

A ROYAL MARRIAGE

AMONG the relics of Henry VIII's daughter Mary is a book of prayers where the page devoted to intercessions for women with child is said to be stained with tears.¹ In the later twentieth century the problem of childlessness attracts considerable attention in the Western world, but no pressure on the would-be mother today can match the peculiar strain on a sixteenth-century queen. Her essential function was to bear sons; otherwise she was a failure. Princesses of the blood were brought up to see this as their destiny. Anne Boleyn had won her way by education, personality and courage, but now she had to accept that success as an individual was unimportant against biological success or failure. Only one thing was now expected of her. Her stepdaughter Mary fiercely resented Anne and rejoiced at her discomfiture, but she too would come to know the private physiological hell of the childless Tudor wife. Anne had described children as 'the greatest consolation in the world', but the Spanish ambassador had the right of it when he wrote of Mary years later that 'the queen's lying-in is the foundation of everything.'²

To have a son, one son – that was all that was necessary. Surely that was not too difficult in an age of large families; surely that could not be difficult with a husband like Henry, who at the time (and since) was recognized as a 'fleshly' man, fond of women, and a sexual predator.³ All that might seem necessary was a healthy wife, and sons would arrive; Anne had only to lie back and do her duty for England. And when healthy sons did not arrive – as they had not arrived to Katherine before her – it was obvious where to place the blame. Yet this is wide of the mark. The popular idea that our ancestors reproduced themselves with the efficiency of some populations today is a fallacy. Even among the nobility, where birth rates and child survival rates were higher than among the general population, large families were by no means the rule, and there were many instances of

childlessness or of couples that produced only daughters. Guaranteeing a male heir was no more possible than it has ever been. Nor was Henry as the popular image would have him. As well as the difficulties and hazards of conception and pregnancy in an age when medical knowledge and practice were more of a danger than a help, Anne had to contend with a husband who was anything but a good prospect for paternity.

The evidence that Henry VIII had sexual problems is, first of all, circumstantial. Between 1509 and 1547 he is known, or can be presumed, to have had sexual relations over some months or years with eight women – that is, his six wives and his two known mistresses, Elizabeth Blount and Mary Boleyn. Only four of the eight conceived, and we may note that the last time was at New Year 1537, when Henry was only 45.⁴ As well as the poor record of conceptions, Henry's partners had a poor record of maternal success. Setting aside Jane Seymour, who died after the birth of her one child, only three pregnancies produced a healthy infant, one each for Katherine of Aragon, Elizabeth Blount and Anne Boleyn. There were other pregnancies that ended in miscarriage, stillbirth or neonatal death. Anne herself had two miscarriages – that is, in two of her three known pregnancies. Katherine, her predecessor, had an even poorer record – five failures in six, and over a much longer period.⁵

This case history raises the possibility that it was Henry and not his wives who was responsible for silence in the royal nursery. At a distance of some 500 years, deficiencies in fertility or genetic defects can be nothing more than suspicions, and the one thing which seems clear is that venereal disease was not to blame (as is sometimes suggested). The king's medical history and the record of the medicines he was prescribed show quite clearly that he was never treated for syphilis, unlike, for instance, Francis I, who was heavily infected. The leg ulcer which periodically darkened Henry's life from 1528, and is often assumed to be venereal, has been convincingly argued to be caused by osteomyelitis resulting from falls in the tiltyard.⁶ We have, of course, to take into account the health and fertility of the women concerned. There is the evidence about the difficulty of Anne's first pregnancy, and the five years' delay between her agreement to marry Henry and the commencement of sexual relations in 1532, when she was over thirty, must have lessened her chances of successfully having children. But all the women could not have been bad risks. There is nothing in the history of Katherine of Aragon's sisters to suggest a tendency to impaired childbearing; Mary Boleyn became pregnant as soon as she left Henry for her husband, William Carey; the same was true of Katherine Parr, when she married Thomas Seymour after the king's death in 1547.

