

The Execution of Anne Boleyn: Six Decades of Scholarship

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It has been over four hundred and fifty years since Anne Boleyn was beheaded on a London Tower scaffold. Since 1950, historians have demonstrated a renewed interest in the question of why Anne was executed. This historiographical essay considers the work of these historians by dividing them chronologically into three groups. The first group represents the period 1954 through 1974, followed by historians from 1976 through 1990. The final and larger of the three groups consists of historians writing after 1990. Within each period a topical methodology has been utilized, with a focus on the more significant reasons historians have suggested for Anne's tragic fate. Among the topics explicated are adultery, miscarriage, witchcraft, the Tudor political milieu, and several less significant explanations for Anne's demise.

The initial inquiry is confined to the twenty-year period between 1954 and 1974. There are three historians in this period beginning with Lacey Baldwin Smith, who published an important article in 1954.¹ Hester Chapman wrote in 1974, taking up the challenge of explaining Anne's death,² and Robert Lacey, writing in 1974 as well, rounds out the work done in this period.³ Lacey Smith explained her view of Anne's downfall by describing what she believed to have been an unstable and erratic environment in the court of King Henry VIII. The court dynamics during the 16th century under Henry VIII were volatile at best. Anne Boleyn was accused of treason, the sentence for treason was death, and she was one of many punished for treason during the reign of the Tudors. As Smith pointed out, many people who simply fell out of favor with the King, or who were considered to be possible nuisances in court, were also charged with treason.⁴ Smith also argued that there were systematic reasons for the large number of treasonous

1. Lacey Baldwin Smith, "English Treason Trials and Confessions in the 16th Century," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 15 (October 1954), 471-498.

2. Hester Chapman, *The Challenge of Anne Boleyn* (New York: Coward, McCann & Geoghegan, Inc., 1974).

3. Robert Lacey, *The Life and Times of Henry VIII* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1974).

4. Smith, "Treason Trials," 475.

convictions during the Tudor years. In her analysis, anyone could have been charged with treason because Tudor law was “constructed with great freedom.”⁵ This, according to Smith, allowed the treason law to be “manipulated to suit the royal purpose.”⁶ Thus, anyone who was no longer desirable to Henry could become a candidate for execution based solely upon an allegation of treason. Smith holds that Anne was not guilty of treason, but was guilty of what Smith has described as “her fall from royal grace.”⁷ Lacey Smith is not the only historian to have credited the unethical practices in the Tudor court to the fall of Anne Boleyn.⁸

In 1974, both Hester Chapman and Robert Lacey also inferred that Anne’s downfall was likely the result of an immoral and unjust crown which was dictated by a “gigantic and terrible *magnifico*.”⁹ Tudor justice was indeed one-sided and even those closest to the King were not immune to Henry’s wrath. Juan Vives, a Spanish scholar and counselor to Catherine of Aragon, Henry’s first wife, explained in a letter written to Erasmus of Rotterdam that England under Henry was treacherous, at best. The times, he wrote, “are difficult, and one can neither speak nor be silent without danger.”¹⁰ In *The Challenge of Anne Boleyn*, Chapman described Anne’s familial niche as a “snake pit,” and the most venomous member was Henry himself.¹¹ Moreover, Chapman argued that judicial treatment in the Henrican court was unpredictable, hostile and most often gruesome. In Chapman’s description, “the actual court of Henry surpassed the wickedness and evil of the prototypes in the Elizabethan and Jacobean playwrights.”¹² If it is to be believed that Anne “fell from royal grace,” and King Henry VIII’s unethical practices at court are to be blamed for Anne’s downfall, how then can her fall from grace be explained? Also, it

5. Smith, “Treason Trials,” 475-476.

6. Smith, “Treason Trials,” 477.

7. Smith, “Treason Trials,” 476.

8. See Appendix I.

9. As quoted in Chapman, *Challenge*, 15.

10. Smith, “Treason Trials,” 475.

11. Chapman, *Challenge*, 15.

12. Chapman, *Challenge*, 15.

may not be difficult to understand how some would have welcomed Anne's ruin. Anne was considered to be immoral herself; she did, in fact, participate in an affair with Henry while he was married to Catherine, and these circumstances – and Anne's personality itself – made it all the easier for Henry to rid himself of his first wife. Further, Anne has been described by both Chapman and Lacey as flirtatious, rude, bawdy, and arrogant, and as Lacey suggested, her flirtation had “changed the tone of the Henrican court.”¹³ According to both writers, Anne was not only disliked, she was “detested by most,” and this hatred quickly grew into resentment and jealousy.¹⁴ She was referred to as “the google-eyed whore,” the concubine, an adulterer and a witch. Anne had few friends, the King no longer loved her, and the people of England hated her.¹⁵

The analyses of Chapman and Lacey make it easier to understand why charges of treason were readily accepted. In their view, Anne became the symbol of everything wrong with society during the third decade of the Tudor century. She was to blame for all dashed hopes, unfulfilled dreams, and, according to Chapman, even natural disasters. Chapman asserts that the people of England thought that Anne was the “personification of not only evil, but of an assault on religion, crops, cattle, fine weather and every other aspect of daily life.”¹⁶ For both Chapman and Lacey, then, the people of England only mirrored what Henry himself had been thinking and feeling. Henry no longer loved Anne, and she repeatedly failed to give him the all-important male heir. “Never,” wrote Lacey, had his “domestic position been as precarious as it was in the 1530s.”¹⁷ Henry's undeserved and risky reputation was all the fault of Anne. In January 1536, surrounded by enemies and people full of loathing, and under “these conditions, of capricious hatred and

