

Her Story: Anne Boleyn the Reformer

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Anne Boleyn (ca. 1501–1536), the second wife of King Henry VIII of England (1491–1547), is often either demonized as a temptress, homewrecker, and adulteress, or is portrayed as an “Esther,” full of virtue and charity.¹ While some believe she played a vital role in Henry VIII’s establishment of the Church of England, others argue that her impact was exaggerated. Nevertheless, Anne’s defiance of gender norms and her advocacy for Protestantism were significant challenges to the existing social order. Whether one is a supporter or detractor, the often-overlooked evidence shows that Anne played an integral part in bringing the Reformation to England.

Anne is a complex and fascinating historical figure. She was known for her intelligence, wit, and charm, as well as for ambition and determination. Fiercely independent, Anne maintained a strong sense of self, which often clashed with the expectations of the patriarchal society of her time. This essay reflects on the reports of those who knew Anne, alongside sixteenth-century historians familiar with the Tudor court, including George Wyatt (ca. 1553–1624) the grandson of the poet Sir Thomas Wyatt and author of the earliest surviving biography of Anne Boleyn; Thomas Cranmer (1489–1556) Archbishop of Canterbury and one of the principal architects of the English Reformation; John Foxe (1516/1517–1587), the Protestant historian and author of *Acts and Monuments*; and Eustace Chapuys (ca. 1489–1556), the imperial ambassador of Charles V to the English court, who adamantly opposed Anne’s marriage to Henry VIII. Although Anne was legally convicted on charges of adultery and incest, her execution cannot be understood apart from the political and religious tensions surrounding her reformist sympathies and Henry’s growing frustration over the lack of a surviving male heir.

The Making of Anne Boleyn

Anne Boleyn does not fit in the traditional category of a sixteenth-century woman. Her education and experience in Austria and France made her unique in the Tudor court. Anne’s father, Thomas Boleyn (ca. 1477–1539), played a crucial role in her education by securing her a highly sought placement at the court of Margaret of Austria (1480–1530) and later, at the court of Queen Claude of France (1499–1524). He was a royal diplomat in the service of Henry VIII and was an associate of Cardinal Wolsey (1473–1530).² Thomas Boleyn’s decision to place Anne in such a prestigious position demonstrated his trust in her abilities, and confidence that she would bring honor to the family.³

Margaret of Austria, Duchess of Savoy, was the Governor of the Habsburg Netherlands (1507–1515, 1519–1530) and daughter of the Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian I (1459–1519). She was in charge of educating Charles V (1500–1558), the future King of Spain. Anne arrived at Margaret of Austria’s court around 1513, when she was approximately twelve or thirteen years old. Here, Anne received a sophisticated education as befitting a noblewoman. She spent her time studying and learning courtly etiquette under the watchful eye of an inspirational female leader.⁴

The combination of intellectual stimulation, exposure to reformist thought, and the emphasis on piety shaped her and set her apart from other women of her age and station.

Margaret’s court repeatedly exposed Anne to reformist ideas, enlightened intellectuals, and philosophers, including Erasmus of Rotterdam (1466–1536). Anne studied Aristotle, Boethius, Boccaccio, and the progressive work of Christine de Pizan (1364–ca. 1430). Pizan was known for challenging female stereotypes.⁵ The exposure to these progressive thinkers heavily influenced Anne’s philosophic and religious beliefs. Impressed by Anne’s intelligence, Margaret wrote to Thomas Boleyn, praising her as “bright and pleasant for her young age.”⁶ This environment likely fostered Anne’s intellectual curiosity and refined manners, and the reputation she gained earned her a prestigious placement at the French Court.

Anne Boleyn’s time in France significantly shaped her religious views and desire to stand for her beliefs, later influencing her role in the English Reformation. Her exposure to reformist ideas and religious literature during her service in Queen Claude’s pious household (1514–1521) was particularly impactful. Queen Claude’s court fostered an atmosphere of devout reform, emphasizing personal faith, internal spirituality, moral renewal, and criticism of superstition and clerical abuses, while encouraging scripturally informed devotion.⁷