Whether or not Henry suffered from any congenital impairment, there is direct evidence to support the suggestion that he was, or became, partially impotent. In 1540 his divorce from Anne of Cleves was secured on the ground of the king's sexual incapacity. Henry's own deposition admitted his lack 'of the will and power to consummate the same', though he slept regularly with his fourth wife for several months.⁷ But the blame was placed on his German bride's lack of attractiveness (and allegedly suspect virginity), while concern for the obvious reflection on Henry led his doctors to pass on to the court (with some details decently veiled in Latin) the king's assurance that he 'thought himself able to do the act with other but not with her'.⁸ The same problem had bedevilled the relationship with Anne Boleyn. At his trial in May 1536, George Boleyn was asked whether Anne had told his wife that the king was incapable of sexual intercourse, implying that he was unable to attain or sustain an erection (*le Roy n'estoit habile en cas de soy copuler avec femme et qu'il n'avoit ne vertu ne puissance*). Such a delicate question was handed to Rochford in writing, and the story was that it was reading the allegation out aloud which sealed his fate.⁹ That is improbable, but the asking of such an amazing question is proof enough that doubts about the king's vigour did circulate.

We can, indeed, take the matter a little further.¹⁰ No hint of impotence had prevented Anne rapidly becoming pregnant in December 1532, and she was pregnant again just over a year later, three or four months after the birth of Elizabeth. But we have a most revealing insight into the way Henry's mind worked in an interview with Chapuys in April 1533.¹¹ When the ambassador pointed out that a new wife to replace Katherine by no means guaranteed children, Henry asked excitedly, 'Am I not a man like other men? Am I not? Am I not?' The ambassador had, he declared, no reason at all to deny this – he was not privy to all the royal secrets (that is, that Anne was then four months pregnant). Quite obviously, Henry associated virility and sexual potency with having children. The birth of Elizabeth reassured him, as did the second pregnancy, and Chapuys noted in February 1534 that Henry was quite happy that he would have a son this time.¹² By April the queen's condition was obvious, and Henry's confidence is seen in the highly elaborate silver cradle which was ordered from his goldsmith, Cornelius Hayes, with Tudor roses, precious stones, gold-embroidered bedding and cloth-of-gold baby clothes.¹³ All was well as late as July, and then tragedy struck.¹⁴ Anne miscarried.¹⁵

The secret of the disaster was so well kept that it was only on 23 September that Chapuys reported that the queen – or 'the lady', as

he insisted on calling her – was not, after all, to have a child.¹⁶ We have to remember that the ambassador had been out of touch with the court while it was on summer progress. Away from the public eye, with a smaller number of attendants than at other times and with both Anne and Henry desperate to conceal it, total discretion was achieved. But the damage had been done. The ominous reminder of Katherine's history brought all Henry's doubts flooding back. It is notorious that anxiety about virility can lead to a loss of sexual potency, and this is what seems to have happened with Henry. Perhaps, after all, he was not 'like other men'. The confidence and stimulation of the new marriage was shattered, and it would be more than a year before Henry could make Anne pregnant again.

It is, perhaps, significant that it was after the miscarriage in the summer of 1534 that the first hints appear of a rift between Henry and Anne. Tradition regularly backdates these by a year, to the last weeks before Elizabeth was born. On 13 August 1533 Chapuys had reported that he saw signs of hope for Katherine in Henry's long absence from Anne.¹⁷ Even more dramatic, the imperial ambassador at Rome passed on to Charles V the story that the king's loss of affection in the face of Anne Boleyn's arrogance had led him to switch his attentions to someone else.¹⁸ On 3 September Chapuys had remarked on how lucky Anne was to have received her magnificent state bed (for her presence chamber) two months previously, since:

Full of jealousy – and not without reason – she used words to the king which he did not like, and he told her that she must shut her eyes and endure, just like others who were worthier than she, and that she ought to know that he could humiliate her in only a moment longer that it had taken to exalt her!

After this, Henry refused to speak to her for two or three days.¹⁹

The case looks ominous. Yet under scrutiny the story evaporates. The report from Rome of the alleged mistress is an error in dating by a modern editor: it belongs to the late autumn of 1534.²⁰ Several letters from different sources reported independently that in July and August 1533 the royal couple were in good health and enjoying life; Henry was in tearing high spirits at the thought of the baby.²¹ As for Chapuys, he was reporting gossip. He was in London in August, so how could he know that Henry was neglecting Anne at Windsor? Furthermore, the ambassador himself tells us that when Henry specially summoned him to meet the king and his council, the meeting was away from the court, at