13. Lacey, *Life and Times*, 149.

14. Lacey, *Life and Times*, 84.

15. Lacey, *Life and Times*, 133.

16. Chapman, *Challenge*, 15.

17. Lacey, *Life and Times*, 133.

undeviating ruthlessness,” Anne’s fate was sealed.¹⁸

The three historians writing during the first period, then, suggest several reasons for Anne’s downfall. They focused upon Tudor stereotypes, both male and female. Similarly, these writers typically blamed Anne’s demise upon her own personal characteristics and mannerisms, to some degree upon those of King Henry himself, and the treacherous dynamic of the King’s court. Two years after the publication of the Chapman and Lacey texts, there was a marked difference in the way historians interpreted the fall of Anne Boleyn. Under consideration in this second period, are three works of selected historians writing between 1976 and 1989. There are two monographs and one article included in this era: Henry Ansgar Kelley’s book published in 1976,¹⁹ an interesting article by Retha M. Warnicke in 1987,²⁰ and a monograph by the same author two years later in 1989.²¹ The same methodology will be employed for this period as in the first, that is, a focus has been placed upon the more significant reasons these writers have suggested for Anne’s demise. Such topics include accusations of adultery, charges of witchery, incest, the advent of a new paramour for Henry, Jane Seymour, and Anne’s 1536 miscarriage.²²

From adultery to witchcraft, the ethos of the 1970s sparked new ideas as to the events that resulted in Anne’s execution. We will see that although Anne was charged with committing adultery, this, surprisingly, was not the typical interpretation of these writers. In 1536 treason was a crime punishable by death, but, adultery was not. Even if Anne was guilty of adulterous liaisons, unfaithfulness to one’s spouse was not a crime. Henry Kelley surmised that a “loophole” in the law existed, and asserted that any act which endangered the King’s health and well-being

18. Chapman, *Challenge*, 15.

19. Henry Ansgar Kelley, *The Matrimonial Trials of Henry VIII* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1976).

20. Retha M. Warnicke, “Sexual Heresy and the Court of Henry VIII,” *Historical Journal* 30 (June 1987): 247-268.

21. Retha M. Warnicke, *The Rise And Fall Of Anne Boleyn: Family Politics at the Court of Henry VIII* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

22. See Appendix II.

was considered treasonous, and Anne's suspected adultery rendered the King physically ill when he was told about it. Thus, in Kelley's interpretation, "Anne had committed treason."²³ Retha Warnicke maintains that Anne was not guilty of adultery, therefore, it could not possibly be the reason of her downfall. She argued that the only reason why Anne was accused of adultery was to hide the fact that she gave "birth to a deformed fetus."²⁴ For Warnicke, the only evidence for adultery consisted of hearsay, with no other evidence ever surfacing, including the eyewitness accounts that inform such vaunted works as that of the highly respected biographer Paul Friedman.²⁵ According to Warnicke, Friedman and other historians believe that Anne, and the men accused of adultery with her, were in fact guilty of the crime, claiming to have evidence.²⁶ Warnicke calls their assumptions into question, asserting that no proof whatsoever has ever been uncovered. Both Warnicke's 1987 article and her 1989 book contain reasons explaining why historians believe that Anne was guilty, even suggesting that "some scholars have conceded that she was careless of her honour," and because of this alone, Anne must have been guilty.²⁷ Even though all historians seem to agree with the evidence that Anne Boleyn was arrested and charged with committing adultery, not all agree that the adultery charges were, in fact, what led to her execution.

Henry Kelley focuses upon different aspects of King Henry's personality: "two extremes, one hypocritical and the other conscientious."²⁸ Henry was a vain man and was unable to admit he had faults. Kelley asserted that Anne's failure to produce a male heir gave rise to Henry's

23. Kelley, *Matrimonial Trials*, 243.

24. Warnicke, "Sexual Heresy," 259.

25. Paul Friedman, whose monumental 1884 work on Anne Boleyn has remained the authoritative source on Anne's short life for many reasons, not least among which were the detailed contemporaneous sources he compiled for his study. Friedman's work, of course, is open to critique among historians, but a simple dismissal of his analysis seems baseless. Paul Friedman, *Anne Boleyn*, ed. Josephine Wilkinson (Gloucestershire: Amberely Publishing: 2010). This is a re-issue of Friedman's original 1884 two-volume biography on Anne Boleyn.

26. Warnicke, *Rise And Fall*, 192.

27. Warnicke, "Sexual Heresy," 247.

28. Kelley, *Matrimonial Trials*, 1.

insecurity about how others perceived his masculinity, and this perception became a fundamental reason why Henry turned against Anne. He argued that “Henry was embarrassed about his lack of virility and Anne’s delinquency in the matter was the most serious charge.”²⁹ Retha Warnicke admits Kelley’s assertion, recognizing as she does that Henry’s love for Anne was diminishing daily, for a number of reasons, including Henry’s personal insecurities, and that some “scholars have asserted that Anne’s execution was the result of long-term disenchantment.”³⁰ Warnicke, however, was not entirely satisfied with Kelley’s view. Kelley found another, somewhat more believable reason for the accusation against Anne: Henry’s love for another woman, Jane Seymour. Henry Kelley put forward an interesting fact in his book that on May 19, 1536 - the exact day Anne was executed - a dispensation was signed allowing Henry to marry Jane Seymour.³¹ Such a dispensation was needed because Jane Seymour was actually a cousin of one of Henry’s mistresses, and ironically, their marriage would have been considered legally incestuous.³² The fact remains however, that on the very day Anne’s head was severed from her body, the King was already making plans to marry Jane.