Contrary to some perceptions, Anne’s time in France was not characterized by the debauchery that King Francis I’s court was known for. Instead, she was protected by Queen Claude’s piety, which kept her household separated from her husband’s. Anne’s education emphasized strict moral standards and proper conduct.⁸ The court was heavily influenced by Marguerite of Navarre (1492–1549), Claude’s sister-in-law, who was a patron of many reformers, including John Calvin (1509–1564).⁹ Marguerite, a renowned reformist, supported Jacques Lefèvre d’Étaples (ca. 1455–1536), a leader in French religious reform.¹⁰ This reform-minded court circle included influential figures like Guillaume Briçonnet (ca. 1472–1534), the Bishop of Meaux, whose diocese became an early center of evangelical reform. From 1517 onwards, members of this broader French evangelical network also showed increasing interest in the writings of Martin Luther (1483–1546).¹¹

These experiences shaped Anne’s religious views, emphasizing personal faith and direct access to Scripture. She was “taught instead to fight back against the questionable authority of Rome by the very activists who kick-started the Reformation.”¹² The combination of intellectual stimulation, exposure to reformist thought, and the emphasis on piety shaped her and set her apart from other women of her age and station.

The Formation of a Queen

Anne Boleyn's education and experiences in European courts significantly molded her character and abilities. As part of Queen Claude's court, she received an education that instilled self-confidence by making her "literate, accomplished, intelligent."¹³ This background prepared her to engage in theological debates with men, giving her opportunity to demonstrate her intellectual prowess. She was perceived as brash when compared to the demure women at the English court. Her education likely included the etiquette of courtly love. Nolan suggests it is "certainly not improbable that Anne played along in the etiquette of courtly love and flirted with the good-looking Wyatt."¹⁴ Anne learned to navigate the complex social dynamics of the court.

There are conflicting accounts regarding Anne's physical appearance. Catholic propagandist Nicholas Sander (1530–1581) described her with various physical flaws, including "jaundice, a projecting tooth, the obligatory sixth finger on her right hand and a large wen under her chin." However, he also noted that she was "rather tall of stature" and, somewhat contradictorily, concluded that "she was handsome to look at."¹⁵ This mixed description suggests that political and religious biases influenced perceptions of Anne's appearance.

As a supporter of early evangelical reform, Anne traversed the evolving religious landscape of her time. She advocated for reform and renewal within the Church rather than the creation of an entirely new religious tradition. These views were in accord with many early reformers. Her efforts to visit and reform monasteries during her reign reflect this moderate perspective and nuanced approach to religious change.¹⁶

Anne's influence later extended to the moral standards of her royal court. William Latymer (ca. 1485–1545) reported that she would "rebuke" or "sharply punish" those who did not uphold her high moral standards, even banishing some from court.¹⁷ She expected "virtuous demeanor, Godly conversation, sombre communication and integrity of life" from her courtiers.¹⁸ Anne also instructed minor members of her court to attend chapel daily and avoid "infamous places" such as brothels. Her approach to leadership emphasized the importance of leading by example. She reportedly told her chaplains: "I assure you, you shall profit more in one day with good examples than in a year with many lessons."¹⁹ This statement reflects her belief in the power of actions over words in influencing behavior.

Anne was known for being outspoken and even overconfident when she was winning. When her beliefs were challenged, she would fight back with a fierceness that was not considered appropriate for a woman. She was known for being brazen in demeanor.²⁰ She fought hard for reformers and for the general public. As we will see later, Anne spent considerable effort to save from prison or execution those incarcerated for spreading reformist ideals.

Although Anne was generally a strong patron of the clergy—particularly those committed to reform—she showed little sympathy toward ministers whom she believed had abused their office or exploited those entrusted to their care. In July 1532, her father asked her to petition for an imprisoned priest to be freed. The latter had been charged with shaving gold coins given to the

church and pocketing the shavings. In response, she "rounded on her father, tearing into him for trying to save the man, declaring there were already too many priests in England."²¹ The priest was executed.²² During her relatively brief time at the Tudor court and later during her reign as queen—by which point she would come to be remembered as "Anne of the Thousand Days"—she helped to change the face of religion in England forever.²³

Henry VIII's Early Orthodoxy and the Origins of the English Crisis

Henry VIII enjoyed studying theology. From approximately 1518 through the mid-1520s he was adamantly opposed to the reformist theology of Martin Luther and was quick to publicly defend Catholic sacramental theology and papal authority. Cardinal Wolsey sent the king coded letters to update him on Europe's quickly changing and volatile reformed situation.²⁴ The reformers were fomenting an uprising regarding indulgences. The pope issued a judgment in June 1518: "Whoever says regarding indulgences that the Roman church cannot do what it *de facto* does is a heretic."²⁵