Guildford, and was disguised as a hunting trip precisely to avoid causing Anne anxiety.²² In any case, a second letter from Chapuys admitted that he had got things wrong.²³ His September report of Henry's bitter remarks to Anne is also suspect. By that time Anne had 'taken her chamber', so the most the ambassador could have had to work on was a story about what had allegedly been overheard by an attendant during one of the king's private visits. For a husband who, a few weeks before, had invented a hunting trip to protect his wife from anxiety, the speech as recorded seems inconsistent, to say the least. Perhaps in the discomfort of her late pregnancy Anne did make a scene, perhaps Henry's own worry caused him to bite back – such an episode would be neither surprising nor significant. Or perhaps the whole was exaggerated by the wishful thinking of Katherine's ally, the marchioness of Exeter, who was probably the ambassador's informant.²⁴ Whatever occurred or did not occur, we need to note that Chapuys himself dismissed it as 'a lovers quarrel'. So should we.

The rumours reaching the Low Countries via the Hanse merchants painted quite a different picture – not of a besotted king coming to his senses but of one who was more besotted than ever, constantly at his wife's side and letting court discipline go to the dogs.²⁵ And that may be much nearer the truth. In late October 1533 Anne's maids of honour were repeating Henry's brazen remark that he loved the queen so much that he would beg alms from door to door rather than give her up. The two are still described as 'merry'. Henry kept Anne, as always, in selective touch with diplomatic affairs, visited Elizabeth after the baby was given her own special establishment in December 1533, and gave the general impression of remaining firmly under his wife's thumb. As the session of parliament due in January 1534 approached, Anne helped her husband to whip opinion into line, and Henry warned the marquis of Exeter that the least signs of disloyalty would cost him (and anyone else) his head.²⁶

So much for the 1533 rumours. The story that trouble arose between Henry VIII and Anne a year later is based, as are almost all the specific stories of friction between them, on Chapuys.²⁷ It was his report that the imperial ambassador at Rome was echoing, and the first notice of the affair is in the despatches sent to Brussels in late September. What Chapuys reported was that with the ending of his hope for a child, Henry had 'renewed and increased the love that he had had previously towards another very beautiful maid of honour [*demoiselle de court*]'. Anne had responded by wanting to dismiss the girl, but Henry had been most upset and had informed her that 'she had good reason to be content with what he had done for her, which he would not do again, if he were starting

afresh, that she should remember where she had come from, and many other things.²⁸ A fortnight later Chapuys had more to tell. George Boleyn's wife had been forbidden the court because she had plotted with Anne to pick a quarrel with Henry's new fancy and force her to withdraw.²⁹ Anne's influence was wilting daily, and the rival was sending encouraging messages to Mary that her trials were nearly over. Many of the courtiers were encouraging Henry's new interest, with the intention of separating him from Anne. The affair was still going on in December, when the king was again annoyed at Anne's complaints, but by the end of February it was finished. In her place was Anne's own cousin, Margaret Shelton, the daughter of the governess in charge of Elizabeth and Mary.³⁰

What should be made of all this? The conventional interpretation is that the marriage of Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn was breaking or had broken up. Descriptions of Anne after her fall are projected back to present Henry as a king whose life was made 'hell' by a 'barren, old and ill-natured baggage'. 'Importunity' (nagging) and 'cursedness' had destroyed every vestige of the king's great passion. Henry, the great lover, was looking elsewhere.³¹ Yet the facts do not justify such a picture. We have to remember the tainted sources of so much of Chapuys' information – the story of the king's annoyance at Anne's complaints in December 1534 came from her enemy Carewe.³² The ambassador could also get things wrong, as he himself recognized. His pleasure on New Year's Day 1535 that even such a Boleyn partisan as the earl of Northumberland was turning against the regime had changed to doubt within the month.³³ His earliest mention of the alleged 1534 romance carried the warning not to attach too much importance to it, since Henry was so fickle and Anne knew how to manage him. Even in the last weeks of her life, when she faced the threat of Jane Seymour, Chapuys would still be sceptical.

There are also reasons why we should be sceptical. Who was this new flame in 1534? Some have supposed that she was Jane Seymour, but there is nothing to support this, and when Jane does appear on the scene there is no reference to any earlier affair with Henry. How are we to understand the arrival of Margaret Shelton? This has been variously interpreted as a deliberate piece of procuring by Anne in order to supplant her anonymous rival, or by Norfolk to supplant Anne, from whom he was now estranged. And why does Margaret Shelton suddenly drop out of the limelight? Another problem is the role of Lady Rochford, who is otherwise known as Anne's enemy. As to the reference that the king was renewing a *previous* relationship, that too becomes mysterious with the redating of the

supposed 1533 Rome despatch, unless we see a connection with Chapuys' cryptic remark in 1533 that Anne's jealousy was 'not without reason'.