Kelley posited other causes for Anne’s demise as well, the most uncomplimentary of which was the charge of incest. Anne was accused of having sexual relations with her own brother, George Boleyn. Unsettling then and now, this had to be the most damaging and insulting charge of all. To have been charged with committing adultery with five different men was bad enough, but to be charged with having sexual relations with your own brother was quite another matter entirely. Kelley suggests that Anne was charged with incest because Henry might have always been fearful that he himself was guilty of committing incest with Anne, that he “was afraid that

29. Kelley, *Matrimonial Trials*, 243.

30. Warnicke, *Rise And Fall*, 189.

31. The suspension, by competent legal authority, of general rules of law in particular cases in the Catholic Church.

32. Kelley, *Matrimonial Trials*, 259.

Anne was his third or even his second cousin.”³³ Kelley’s argument turns on a claim made by Nicolas Sander, a late 16th century source who was only six years of age at the time of Anne’s death. Sander claimed that Henry was actually Anne’s biological father, asserting that Henry and Anne’s mother Elizabeth had an extramarital affair that resulted in the birth of Anne, therefore Anne was doubly guilty of committing incest.³⁴ Even though Kelley’s assertion is based on rather dubious material, other historians also looked to incest as a reason for Anne’s death. Warnicke admitted the incest charge, but blamed it on the fact that Henry believed Anne was practicing witchcraft. In fact, in her 1987 monograph, Warnicke posited witchcraft as the sole reason for Anne’s downfall, asserting that “witchcraft and its relationship to sodomy and incest will be made to establish the prevailing cultural framework for these concepts.”³⁵ Witchery is a well-worn connection for Warnicke, as she held that witchcraft informs all accusations against Anne. Warnicke even advanced the incredible claim that Anne’s brother was “responsible for her last pregnancy,” and that this witchery-induced pregnancy was the one that ended with the miscarriage of a deformed fetus.³⁶ Although Warnicke herself does not believe that Anne was in fact a witch, she propounds that Henry and his court believed as much.

It is of interest to note that up until six years *after* Anne’s death (1542), practicing witchcraft was not a felony and was not punishable by death. Many contemporaries of Henry and Anne, including the King and Queen themselves, believed that sorcery and the casting of spells was possible, even thinking that religion, astrology and the use of charms went hand in hand. Indeed, the belief in witchcraft was prevalent during Anne Boleyn’s lifetime, not limited to the peasant classes. According to Warnicke, and Kelley as well, Henry suspected Anne of witchcraft, or at

33. Kelley, *Matrimonial Trials*, 46.

34. Kelly, *Matrimonial Trials*, 47.

35. Warnicke, “Sexual Heresy,” 3.

36. Warnicke, “Sexual Heresy,” 16.

least believed witchery justified scapegoating Anne for all of Henry's shortcomings. It is true that Henry did tell someone at court that he had been "tricked into marrying Anne by witchcraft."³⁷ Henry's accusation that Anne practiced witchcraft, however, was not a claim that would necessarily have been suspect at the time. Even so, Warnicke stands out among other historians of this period when it comes to equating witchcraft to Anne's downfall. The adultery and incest charges were directly related to witchcraft, and Warnicke offered enlightening descriptions of the collective beliefs of witches during Anne's lifetime: "Universally, witches used aphrodisiacs for their excessive lust," and "witches gave birth to deformed children and committed incest."³⁸ Also, witches could afflict men with impotence, and they also had the ability to fly. The capability to fly, Warnicke asserts, was a significant detail during Anne's trial and explains how her accusers may have believed it possible for Anne to be in more than one location at the same time.³⁹

The two more prevalent reasons for Anne's demise among historians writing in this second period (1976-1989) were first, her last miscarriage, and second, the possibility of a political conspiracy, both of which have been asserted by Retha Warnicke. Accordingly, the miscarriage, especially true if the fetus was deformed, combined with the close temporal relationship between the miscarriage and the accusations of treason, makes it reasonable to surmise that "Henry VIII lost interest in Anne after she miscarried a male child."⁴⁰ Given Henry's obsession with producing a male heir and his insecurity about his perceived masculinity, Henry probably did lose interest in Anne once her last pregnancy was involuntarily aborted. As to there being a deformed fetus, other than an untrained visual inspection of the fetus, there is absolutely no

37. Kelley, *Matrimonial Trials*, 241.

38. Warnicke, *Rise And Fall*, 192.

39. Warnicke, *Rise And Fall*, 192.

40. Warnicke, "Sexual Heresy," 2.

evidence of such an occurrence. Even so, Anne's miscarriage took place during the 15th week of her pregnancy, a period when it would have been difficult if not impossible to have determined the gender of the fetus. Significantly, the fact that the fetus was deformed has not been mentioned by historians other than Warnicke.

Only such a tragedy in his nursery, it will be suggested, could have transformed the king from a complaisant husband, having a 'mery' time with her in late 1535 to a horrified spouse, acting next spring as though she were 'accursed' and he were living in hell.⁴¹

Warnicke is convinced that Anne miscarried a deformed fetus, claiming that it was a "mishap" and was "viewed as an evil omen."⁴² Notwithstanding Warnicke's view, the temporal dissociation of four months is important. If, for instance, the still-birth of a deformed fetus was the precipitating event for Anne's execution, then why did Henry wait four months to kill her? This question becomes all the more significant when one remembers that Henry was not famous for his patience. Warnicke can only offer a hypothesis for the deformity, stating that the miscarriage was the natural way of aborting an abnormality or something "monstrous," proposing that many believed that "adultery and incest were a major reason for the birth of monsters."⁴³ Warnicke also points to the fact that it was kept secret, the details of the deformity were not forwarded to the court.⁴⁴ Warnicke thus leaves herself in the unenviable position of asserting that the secretive nature of the matter in and of itself proved that the fetus was deformed: "it was the sole reason to have Anne killed."⁴⁵ However unappealing Warnicke's hypothesis may be; Anne's miscarriage remains the predominant reason for her execution given by historians writing in the 1980s, seconded by the belief that the disaster was based on the Tudor political milieu.

