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ANNE BOLEYN: An Excerpt from *Five Women of the English Reformation*

By Paul Zahl

Anne Boleyn was twenty-six years old when she became Queen of England. She was twenty-nine when she was executed for treason against the King....

Anne was educated in France from the age of six. Her seven years in the royal courts of Burgundy, Flanders, Amboise (and Cloux, where Leonardo da Vinci served the French king), and Paris gave her a delight in the French language; an extremely cosmopolitan exposure to Renaissance classicism and also fashion — for it is proven beyond a doubt that she forever after loved fine clothes and jewelry; and a strong, living link to a heritage she had in common with most of her sisters in the English Reformation. This heritage was the French connection, a Reforming tendency which existed at the highest level of the French nobility....



The Reformation insight, which was justification by grace through faith and the consequent disenchantment with the Catholic church, was to come to Anne, and thus to Queen Anne, from a French Bible, from French commentaries on Scripture, and from the anti-establishment, Reformist poetry of Clément Marot. The French connection was not unmediated, insofar as Anne never knew Marguerite de Navarre as Reformer, nor was she old enough to comprehend the issues involved during the period she lived in France as a very young child. But Anne's delight in the French language made the works she began to receive as gifts later on as a young adult, entirely accessible and also pleasant to her. Anne received the Reformation, in other words, partly because she understood its third principal language, its first language being Latin and its second being Greek. English is the fourth language of Reformation literature. The earliest Reformation works in English were translations of Luther from his German and Latin.

Anne Boleyn's story intersects with that of Henry Tudor at the point that King Henry began to be impatient with the inability of his first wife, Katherine of Aragon, to produce a male heir. Although she was not regarded as a beauty by her contemporaries, Anne's inward confidence and outward vivacity caught the king's eye on hunting excursions during which her family sought to put themselves forward for royal preferment.

Around the beginning of Lent 1526, Henry began to go after Anne. The following winter he decided on a divorce from Katherine. The story of his divorce and the nation-shaking events that led to his marriage to Anne on January 24 or 25, 1533 (she had become pregnant) is well known and quite complex. Anne's coronation as Queen of England took place on Whitsunday (i.e., Pentecost), June 1, 1533.

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Anne Boleyn was executed on Friday, April 19, 1536. The length of her reign, just under three years, has inspired the nickname, “Anne of the Thousand Days.” During this period she gave birth to a daughter, Elizabeth, who was later declared a bastard both under English law — the ruling was reversed later when circumstances changed — and also under Roman Catholic church law. The second ruling was never reversed. It fortified the pope’s declaration that Anne’s daughter was entirely illegitimate as Queen of England and therefore the legitimate target of a *fatwah*.

During her thousand days, Anne, supported by like-minded Reformers such as Thomas Cromwell at court and Thomas Cranmer within the church, presided over the Reformation of the Church of England. Anne, leaning on Henry, fomented a policy of dissolving all the monasteries, although she also worked actively towards the use of the riches and lands thus expropriated for the relief of the poor. There is incontrovertible evidence of this. At the same time, many nobles who stood to gain from the Dissolution resented Anne’s claims on expropriated property for the relief of the destitute. This resentment probably led in part to widespread support for the *coup d’état* that crushed her.

Anne also secured, again through Henry — as her good works were almost always achieved from and through her husband’s authority—the appointment of several evangelical bishops and deans for the newly independent Church of England. Anne was also patron to Protestant publishers and writers, who were able to become extremely prolific during this Protestant period of royal policy. Thus Anne sought to convince Henry that William Tyndale, the outlaw Bible translator and “Lutheran” theologian, was the king’s supporter and friend. That was basically true, in any event.

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For reasons that have never become clear, Thomas Cromwell, who was by theological conviction and government policy a supporter of Anne’s and of the Protestant party’s goals at court, turned on her, with seeming suddenness, in the early months of 1536. He later told the Hapsburg ambassador to England that he, Cromwell, had engineered the coup: the false charges of adultery against Anne; the charges of collusion with her brother, Lord Rochford; the startling speed of their arrest and trial; the “evidence” presented to King Henry as well as the “witnesses”; the engineered trials — everything! Cromwell’s motives have never been understood. Possibly he thought to avert Henry’s suspicion of himself by setting the king on to Anne.