A far more likely explanation for the evidence than the 'irretrievable breakdown of marriage' is, in fact, suggested by Chapuys' own description. The relationship between Henry and this new lady was first of all a limited one; it would be significant, he said, only if it lasted and if it became warmer than it had been. And what that limitation was he indicated by describing the girl as 'the damsel whom the king has been accustomed to serve'. 'Accustomed to serve' – this is the language of chivalry. What Henry had done was to offer his knightly service to a new 'mistress' for the game of courtly love. As in the case of Anne Boleyn herself, this could sometimes lead to a genuine relationship, but Chapuys is clear that in this case it did not do so, nor when the king's interest turned to Madge Shelton. Indeed, it is easy to see why an amour which remained superficial should attract a man anxious to appear a terror with the women, but deeply uncertain of his capacities.

Henry was probably doing no more than substitute 'a lady to serve' while his wife was recovering from the miscarriage, but it is nevertheless obvious why Anne would object to Henry's gallantry. She had for six years been Henry's 'sovereign lady'; she had been the adored mistress. How could she accept the new situation and see Henry become the 'servant' of another woman? And she must have suspected, as we do, that Henry would not have relegated her to conventional treatment as queen if she had had a son. It was not, however, a mere matter of pride or hurt feelings, or of failure to adjust to her new position. Henry might well get annoyed at such over-sensitiveness: he was behaving as the rules said a king should behave, so why could not she? There had never been any rivalry between Katherine and the ladies whose praises Henry had sung over the years, who had danced with him, who had played the game of flirtation with him; she was the queen and her place at the head of the court and of society was hers by incontestable right. Anne, however, knew that her right to that title was contested. She could not take for granted the protection of recognized status; she still had to compete for and win the king's favour. She was in the contradictory position of being expected to behave as a queen, but having to continue to challenge as a mistress.

The place that Anne occupied was flawed in another way. She was now a wife and mother. Convention – and Henry was nothing if not conventional – dictated that she should now take a subservient role, neither disputing with nor presuming to criticize her husband. Once the honeymoon period was over, the husband was expected to find his concerns in

the masculine world; he was certainly not expected to live in his wife's pocket. One of the worst things that Flemish rumour could say about Henry was that he did just this and let the court go to the devil. Anne, however, as we have seen, was that Tudor rarity, the self-made woman. She was where she was by virtue of her own abilities and what she had made of herself, not by virtue of wealth or family.³⁴ It was asking a great deal of her, after so many years, to abandon the formula that had brought her the most amazing success.

There was one thing more. However complicated the motivation, however we gloss the phrase, Henry and Anne were lovers. In an outburst against the new regime, a Colchester monk had declared with contempt that when the two had been at Calais in 1532, Anne had followed Henry round like a dog.³⁵ Certainly they quarrelled, and not simply on Chapuys' evidence. The Venetian ambassador reported in June 1535 that Henry had had more than enough of his new queen.³⁶ The alleged remark of 1534 that he could reduce Anne as rapidly as he had raised her makes sense only if Henry was blazingly angry at the time, for at the very same moment he had Cromwell hard at work drafting the statute which would vest the succession to the Crown in the children of the Boleyn marriage. If he said it, he certainly did not mean it. As Chapuys had said of the friction between Henry and Anne over the new 'mistress', these were lovers' quarrels and not much notice should be taken of them. If some of them were provoked by Anne's natural resentment at the king's shallow gallantries to other ladies, at other times the queen could laugh about such flirtations. She nearly caused an international incident at a banquet on 1 December 1533 by bursting into laughter when she was talking to the French ambassador. Offended, he had asked, 'How now, Madam! Are you amusing yourself at my expense or what?' Trying to mollify him, Anne explained that Henry had gone to bring another guest for her to entertain, and an important one, but on the way he had met a lady and the errand had gone completely out of his head.³⁷