41. Warnicke, "Sexual Heresy," 3.

42. Warnicke, "Sexual Heresy," 3.

43. Warnicke, "Sexual Heresy," 4, 11.

44. Warnicke, *Rise And Fall*, 261.

45. Warnicke, *Rise And Fall*, 191.

Of the three sources discussed during this second time period (1976-1989), Retha Warnicke is responsible for two. Warnicke, and other historians, also point out that Anne's death may have been part of a political conspiracy that involved key players at court, such as Thomas Cromwell.⁴⁶ Anne had several family members who held prominent positions in Henry's court, among them her brother, father and uncle. Cromwell and Anne had become enemies which in turn made Anne's family members untrustworthy to Cromwell. Some historians believe that Cromwell wanted to rid himself of these personal and political threats in court. Warnicke, however, claims that it contradicts the "prevailing view" that he used her miscarriage as a means to eliminate five of his political enemies.⁴⁷ Although Warnicke admits that Cromwell allowed reformers to think, *ex post facto*, that Anne's death resulted from her association with Lutherans, Warnicke herself was not persuaded by the political conspiracy theory.⁴⁸ Because other historians rejected the deformed fetus hypothesis, Warnicke claimed that they had instead adopted the cynical conclusion that "Cromwell succeeded in killing her" for his own selfish and political reasons.⁴⁹ The three works considered in this second period (1976-1989), propose more than a few reasons for Anne's death. Unlike the first era from 1954 to 1974, when historians attributed difference of personalities to the demise of Anne, the primary cause in the second period was the belief that Anne gave birth to a deformed fetus, followed by political circumstances, incest, and adultery. As varied as these interpretations were, historians of the next period expand these views still further.

The third, and final, era under analysis examines works published between 1991 and 2010. This period covers the largest amount of historical writings after 1950 regarding Anne Boleyn's

46. Chief Minister for King Henry VIII of England from 1532 to 1540. Eventually he too fell from royal grace and was condemned to death without trial (for treason and heresy) and beheaded on July 28, 1540.

47. Warnicke, *Rise And Fall*, 191.

48. Warnicke, *Rise And Fall*, 242.

49. Warnicke, "Sexual Heresy," 2.

death. It is helpful for the reader to recall that although this historiographical essay is chronologically divided into three periods, each of the periods are arranged topically, a methodology demanded by the sources themselves. There are nine historians in this last period, beginning with an E.W. Ives' article in 1992,⁵⁰ followed by Steven Gunn's article,⁵¹ and Karen Lindsey's book in 1995,⁵² Greg Walker's article published seven years later in 2002,⁵³ and David Starkey's remarkable volume on Anne, published in 2003.⁵⁴ Rounding out this period's works are a monograph from E. W. Ives in 2004,⁵⁵ followed by Joanna Denny's text in 2006,⁵⁶ Suzannah Lipscomb's fine recent work from 2009,⁵⁷ and two outstanding volumes published in 2010, one from G.W. Bernard⁵⁸ and another from Alison Weir.^{59 60}

In his 1992 article "Debate: The Fall of Anne Boleyn Reconsidered," E.W. Ives disagreed with Warnicke's earlier assumption that Anne's downfall could be blamed on her miscarriage, and neither does he believe that Anne gave birth to a deformed stillborn. Ives even rebuked the validity of Warnicke's adultery charge.⁶¹ Instead, Ives points to indications of Anne's innocence. Anne was the only female to have been punished for the adultery charge. It seems highly unlikely, if not impossible, that if Anne had been involved in extramarital affairs, not a single one of her chambermaid's would have known about it. Since among them, only Anne was beheaded, and none of her attendants were punished in any way, Ives questioned the validity of

50. E.W. Ives, "Debate: The Fall of Anne Boleyn Reconsidered," *English Historical Review* 107 (July 1992).

51. Steven Gunn, "The Structures of Politics in Early Tudor England," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society, Sixth Series* 5 (December 1995).

52. Karen Lindsey, *Divorced, Beheaded, Survived: A Feminist Reinterpretation of the Wives of Henry VIII* (Reading: 1995).

53. Greg Walker, "Rethinking the Fall of Anne Boleyn," *Historical Journal* 45 (March 2002)

54. David Starkey, *Six Wives: The Queens of Henry VIII* (New York: 2003).

55. E.W. Ives, *The Life and Death of Anne Boleyn: 'The Most Happy'* (Malden: 2004).

56. Joanna Denny, *Anne Boleyn: A New Life of England's Tragic Queen* (Cambridge: 2006).

57. Suzannah Lipscomb, *1536: The Years That Changed Henry VIII* (Oxford: 2009), 87.

58. G.W. Bernard, *Anne Boleyn: Fatal Attractions* (New Haven: 2010).

59. Alison Weir, *The Lady in the Tower: The Fall of Anne Boleyn* (New York: 2010).

60. See Appendix III.

61. Ives, "Debate," 10.

interpretations based on the charge of adultery. Ives, a British historian and expert on Tudor England, claimed that this is very significant “given the fact that Tudor palaces were places where no queen could pursue a liaison without assistance.”⁶² As we have seen, adultery was not treasonous under English law and Ives claimed the charges were unsubstantiated.