Martin Luther wrote *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* in 1520. This bold publication exceeded Henry's willingness to tolerate what he believed was blasphemous heresy.²⁶ He responded with a theological argument, "The Assertion of the Seven Sacraments," also known as the "Henrician Affirmation" (1521). The well-argued document drew the appreciation of Pope Leo X (1475–1521), who, on 11 October 1521, named Henry VIII "Defender of the Faith."²⁷

Henry VIII married Catherine of Aragon (1485–1536), daughter of Isabella I and Ferdinand II of Spain. Henry and Catherine were devoted Catholics. Several pregnancies ensued, but most ended in miscarriage. A son, Henry, Duke of Cornwall (1511), died in infancy. Only one daughter, Mary (1516–1558), survived to adulthood. When Catherine did not provide Henry with a male heir, he began to believe that God was judging him for marrying his brother Arthur's widow. Henry set his advisors to finding a way to dissolve the marriage. He consulted his advisors in April 1527, and on May 17, he secretly began the formal process. Then, in August, Henry asked for dispensation to marry again. This letter could allude to Anne because it also asks for dispensation for having slept with a first-degree relative of the intended wife. Anne's sister Mary had previously had an affair with the King.²⁸

By the late 1520s the king's marital crisis had become inseparable from the wider debates about ecclesiastical authority. As Wolsey's diplomatic efforts failed and new advisers gained influence at court, reform-minded ideas—many circulating within Anne's own circle—began to shape the intellectual framework through which Henry reconsidered papal authority.

Anne's Influence on the King

Anne Boleyn's active involvement in religious change began as early as 1522 when she arrived at the royal court. From an early stage, she encouraged the king to read controversial works that challenged traditional attitudes toward papal authority and aspects of late medieval Catholic orthodoxy. Anne played a significant role in the early phases of the Henrician Reformation, making considerable contributions to Protestant reform.²⁹ Her relationship with Henry

VIII would eventually catalyze the English Reformation and contribute to the establishment of the Royal Supremacy.³⁰

English law at the time banned the circulation of reformist manuscripts, with offenders facing varying degrees of punishment. Anne lent her copy of William Tyndale's *The Obedience of a Christian Man* to Anne Gainsford (d. 1548). Richard Sampson, Dean of the Chapel, discovered Gainsford's fiancé, George Zouche, reading it. He confiscated the book and sent it to Cardinal Wolsey. Upon learning of this, Anne went directly to Henry VIII and declared: "It shall be the dearest book that ever dean or cardinal took away." She urged the king to read it, and Henry reportedly responded with enthusiasm, proclaiming, "This is for me and all kings to read."³¹

During this same period, Henry pursued Anne, at one point asking her to become his sole mistress. Anne refused, making clear that she would not sacrifice her reputation and would give herself only to her lawful husband.³² She withdrew from court for about a year, but this absence did not dissuade the king. At the same time, Henry was increasingly seeking release from his marriage to Catherine of Aragon.

Realizing that she could not ultimately escape Henry's pursuit, Anne came to believe that a lawful marriage to the king might serve both divine purposes and the advancement of reform. She understood that she could further the reformed cause through a powerful marriage, and she gradually interpreted their union as God's will.³³ Evidence of this conviction appears in Anne's personal *Book of Hours*, where, beneath an image of the angel announcing Christ's birth to Mary, she wrote to Henry, "By daily proof you shall me find to be unto you both loving and kind."³⁴

Henry himself possessed strong and evolving religious convictions. As Felicity Heal observes, "His ideas had evolved, or sometimes revolved, in response to debate among his clergy and discussion with key advisors like More, Anne Boleyn, and Cromwell."³⁵ Anne was especially active in religious discussions in the court. Latymer said of Anne: "She was very well learned in the Scriptures, and delighted much to confer with learned men of the same; and gladly would hear them reason upon the same matter in the presence of the King."³⁶ Such exchanges were said to encourage Henry toward "the rich treasures of love of piety, truth and learning."³⁷

In September 1532, Henry conferred upon Anne the title of Marquess of Pembroke, granting her independent status and lands. This was an unusual move as it made her the first woman to hold a hereditary peerage in her own right in England. This increase in status would fit her for marriage to the king.³⁸ Henry VIII and Anne were formally married in January 1533.