In the relationship between Henry and his second wife, storm followed sunshine, sunshine followed storm. A fortnight after the Venetian report that Henry was satiated with her, the returning French ambassador told Paris that she was very much in charge.³⁸ In an ultimate sense, the problems of Henry and Anne arose from the fact that there was emotion in the relationship. Occasionally even Chapuys' hostile spin cannot disguise the intimacy. On St John's Eve 1535, Henry went to see a pageant and so enjoyed it that he sent Anne a message suggesting that she must see the next performance on St Peter's Eve, five days later.³⁹ The conventions

of the day, of courtly love, of sovereign and consort, were simply not capable of accommodating the fierce passions which united Anne Boleyn and Henry Tudor.⁴⁰

The tensions within the marriage were undoubtedly made worse by external problems. The most immediate was Katherine's daughter, Mary. Aged 17 at the time of the second marriage, she was adamant in refusing to recognize Anne and her child, despite her father's determination that she should do so. Though Katherine helped to inspire Mary, Henry could largely ignore his ex-wife. Relegation to a modest establishment away from court was a proper fate for a princess dowager, and Katherine was not one who would, so he believed, ever plot against him. Mary, on the other hand, was undeniably part of the royal family. Intelligent, gifted, not unattractive and of a winning disposition, popularity made her adherence more important and her opposition more dangerous. Disloyalty to Henry did not seem like disloyalty when it was thought to be support for the rightful heir, and increasingly Mary became the focus for all dislike of Anne and everything she appeared to represent.

Henry saw Mary's behaviour as a straightforward case of disobedience and, despite his obvious affection for her, put increasing pressure on his daughter to conform.⁴¹ She lost her royal style and her household; she was forced as 'a bastard' to join the household of the 'legitimate' Elizabeth and give her half-sister precedence at all times, under the oversight of Elizabeth's governess, Anne Shelton, who was Anne's aunt. Mary was kept away from her mother, isolated from her former friends and servants, and deliberately slighted and ignored by Henry. The result was a head-on clash with a Tudor obstinacy as great as his own, but at the cost of permanent damage to Mary. The story is not pleasant to modern reading, although what was questioned at the time – and not only by her committed supporters – was not so much the treatment meted out for her disobedience as the unfairness of it. According to Chapuys, when Norfolk and Rochford rebuked Anne Shelton for being too lenient with Mary – the family must not fail the king – Anne's aunt replied that even if Mary was the bastard daughter of a poor gentleman she would deserve respect and kindness because of the girl she was.⁴² Henry disagreed. He was determined to break his daughter's will. It was Anne Boleyn, however, who got the blame. To believe it was her fault made it much easier for Charles V to keep up some civil relationship with Henry, much easier for Mary (and Katherine) to resist pressure. Her father could not really know; he was not to blame; it was the harpy who had her claws in him. When Anne was dead

Mary discovered the truth, and the abasement which Henry exacted scarred her for life.

This is not to say that Anne was guiltless. Chapuys' letters are full of her railing against Mary and of her lurid threats to curb 'her proud Spanish blood'.⁴³ But much though the ambassador warned of poison and worse, Anne was ranting, not thinking. There is an obvious ring of truth in his story that, assuming she would be regent if, as expected, Henry went to Calais to meet Francis I again, Anne swore to seize that chance to put Mary to death. When her brother pointed out, very simply, that this would anger the king, she retorted that she did not care, even if she was burned for doing it.⁴⁴ So Anne's language was violent and threatening, but this sprang not from malevolence but from self-defence. For Henry, Mary was a disobedient child. For Anne, she was much more. Her obstinacy was an insult, a denial of Anne's own identity and integrity. If Katherine's marriage was valid, then she, Anne, was a whore. And there was an added twist. In canon law – and this fact was widely appreciated at court – a child born to a couple who at the time were apparently lawfully married, remained legitimate even if it was subsequently found that the union had been invalid.⁴⁵ If anyone had, as the lawyers put it, been conceived 'in good faith', that person was Mary, and by refusing to recognize the priority of Elizabeth she was in effect asserting her own claim to be the heir to the throne.⁴⁶ For Anne, therefore, the negative policy of disciplining Mary and excluding her from court was a defeat; every day that she withheld the positive endorsement of Anne's title made the queen's weakness more obvious. Active conformity alone would do. Anne knew that the stakes could not be higher: 'She is my death, and I am hers.'⁴⁷