David Starkey, a highly respected British historian of Tudor England, agreed with Ives, explaining that Anne had an attitude of “do as I say and not as I do,” which enforced virtue while failing to practicing it.⁶³ Starkey emphasized that King Henry’s court was full of young men and young women “ambitious and on the make, with plenty of time on their hands,” but even so, Anne and the five men accused of adultery “were condemned upon presumption, without valid proof or confession.”⁶⁴ Ives underscored Starkey’s view in his 2004 monograph, defending Anne, claiming that there was no proof that Anne committed adultery.⁶⁵ He also claimed that the details of the adultery charges were fictitious; he based his argument on the fact that Anne was recovering from childbirth and would not have been sexually active. For Ives, everything Thomas Cromwell charged Anne with was a lie.⁶⁶

Two years later in 2006, Joanna Denny’s *Anne Boleyn* contained another defense of the Queen against adultery charges. Denny argued that historians who explain Anne’s death by asserting adultery have “never been sympathetic to Anne,” and calls into question the unscrupulous fantasies of historians, that “Anne did in fact have an affair with one of the accused and together they devised a plot to kill the King.”⁶⁷ Pointedly, Denny rejected the charge that Anne was pregnant with her fifth child at the time of her execution, discarded the idea that the child was

62. Ives, “Debate,” 3.

63. Starkey, *Six Wives*, 565.

64. Starkey, *Six Wives*, 564, 578.

65. Ives, *Most Happy*, 352.

66. Ives, *Most Happy*, 344-346.

67. Denny, *Tragic Queen*, 289.

not fathered by Henry, and scrapped the unfounded “proof” that these charges are true simply because the court documents of the trial have been destroyed.⁶⁸ It is known to historians of the Tudor era that Henry, in fact, gave orders to destroy court records regarding Anne, but not because Anne was pregnant; Henry wanted there to be no record of Anne Boleyn’s existence at all. According to Denny, there is no evidence to support the assumption that Anne was pregnant with anyone’s baby at the time of her conviction. Forming a positive argument, Denny asserted that the adultery charges are only “fathomable because these accusations were part of the political conspiracy” surrounding Henry’s court.⁶⁹

In his 2010 book, G.W. Bernard asserted that although adultery was risky, it was not impossible.⁷⁰ Anne “indeed committed adultery with Norris, probably Smeaton and possibly Weston, and the charges triggered events that led to Anne’s downfall.”⁷¹ Bernard’s contribution appears to be in the minority, as Alison Weir clearly pointed to the fact that he “is alone in believing that Anne was guilty of some of the charges.”⁷² Weir also disagreed with Ives’ notion that the charges “must have been plausible to get 95 jurors to vote guilty.”⁷³ Joanna Denny weighs in on Weir’s rebuff of Bernard’s claim by quoting the Mayor of London in 1536: “I can only observe one thing in this trial – the fixed resolution to get rid of the Queen at any price.”⁷⁴ Not all Englanders believed these charges, but for Anne it was too late: Henry had made up his mind.

Some historians of this third period have speculated that Henry was the sole reason for Anne’s murder, that Anne was not guilty of any charges. Joanna Denney is convinced that it was

68. Denny, *Tragic Queen*, 289.

69. Denny, *Tragic Queen*, 277.

70. Bernard, *Fatal Attractions*, 157.

71. Bernard, *Fatal Attractions*, 192.

72. Weir, *Lady in the Tower*, 337.

73. Weir, *Lady in the Tower*, 337.

74. Denny, *Tragic Queen*, 300.

entirely Henry's fault, asserting that "no matter the conspiracy or lies, the real blood-guilt" lies with him.⁷⁵ She reminded readers that in Tudor England, everyone and everything revolved around the King. If he wanted something, he made sure to get it, and murder was not out of the question. Agreeing, Alison Weir straightforwardly insisted: "Henry had Anne killed simply because he hated her."⁷⁶

While incest was among the reasons for Anne's demise in the second period, here in the third, suspicions of incest have all but disappeared. Historians writing in this era do, however, shift their attention to Jane Seymour. Ives pointed to circumstantial evidence that in order for Henry to achieve an "unchallenged marriage" to Jane, he had to get Anne out of the way first.⁷⁷ Because Henry could not ask the Roman Catholic Church for another annulment or divorce, his only option was to murder Anne. Greg Walker asked the obvious question: "did Henry simply tire of Anne and dispose of her in the most ruthless manner imaginable in order to replace her with a more agreeable bride?"⁷⁸ As Henry had moved on from his first wife, Catherine, to Anne, he was again in the process of repeating that pattern by 1536. Starkey, too, recognized this nuance by asserting that "death had liberated [Henry] from Catherine and his own disillusionment was freeing him from Anne."⁷⁹ Rumors of Henry's interest in Jane began as early as January 1536, the same month Anne had her last miscarriage, and we know from Anne's statement to Henry that he was already involved with Jane. Starkey suggested that in early May, Henry already "had eyes and ears only for Jane Seymour."⁸⁰ We also know that as soon as Anne was taken to the Tower, Henry moved Jane to the town of Beddington so he could visit her daily

75. Denny, *Tragic Queen*, 290.

76. Weir, *Lady in the Tower*, 338.

77. Ives, "Debate," 6.

78. Walker, "Rethinking," 11.

79. Starkey, *Six Wives*, 554.

80. Starkey, *Six Wives*, 575.

without worrying about disapproving onlookers.⁸¹ As Denny succinctly put it, “Henry just simply fell in-love with another woman,” a point made all the more viable when combined with the fact that Henry married Jane only eleven days after Anne’s execution.⁸² Tellingly, eyewitnesses reported that as soon as the tower bell rang, Henry sped off to tell Jane the good news.⁸³