In any event, Anne denied all the charges at the trial, as did Rochford her brother. She carried herself with affecting poise right up to the moment of her death. At that moment she spoke earnestly, but without grievance, of the faith in which she was to die. Cranmer met with her as confessor and chaplain the day before her execution. We will never know what passed between them, although we do have Cranmer’s letter to Henry, the most difficult of his career, defending Anne as best he could. He had been kept sedulously in the dark, right up to the last minute, concerning the accusations and their sources. His

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painful yet brilliant letter managed at the same time to defend Anne, to submit no less absolutely to the king's judgment, and to speak for the Reformed Religion that Anne herself had demonstratively backed.

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Anne died meekly but gave away nothing. She was then completely erased from the record. It became as if she had never lived. The value of her achievement only began to be understood after her daughter Elizabeth became queen twenty-five years later. It was then that John Foxe, the Protestant chronicler, was able to tell Anne's story, at least as he and many of her contemporaries had grasped it at the time.

What sort of person was Anne? What was her inward life like? We cannot really know. We have windows into Anne Askew's spiritedness, into Katharine Parr's penitence and prescience, into Jane Grey's "back talking" in the face of danger, and into Catherine Willoughby's desperation at being excluded from court and thus from influence by Elizabeth I.

Anne Boleyn's temperament and personal qualities, on the other hand, have to be deduced from a few bits of written evidence, such as the lists of her fabulous wardrobe and the fact that she sent back one of her infant Elizabeth's caps three times to the designer at Greenwich until it was just so. We also have her unflappable, firm "No!" to every charge that was laid publicly against her at the trial.

But what was really in her mind? How did she really regard her husband? What did she say to Cranmer the day before she died—in an appointment that lasted two hours? And how did she regard herself as she laid her head on the block that Friday? There is no way to know. Of her theology, however, of her specific commitments in Christianity, we know a good deal...

It is not always realized that Anne and her supporters were destructive out of a consuming desire to redirect the nation's piety away from works, and towards love, in order to inspire works.

The formal principle of Anne's reign was: "Burn down the Mission" (Elton John). In other words, get rid of the externals that support the opposite material principle, the principle of gaining God's affirmation by deeds of veneration and visible devotion.

It is not always realized that Anne and Thomas Cromwell and Thomas Cranmer and their supporters and associates were destructive out of a consuming desire to redirect the nation's piety away from works, and towards love, in order to inspire works. On this theological/ideological foundation, Anne stood foursquare with all the "Lutherans" of her age.

The evangelical or Protestant position in the early years of the Reformation emphasized the inwardness of true religion (St. Matthew 15:17-20; St. Mark 7:14-23) in opposition to outward or "formal" religion. The material principle of the Reformation, I repeat, was the essence or substance of this: justification (by grace) through faith. The formal principle of the Reformation was the outward or visible form taken by the material principle: the husk in distinction to the kernel. Thus Scripture alone (*sola Scriptura*) is the formal principle of the Reformation, while its material principle is God's grace (*sola gratia*) responded to by means of faith (*sola fide*).

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Anne's religion is well expressed through the Ecclesiastes commentary. It is perfectly summarized in the verse from St. John's Gospel imprinted on the back binding of her French Bible. That verse, from its late first-century source, speaks for the entire primavera moment of the Reformation spring: The law has given way to grace. "Lo, the winter is past, . . . the flowers appear on the earth, the time of singing has come" (Song of Solomon 2:11, 12)....

As a queen, Anne understood her providential mission to be this: to bring the Reformation to England. In fact it was through Anne that the New Religion entered England.

Anne did not see herself principally as a Christian martyr. She saw herself as a person who had gambled with very high stakes and lost. But as queen, Anne understood her providential mission to be this: to bring the Reformation to England and employ every single instance of patronage and influence to that end. Her self-confidence and bearing aided the Protestant cause immeasurably. In fact it was through Anne that the New Religion entered England.

Yet in the end Anne became a victim, and her life was tragic.

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