Mary was certainly frustrating to deal with, and this is a further reason for Anne's outbursts and her support for harsh treatment. On three distinct occasions Anne put out feelers for a better relationship. In February or March 1534, when on a visit to Elizabeth, she offered to welcome Mary if she would accept her as queen, and to reconcile her with her father.⁴⁸ Mary's response was that she knew no queen but her mother, but that if the king's mistress would intercede with her father she would be grateful. Even after this offensiveness Anne tried again, before leaving the house in high dudgeon, vowing to repress such impudence. It was perhaps a few months later, when the two half-sisters were at Eltham, that Anne and Mary found themselves in the palace chapel together.⁴⁹ An attendant, either out of kindness or in order to see the fun, or as part of a deliberate plot to set Anne up, told her that Mary had acknowledged her before leaving. The queen immediately sent a message to the princess apologizing

for not noticing, saying that 'she desires that this may be an entrance of friendly correspondence, which your grace shall find completely to be embraced on her part.' Mary's reply could not have been ruder. From the publicity of her dinner table she declared that the queen could not possibly have sent the message; she was 'so far from this place'. The messenger should have said 'the Lady Anne Boleyn, for I can acknowledge no other queen but my mother, nor esteem them my friends who are not hers.' Her curtsey, she explained piously, had been made to the altar, 'to her maker and mine'. The story has a good pedigree, but it is a late one, and we may doubt whether even Mary dared to be that offensive. But even allowing considerable discount, Anne would still have been justified in being offended.

It is not surprising to find after this that Anne left Mary to reflect for eighteen months before trying again, but with Katherine on her deathbed and Anne certain that she was pregnant again, Lady Shelton was instructed to press once more the queen's desire to be kind.⁵⁰ This was followed, after the old queen had died, by a message that if Mary would obey the king she would find Anne a second mother, and be asked for minimal courtesies only. When Mary replied discouragingly that she would obey her father as far as honour and conscience allowed, Anne tried to frighten and warn her at the same time. She wrote a letter to Anne Shelton, which was left 'by accident' in Mary's oratory where she read it, as clearly she was expected to do. Efforts to persuade Mary were, Anne wrote, to cease; they had been an attempt to save the girl from her own folly, not because Anne needed her acquiescence. One may think that only partly true, but there is no doubt of the chilling realism of Anne's warning of what would happen to Mary if, as she expected, the child she was carrying was a son: 'I have daily experience that the king's wisdom is such as not to esteem her repentance of her rudeness and unnatural obstinacy when she has no choice.' This was only literal truth, as anyone knew who was familiar with Henry's behaviour towards those who had offended him but sought mercy too late.⁵¹ Mary took a copy of the letter for Chapuys, restored the original to its place and ignored the warning.

Mary's failure to accept Anne was one problem, but it was linked to another: an increasing opposition to the queen among the nation at large and among the elite. There is no doubt that a good deal of Anne's unpopularity was on account of Mary and the repudiation of Katherine. The sentiment was frequently found among women, for obvious reasons.⁵² Margaret Chanseler, from Bradfield St Clare in Suffolk,

demonstrated a particularly personal line in invective when she said that Anne was a ‘goggle-eyed whore . . . God save Queen Katherine.’⁵³ Feelings were usually more circumspect among the elite, but no less real. Anne could not but notice the readiness of courtiers who accompanied her to see Elizabeth, to slink off at the same time to pay their respects to Mary.⁵⁴

Much of the hostility to Anne was, however, also associated with a dislike of Henry’s recent policies: in the first place taxation, but even more, interference with the Church. The abbot of Whitby declared comprehensively that ‘the king’s grace was ruled by one common stewed [professional] whore, Anne Bullan, who made all the spirituality to be beggared and the temporalty also.’⁵⁵ The less educated could be just as direct, in their own way. On Monday, 4 May 1534, a certain Henry Kylbie was attending to his master’s horse in the stables of the White Horse in Cambridge. Perhaps the horse was lame; we do not know. At any rate, Kylbie had arrived with his Mr Pachett the Saturday before on the way from London to Leicester, and he was heartily sick of waiting. The ostler of the inn strolled over and the two got into conversation. Did he know, the ostler asked, that there was no longer a pope, only a bishop of Rome? As a man who may well have stabled the horses of the Cambridge Reformers when they met in the inn for their evenings of convivial but risky debate, the ostler evidently was well up in religious gossip. Not so Henry Kylbie. There was a pope, he insisted, and anyone who said contrary was ‘a strong heretic’. When the ostler, playing his ace, said that ‘the king’s grace held of his part,’ Henry lost his common sense and his temper. Both ostler and king were heretics, and ‘this business had never been if the king had not married Anne Bullen.’ Angry words became blows, and ended with Henry breaking the ostler’s head.⁵⁶