The last miscarriage that Anne had was in January of 1536, the same time that Henry was rumored to have been intimately involved with Jane. The miscarriage has been the center of controversy for decades and whether or not it had anything to do with the fall of Anne Boleyn is still debated by the historians of this third period. According to Karen Lindsey, Anne’s miscarriage was a significant event that changed everything between King and Queen, and accomplished two things: “it intensified Henry’s hatred, and allowed him to get rid of her.”⁸⁴ Joanna Denny agreed and expanded on Lindsey’s argument, claiming that the miscarriage was the “root cause of a conspiracy between Henry and Cromwell to get rid of Anne,” and thus was the sole reason for Anne’s unfortunate fate.⁸⁵ Other scholars after 1990 agreed that Anne did suffer a miscarriage in January 1536, but the majority do not agree that she gave birth to a deformed fetus, nor do they agree that the miscarriage itself was the main reason for Anne’s ruin. Suzannah Lipscomb believes that the miscarriage was definitely a “shocking blow to Henry,” but disagrees with Starkey “that it was the last straw.”⁸⁶ Weir also acknowledged the fact that Anne did suffer a miscarriage. Like Lipscomb, however, Weir is unconvinced that it was the reason for

81. Beddington was a town located twelve miles south of the Tower, and was the home of Nicholas Carew, a courtier of Henry and also a close colleague of Thomas Cromwell .

82. Denny, *Tragic Queen*, 131.

83. At the end of an execution the tower bells would ring, signaling the successful removal of the head from the body.

84. Lindsey, *Divorced*, 121.

85. Denny, *Tragic Queen*, 303.

86. Lipscomb, *1536*, 68.

Anne's demise.⁸⁷ Ives, Bernard and Walker also agreed that Anne's miscarriage was not the cause of her conviction and execution.

Anne Boleyn has been described as possessing a polarizing personality; one either loved her or hated her. She was a strong willed individual, made evident in part by her singular ability to withstand the King's advances for sexual relations prior to marriage and to demand he marry her first. She also weathered the blame for Catherine's death and was reviled by the Catholic population in England. Karen Lindsey described Anne as "independent, self-asserted, narcissistic and happy," a seductress who used Henry's lust to achieve her own power.⁸⁸ It was not these traits, however, that caused her downfall; Anne's demise was caused by the fact that after her marriage to Henry, she became "arrogant and temperamental," behaviors that rendered her "sexually unattractive to the King."⁸⁹ Strikingly, Starkey defined Anne as "insatiably jealous and domineering," a person who "tongue-lashed Dukes and Earls, drove Catherine to the grave and More and Fisher to the block."⁹⁰ Likewise, Lipscomb suggested that Anne's "proud and abrasive character soon became intolerable" and what had once been Henry's "devastating infatuation" with Anne eventually "turned into his blood-thirsty loathing" of her.⁹¹ Alison Weir expands on this interpretation, suggesting that Anne's transition from mistress to wife was more difficult than even she expected. Anne became "over-bearing, shrewish and volatile," and because of her offensive actions and disrespectful attitude she had made many enemies at court, adversaries that would be quick in expediting her downfall.⁹²

It is no secret that Anne made enemies at court, but her personality was merely a part of the

87. Weir, *Lady in the Tower*, 27.

88. Lindsey, *Divorced*, 106, 48.

89. Lindsey, *Divorced*, 114.

90. Starkey, *Six Wives*, 577.

91. Lipscomb, *1536*, 72.

92. Weir, *Lady in the Tower*, 10.

overall dysfunction of Henry's court. Ives argued this point in his 1992 article that "the real topic at issue is the nature of politics in Henrican England."⁹³ By far the most common opinion among historians of this third period – and perhaps the most convincing - is that Anne's conviction and execution were arranged by a political faction in Henry's court. Ives was convinced that Anne's fall was orchestrated by Henry's Lord Chancellor Thomas Cromwell in order to secure his political power within the Privy Council and enhance his overall position in Henry's eyes. Ives argued that the "hypothesis which does satisfy the evidence is that Anne's fall was the result of a *coup d'état*, and a classic example of Tudor faction politics in operation."⁹⁴ Ives for example, points to two letters written to Thomas Cromwell by Eustace Chapuys.⁹⁵ Eustace Chapuys, who was the Spanish Imperial Ambassador to England, and also a close friend and supporter of Henry's first wife Catherine, hated Anne and repeatedly referred to her as a whore. Further, in spring 1536, Anne and Cromwell had a vicious argument over their political and religious differences, and as a consequence Anne had an Anglican Church officer denounce Cromwell before the entire court as her enemy.⁹⁶ It was because of these two events that Ives explained that they suffered a "fatal split," and their relationship "was fatally damaged," never to recover.⁹⁷ Starkey concurred with Ives' interpretation, agreeing that the "breach" between Anne and Cromwell was significant and further described Anne's influence at court as a "brutal and effective politician who had beaten [Cardinal] Wolsey," a far more difficult feat than standing up to Cromwell.⁹⁸ Anne was assuredly seen as capable of ridding the court of Cromwell, and he "who had climbed to power behind Anne, now had to destroy her in order to retain that power."⁹⁹

93. Ives, "Debate," 1.

94. Ives, "Debate," 10.

95. Ives, "Debate," 11.

96. Ives, *Most Happy*, 316.

97. Ives, *Most Happy*, 307, 311.

98. Starkey, *Six Wives*, 554-555.

99. Ives, *Most Happy*, 357.

Joanna Denny agreed with Ives' estimation. Fourteen years after Ives' 1992 article, "Debate: The Fall of Anne Boleyn Reconsidered," Denny explained that Anne was brought down by a political conspiracy, a plot invented by Cromwell, Chapuys, and the Catholic party.¹⁰⁰ Cromwell and his political allies had made up their minds and decided it was time to take Anne out of the picture:

They hatched an international conspiracy aimed at pulling down the Boleyns, replacing Anne with the pliant Jane Seymour and effectively reversing all the reforms which had overturned the authority of the Pope.¹⁰¹

Echoing Ives' argument, Denny claimed the arrest of Anne and her five accomplices was a "*coup d'état*" by Cromwell and his allies.¹⁰² Thomas Cromwell was a key player in developing a case against Anne, and was also responsible for gathering alleged evidence. As Alison Weir remarked, "Cromwell's role in Anne's fall was hideously corrupt."¹⁰³ Similar to Ives and Denny, Weir held that many historians believe that Anne "was the victim of a political coup of great skill and ruthlessness."¹⁰⁴ It is clear that several historians in this period assert a political conspiracy theory.