Anne Boleyn the Reformer

Anne's faith in the new reforms was one of the influences that led England from Catholicism to Protestantism. Heal wrote, "The Henrician court offered a critical focus for forms of religiosity that migrated between Erasmian pietism, biblical evangelicalism and outright rejection of Catholic belief."³⁹ She was given the authority to promote the Bible in English, to protect the distribution of banned Reformation materials, and to replace Latin prayer books with English versions. Anne became the patron of many theologians,

encouraged the promotion of like-minded bishops, gave to the poor, and fought religious abuses.⁴⁰ She did not hesitate to use her husband's authority to support the reformed cause.⁴¹

Patronage and the Poor

Anne knew she was uniquely positioned to support and educate the scholars and theologians who were sympathetic to reform. Anne's patronage was extensive and it focused on education at Cambridge and Oxford. Among those associated with her circle were Thomas Cranmer, Archbishop of Canterbury; Hugh Latimer (ca. 1487–1555), future Bishop of Worcester, a prominent evangelical preacher later burned at the stake; Matthew Parker (1504–1757), who would become Archbishop of Canterbury under Anne's daughter, Elizabeth I; and Nicholas Shaxton (ca. 1485–1556), future Bishop of Salisbury until his resignation in 1539 when he returned to Catholicism. Other figures connected with Anne's household and patronage included William Bettes (d.1535), one of her chaplains; William Bill (ca. 1505–1561), later Dean of Westminster and future almoner to Elizabeth I; Edward Crome (d.1562), imprisoned for heresy during Mary I's reign; William Latymer, Anne's chaplain and later her biographer; Nicholas Heath (ca. 1501–1578), future archbishop of York, removed in 1559 after returning to Catholicism; John Skip (d. 1552), Anne's almoner and later Bishop of Hereford; William Paget (1506–1563), future Baron Paget of Beaudesert; Thomas Thirlby (ca. 1500–1570), future archbishop of Norwich and Westminster.⁴² During this period a number of episcopal vacancies occurred—nine bishops died and two resigned within four years—and several of their successors were men associated with Anne's reform-minded circle.⁴³

Education

Anne placed a high priority on education. Sir John Cheke (1514–1557), English scholar and professor of Greek at Cambridge, wrote that she "hugely increased her already generous donations to Cambridge, and that she would fund any impoverished student, just so long as one of her chaplains could vouch for them being a good, smart person with an inclination to learn."⁴⁴ She paid for individual students and donated money to the universities of Oxford and Cambridge. She asked the king to exempt these institutions from clerical taxes. She also started grammar schools to educate those who could not afford tuition and created scholarships for further education. Anne appointed Matthew Parker to lead English Bible study four days a week, making the Bible accessible to the general populace, which did not speak or read Latin.⁴⁵

Anne was passionate about reading and sharing important works with others. Many of the works were reformist and banned; most people caught with them would be arrested and charged with heresy. Upon her arrest, forty books and manuscripts were seized.⁴⁶ The library included William Tyndale's 1534 English translation of the New Testament, illuminated copies of "Epistle and Gospel for the 52 Sundays in the Year," a commentary on Ecclesiastes, Clement Marot's "The Gospel Shepherd," Marot's Huguenot Psalter and several elegies to Christ, and many more.⁴⁷ Anne had asked her father to bring her French works, her favored language, for personal study.⁴⁸

Anne worked hard to relieve poverty where she could. She worked to use the money from the dissolution of the monasteries to relieve the

destitute. This angered many who sought to get rich from the spoils.⁴⁹ Wherever Anne went, she had money to donate.⁵⁰ It was reported that she went beyond giving money. Anne bought canvas and flannel so that she and her ladies could sew clothing and sheets for the poor.⁵¹ Politically, Anne is believed to have worked with William Marshall on the 1535 study of poor relief. They hoped to implement it, but Thomas Cromwell has been credited with passing the Tudor Poor Law.⁵²

Protection for the Reformers

Anne consistently defended anyone condemned for practicing or promoting Protestant ideals. While she could not save everyone, numerous accounts exist of people who were released from jail and of those who escaped persecution because of her intervention. One was Richard Herman, a merchant who distributed English New Testaments.⁵³ Another was Clément Marot, accused of heresy for translating the Psalms.⁵⁴ Yet another was Nicholas Bourbon, whom Anne employed to tutor children in the court after he had to flee France.⁵⁵ Bourbon wrote to Anne, “Your pity lighted upon me from the ends of the earth, snatching me in my affliction, Anna, away from my troubles . . . How can I express my thanks, still less, Oh Queen, repay you?”⁵⁶ Similar was the case of Thomas Patmore, who disagreed with the prohibition on priests to marry. In an act of defiance and following his conscience, he married one of his priests to a housemaid. He was in prison for two years before he petitioned Anne to help. She took it to King Henry VIII, and after an investigation, Patmore was released.⁵⁷