Those at court in the forefront of the battle for the papal headship did their best to exploit such plebeian sentiments. When two of the Observant Friars on the run from Greenwich were asked whether Elizabeth had been christened in cold water or in hot they replied, ‘hot water, but it was not hot enough.’⁵⁷ When the Blessed Richard Reynolds, ‘the most learned monk in England’, went to the scaffold with the Carthusian martyrs in May 1535, he took with him John Hale, a Cambridge Fellow and vicar of Isleworth in Middlesex, who was part of a cell which Reynolds had been feeding with gossip about the morals of the Boleyn family and the falseness of Henry’s claim to be supreme head.⁵⁸ It was Hale that confessed that Mary Boleyn’s son by William Carey had been pointed out to him as the king’s son. The group also dabbled in the cryptic prophecies that

circulated widely in moments of crisis – that a queen (Anne) would be burned, that Henry was the cursed Mouldwarp prophesied by Merlin, and so forth.

We know of all these cases, and more, because of the tireless efforts of Thomas Cromwell to monitor every possible source of discontent. He also put together an armoury of statutory weapons for use if necessary.⁵⁹ The Succession Act required every person to take an oath to support the Boleyn marriage, and a massive attempt was made to swear all adult males in the country.⁶⁰ The Act also made it a treasonable offence to write or act against the marriage with Anne, with lesser penalties for gossip or for refusing to take the oath specified, while the clergy and Church institutions were also forced, in a variety of ways, to abjure the power of the pope. Another Act, passed later in the year, extended the definition of treason to cover anything spoken, written or done which deprived the king of his title or seriously defamed him.⁶¹ And as the Acts came into force the popular voice was clear – Anne was responsible. When George Cavendish wrote his *Verses* in Mary's reign he has Anne saying:

I was the author why laws were made
 For speaking against me, to endanger the innocent;
 And with great oaths I found out the trade [method]
 To burden men's conscience: thus I did invent
 My seed to advance; it was my full intent
 Lineally to succeed in this Imperial crown:
 But how soon hath God brought my purpose down!⁶²

She was assumed to be encouraging her husband's brutality, particularly the deaths of the Carthusians and of Fisher and More.⁶³ 'The people, horrified to see such unprecedented and brutal atrocities, muttered in whispers about these events and often blamed Queen Anne.'⁶⁴ Since Sir Thomas More himself had, according to a report circulating on the continent within weeks of his death, said at his trial that the real reason for condemning him was his refusal to assent to the Boleyn marriage, it was all too plausible to present Anne as a latter-day Salome demanding the head of a new saint.⁶⁵

More dangerous than popular gossip was opposition within the political establishment. How much Anne, or for that matter Henry, knew of this, it is impossible to say. Henry was aware of the possibility. He said of Katherine: 'The lady Katherine is a proud, stubborn woman of very high courage. If she took it into her head to take her daughter's part, she could

quite easily take the field, muster a great array, and wage against me a war as fierce as any her mother Isabella ever waged in Spain.⁶⁶ Such evidence as we have is hidden deep in the correspondence of Chapuys. If we are to believe him, a majority of the magnates – in importance, if not in numbers – were critical of the way matters were going. Many were even talking of actual revolt against Henry. But as with most magnate conspiracy, it was only talk. Apart from the initial psychological effort needed to break free from the chain of loyalty to the king, the odds against a successful concerted rising were high, and dissatisfaction with affairs had to compete with the very real desire not to come into the open before success was assured. Much of the conversation and messages reaching Chapuys were, indeed, attempts to avoid that decision by having Charles V take the first step.⁶⁷