Anne Boleyn and Thomas Cromwell did have significant differences, differences that mirrored the population of England at the time. Ives tells us that "a large fear of religious change was widespread throughout the country," the people thought that Catholicism was in danger, and "Anne was to blame for it."¹⁰⁵ Lindsey added that Anne's protestant religious beliefs and practices were thought by many (Cromwell included) to border on heresy.¹⁰⁶ Anne was considered the enemy of the Catholic tradition, and in turn she considered many in the Universal Church her enemies as well. She made powerful enemies among the Roman Catholic hierarchy,

100. Denny, *Tragic Queen*, 268.

101. Denny, *Tragic Queen*, 269.

102. Denny, *Tragic Queen*, 278.

103. Weir, *Lady in the Tower*, 339.

104. Weir, *Lady in the Tower*, 340.

105. Ives, *Most Happy*, 293.

106. Lindsey, *Divorced*, 47.

and everyone knew that she favored Reformation theology.

With writers after 1990, explanations concerning Anne's execution have increased. Historians writing between 1991 and 2010 suggest more than a few reasons for Anne Boleyn's tragic execution in 1536. These historians disagreed over the issue of Anne's 1536 miscarriage, whether or not there was deformed fetus, and on the matter of Anne's alleged adultery. There is more agreement on Henry's interest in ridding himself of Anne in order to pursue a new love, Jane Seymour, and on Henry's impetuous character. Further, the almost ubiquitous identification of Anne with Reformed theology gave her enemies another reason to conspire towards her demise. Finally, historians make the strongest case for the political milieu of Henry's court, and how Anne's bold personality interacted with its dysfunction.

Anne Boleyn's execution is just one reminder of how world-views and cultural attitudes change through time, and how different values and societal norms alter a historian's perception of an event.¹⁰⁷ In the numerous books and articles that have been discussed, and the multitude of reasons given for Anne's death, one fact is strangely absent. Anne's ultimate contribution has been ignored. Without Anne Boleyn, Queen Elizabeth I would not have been born. Without Elizabeth, Western history would certainly have been much different than we know it. Further studies into aspects of Anne Boleyn's life and execution are pertinent, therefore, to our understanding of the dynamics at work during sixteenth-century Tudor England, forces that were ultimately significant in the development of Western civilization.

107. Warnicke, "Sexual Heresy," 2.

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APPENDICES

Appendix I

“Comparative Chart - 1954 – 1974”

Appendix II

“Comparative Chart - 1976 – 1990”