Anne’s concern for the persecuted extended beyond England. A woman in France, Mrs. Marye, was in trouble for her faith. Anne stepped in and brought her to England. Anne met with her, and she stated the Queen had “entertained her so honorably as she confessed that her trouble had purchased her liberty and that she gained more by her banishment than she could have hoped for at home.”⁵⁸

Unfortunately, not all of her requests were answered. Thomas Foreman, the Parson of Honey Lane, angered Cardinal Wolsey by selling Martin Luther’s banned works to Wolsey’s students at Cardinal College. Anne wrote to Wolsey, “I beseech your Grace with all my heart to remember the Parson of Honey Lane for my sake shortly.” Foreman died a few months later, cause unknown.⁵⁹ William Tyndale was arrested in 1535. This was reported to Anne in the hope that she could save him. The timing worked against Tyndale, as Anne was arrested and beheaded a couple months before Tyndale’s execution.⁶⁰

Until Anne was arrested, she zealously did everything in her power to forward the cause and act with charity. Her enemies were numerous, and Anne, like her predecessor Catherine, could only bear one living girlchild to Henry VIII. She had many miscarriages, and Henry began listening to those who wanted to destroy her. Cromwell engineered her demise, accusing her of incest and adultery.⁶¹

The Spanish Ambassador Chapuys also wanted her removed from court. He wrote to Charles V explaining that when she was gone, “the management of affairs may be left to those who know best how to act.”⁶² In another letter, he wrote that removing Anne was necessary “to remedy the heresies here, of which the concubine is the cause and principal nurse.” Their plan succeeded, and she was

beheaded in London on 19 May, 1536.⁶³ Even Chapuys had to admit that she was “condemned upon presumption and certain indications without valid proof or confession.”⁶⁴

Anne’s Reputation

Anne was a force of nature who elicited a reaction from those who knew her. She was called names, both good and bad, held up as a saint and as a devil, and accused of “artfully” manipulating the king into marrying her.⁶⁵ After her death, in a letter to the king, Pole called her “the King’s domestic evil.” Cranmer held the opposing view: “I never had better opinion in woman that I had in her . . . I loved her not a little for the love I judged her to bear towards God and his Gospel.”⁶⁶

People had strong opinions regarding her faith and her influence on the king. The Abbot of Whitby, John Hexham, hated her with a passion: “The King’s Grace is ruled by one common stewed whore, Anne Boleyn, who makes all the spirituality to be beggared, and the temporality also.”⁶⁷ On the other hand, Chapuys said Anne was “more Lutheran than Luther himself.”⁶⁸ More than twenty years later, John Aylmer believed that God gave Anne the wisdom to be the driving force behind the English Reformation. He explained her mission: “Was not queen Anne . . . the chief, first, and only cause of banishing the beast of Rome? Was there ever in England a greater feat wrought by any man than this by a woman?”⁶⁹ John Foxe agreed and called her a martyr of the “new religion.”⁷⁰

George Wyatt held that she “bore a most great part in the great and remarkable conversion in the state of religion . . . which living she so courageously stood to support.”⁷¹ Wyatt goes on to say that it was her push for reform “which moved so many to write and speak falsely and foully of her.”⁷² Others, including Latymer, Nicholas Shaxton, and the Scottish theologian Alexander Alesius, all affirm her work as a reformer.

Conclusion

Anne Boleyn did not singlehandedly cause the English Reformation, but the evidence favors her role as one of its most strategically placed and theologically engaged catalysts at the Henrician court. Shaped in reform-minded European circles and confident in Scripture, Anne used her proximity to Henry VIII to promote evangelical reading, patronize sympathetic scholars and bishops, and protect those targeted for reformist sympathies. Her influence is therefore best measured not by romanticized legend but by her sustained demonstrations in religious advocacy.

Within a period of English history made turbulent by dynastic anxiety, political intrigue, international pressures, and conflicting religious convictions, Anne’s distinctive contribution was to help shape the direction of reform by bringing evangelical ideas into the king’s daily orbit.

Anne’s execution ended her queenship but not her impact. The networks she supported, the educational priorities she advanced, and the scriptural piety she modeled continued to inform English Protestant memory. She is best understood neither as temptress nor as heroine, but as a historically situated reform-minded queen whose convictions helped redirect the religious future of England.

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