, Cardinal Wolsey – whom she hated, ironically, for blocking a possible betrothal when she was younger. Antonia Fraser, who is very much of the Catholic party of Henry's first wife, the much put upon and infuriatingly correct Katherine of Aragon, sees Anne as a schemer and a *poseur*. She accuses her of 'religious chic', always making sure she had a religious book in her hands when someone important

came into the room. In her recent novel, *Wolf Hall*, Hilary Mantel gives us an extraordinary Anne, calculating yet instinctive, almost feral, a very dangerous woman indeed.

There is some truth, no doubt, in all these perceptions of her. Clearly she was formidable. When she was 13 she was sent abroad, first to Burgundy then to Paris as a lady-in-waiting to the French Queen. Both Courts were notorious for political infighting; Anne observed and learnt. Her French became flawless; later, as favourite, then Queen, she made herself invaluable to Henry in the endless, convoluted negotiations with the French King.

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By all accounts she was not a conventional beauty, but she seriously unnerved men. Perhaps it was a directness of gaze, a centred confidence, a charm without deference that bowled them over. She was also armed with a flashing and at times indiscreet wit and, when needed, a hell of a temper – she was, after all, the future mother of Elizabeth I.

When King Henry fell in love with her in 1526 she refused to sleep with him. She kept him hooked but at bay for nearly seven years while negotiations with the Pope to secure an annulment of Henry's marriage to Katherine foundered and then failed. The prurient Court gossips speculated, month by month, how far up Anne's thigh Henry was allowed to go. They finally slept together in Calais, a few weeks before they were married in great secrecy on the 25th of January 1533. Anne quickly became pregnant.

The cruelty of the past can be thrown into sharp relief by present-day knowledge. Anne gave birth to a healthy child, Elizabeth, and then had three miscarriages. Another historian,



A putative portrait of Anne Boleyn by Holbein. Courtesy of Her Majesty the Queen

Alison Weir, argues that she was one of those rare women who are Rhesus negative: when a man is Rhesus positive and his partner negative, problems do not occur with the first child but they do with subsequent pregnancies. If Anne had given Henry and England a male heir she would have been invulnerable. But she did not. Over Easter in 1536 Thomas Cromwell, the King's Chief Minister and at one time Anne's ally, decided to destroy her. It took him three weeks to launch a coup against her family and her faction, fix witnesses, rig a trial and have her dead.

So an attractive and ambitious woman gets to the centre of a dangerous maze of male power to find there is only one way out: her death. It is a tragic and highly dramatic scenario and, as far as it goes, true. But it is a modern reading. There was a whole other dimension to Anne.

She was religious. More: she was a Protestant, a reformer, and an admirer of William Tyndale.

Tyndale's name provoked fear and loathing amongst both Catholics and moderate Protestants. He was in hiding on the outskirts of Antwerp (he was betrayed and burnt alive in the same year as Anne's execution). His vivid, egalitarian translation of the Bible was banned, but copies were smuggled into England. Anne had one. She may well have been directly in touch with Tyndale. She certainly got hold of his *The Obedience of a Christian Man* when it was published in 1528. This was an explosive book,

a key text of the Reformation, attacking the Pope and the Church. An incensed Cardinal Wolsey confiscated it from one of Anne's ladies-in-waiting. Anne went to the King and Wolsey was forced to return it. Anne marked up passages for Henry to read. He commented: 'This book is for me and for all Kings to read'.

It is as if there was a Joan of Arc, driven by a religious vision, within the more familiar figure of Anne the dazzling sexual predator. She even died for religious reasons: she discovered Cromwell was stealing huge sums from the dissolution of the monasteries, money meant for the establishment of universities and religious schools. He moved so quickly because he feared she would tell the King.

Anne was in love with Henry but also in love with the most dangerous ideas of her day. She conspired to make England Protestant forever. I have written my play for the Globe to celebrate her life and her legacy as a great English heroine who helped change the course of our history.

Howard Brenton's many plays include *The Romans in Britain*, *Pravda* (with David Hare), *Paul*, *In Extremis* (premiered at the Globe in 2006) and *Never So Good*.

*Anne Boleyn* opens at the Globe on 24 July.