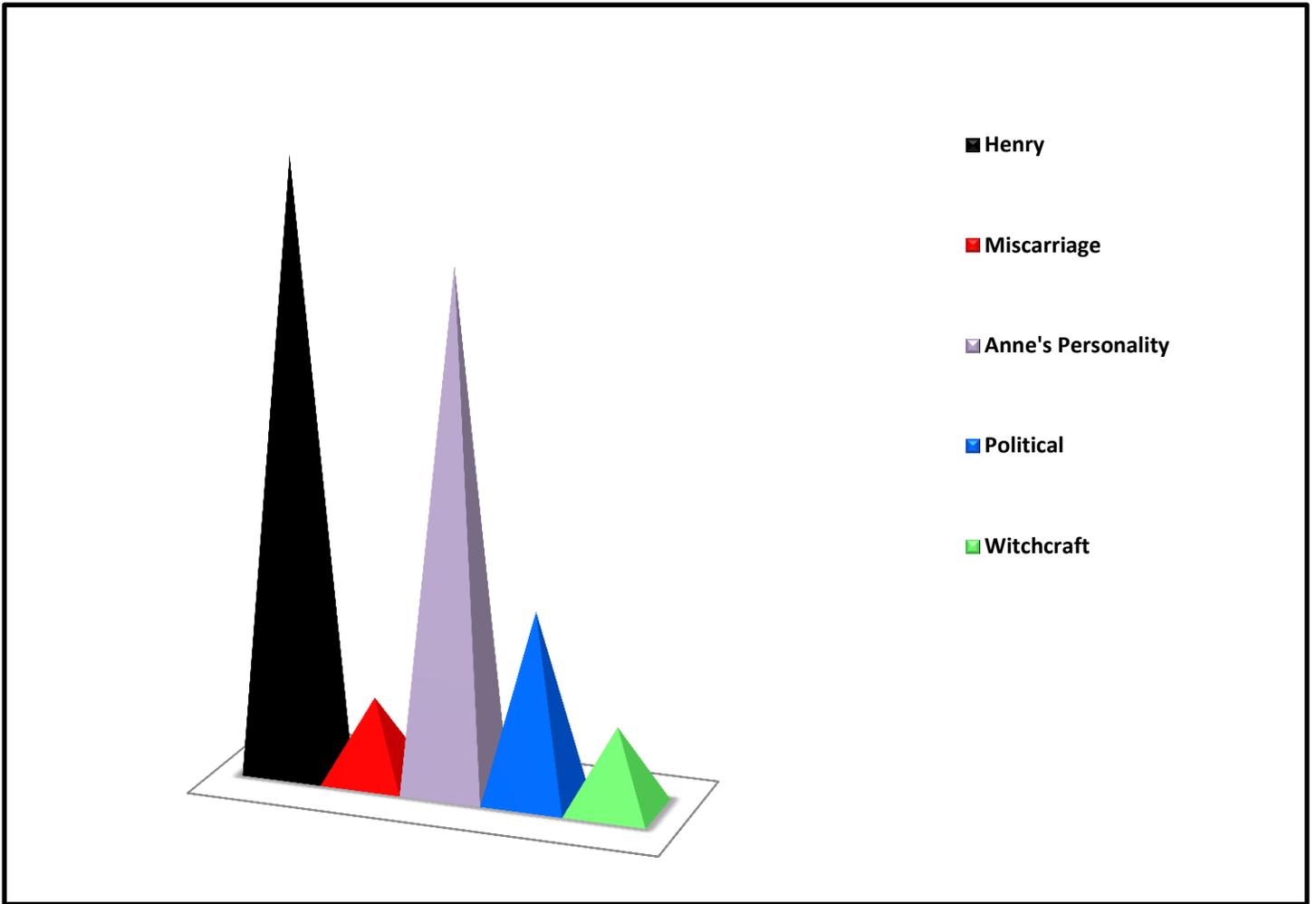
Appendix III

“Comparative Chart - 1991 – 2010”

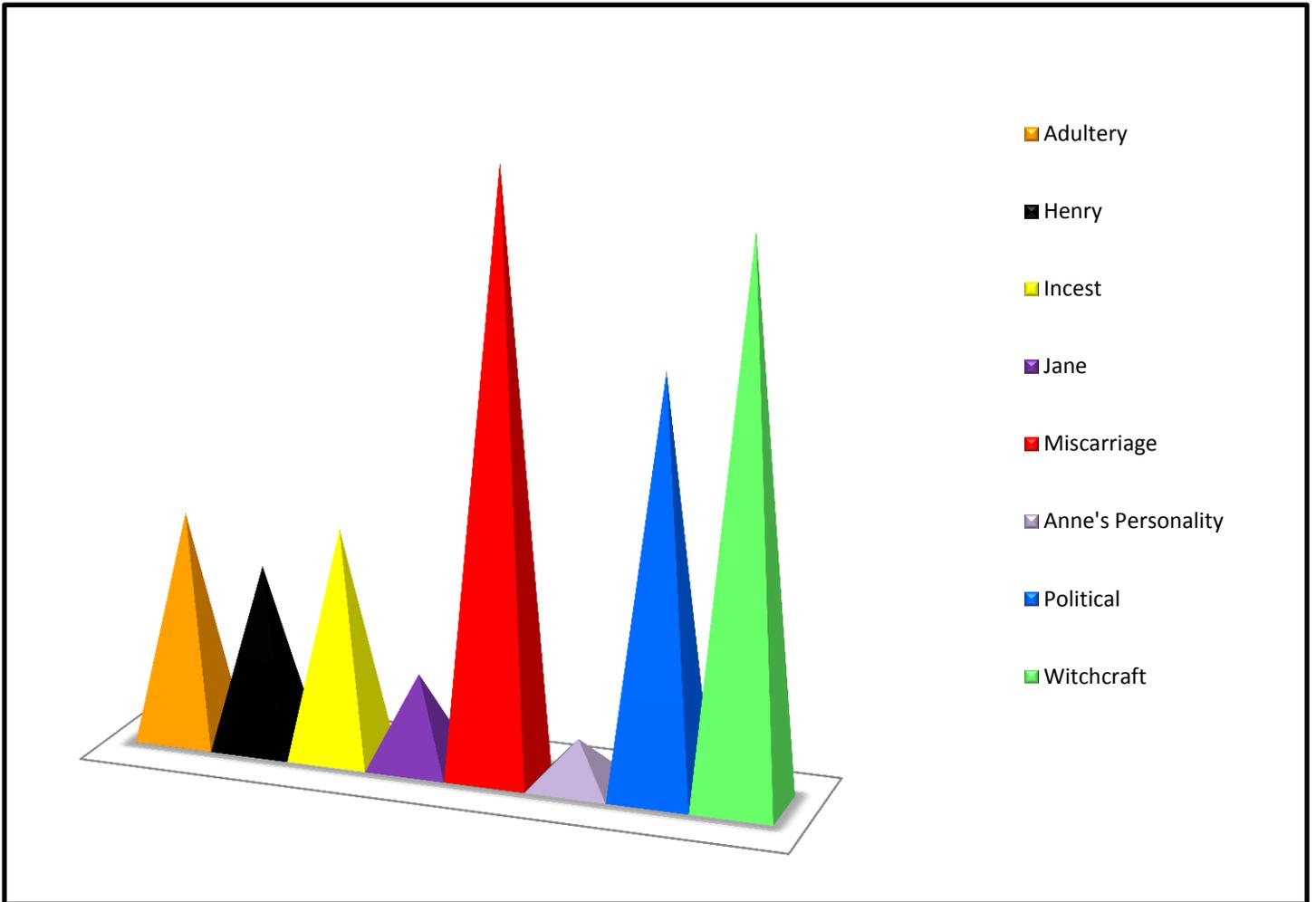
Appendix IV

Class Presentation -
“The Execution of Anne Boleyn: Six Decades of Scholarship”
<http://www.anne.strandedwolf.com/>

Comparative Chart 1954-1974



Comparative Chart 1976-1990



Comparative Chart 1991-2010