The duke of Norfolk's increasing dissatisfaction was of a different kind. Anne and her supporters were leaving him behind. He had been prepared for her to be a Boleyn when taking risks, but he fully expected her to be a Howard when enjoying success. The queen, however, had a good memory. Despite the fact that his mistress was one of her ladies-in-waiting, the duke found himself in much less favour than he felt was his due. Perhaps Anne felt that she had paid her debts to the Howards by persuading Henry to marry his illegitimate son, the duke of Richmond, to her cousin Mary without the large payment the king would normally have expected for disposing of so valuable a match.⁶⁸ Norfolk, however, was soon complaining that the sweets were going elsewhere.⁶⁹ Perhaps even more than by Anne, Thomas Howard was put out by Cromwell, who was now in effective and obvious charge. The secretary's usefulness and record of success were, in fact, taking him out of the Boleyn clientage and making him an independent political figure in his own right, but he maintained his links with the queen and to outward appearances was still her man – perhaps Anne herself did not recognize the change.⁷⁰ Yet Norfolk, though sometimes goaded into grumbling in public, remained loyal to Henry and acquiescent towards the Boleyn marriage. And this was not only because his only known principle was self-advantage ensured by spaniel-like sycophancy to the king, or because there was still some advantage in having a niece on the throne. The point was that Anne had only a daughter and a miscarriage to her credit; for Norfolk to have the king's only living son as a son-in-law was too good a hand to throw away. And it was one which made Anne and her brother increasingly suspicious.⁷¹

The problems facing Anne – the lack of a son, the intransigence of Mary, increasing unpopularity – were compounded by the international

situation. As always, the controlling reality was the hostility between Francis I and Charles V. It was one of the periods of 'cold' rather than 'hot' war, with the antagonists each regarding Henry and his quarrel with the pope as one extra circumstance to be exploited or contained, as appropriate. Henry's principal reliance continued to be on his 'good brother Francis', but he was never confident that England's interests were wholly safe there. Thus, in a relationship which has rightly been described as 'ambiguous', Henry and Francis each tried to exploit their alliance in a thoroughly selfish fashion.⁷² The result was a great deal of suspicion, one of the other, and with Anne personifying to the English the French connection, the opprobrium fell on her.

Anne had been fully involved in the attempt to postpone the meeting between Henry and Francis proposed for the summer of 1534, and the expected arrival of a French embassy in the following November was prepared for with care and enthusiasm.⁷³ The admiral of France was, however, bringing an imperial suggestion for a settlement between Charles and Francis which involved the marriage of Mary to the dauphin. This shocked Anne because it implied that her patron, Francis, considered that Mary had a better claim to the English throne than her own daughter, and matters were made even worse when the French were lukewarm at Henry's counter-proposal for a marriage between Elizabeth and Francis's third son. The result was a perceptible coolness on the side both of the French envoy and the queen. Anne nevertheless did her best to improve matters towards the end of the mission, and we hear of her entertaining the admiral at the final great banquet, while Henry sought out Gontier, the ambassador's secretary and a man of considerable influence, to come to talk with his wife. It was a different story two months later, when she saw Gontier on his return with the answer to the proposal about Elizabeth.⁷⁴ Anne upbraided him for the time he had taken, which had aroused all Henry's suspicions. If the French did not allay them at once, her own position would become impossible, for she felt herself more precarious than even before she was married; she could say no more, with everyone watching, including Henry, and she could not write to the envoy or see him again. She then withdrew, and Henry went off dancing.

We have to remember that in sixteenth-century diplomacy – if not in diplomacy generally – what is said often had an ulterior motive, and in February 1535 the intention of the English was certainly to frighten the French.⁷⁵ However, on this occasion Anne's concern convinced Gontier: 'I assure you, my lord, by what I can make out, she is not at her ease.'⁷⁶ And there is no doubt that she had good cause to fear the loss of French

support, as their hard bargaining caused Henry to press Francis for more and more public commitment to his cause.⁷⁷ Nor were matters improved by a banquet given by the resident French ambassador, where many of Anne's critics were present to hear gruesome tales of the persecution of unorthodox religious opinions then in full swing in Paris.⁷⁸ Eventually a meeting of representatives was arranged for Calais in May 1535. Cromwell was at first to go himself, but he fell ill, and the Boleyn interest was represented instead by Rochford – characteristically, Chapuys suggested that Cromwell was evading the responsibility for any failure.⁷⁹ And fail the negotiations did, despite a rapid return to England by Rochford in search of further instructions.⁸⁰ When he arrived, it was significant that he first had a long discussion with his sister before reporting to the king himself; and it was noted that Anne's conversation had suddenly become bitterly anti-French. Nor did she stop at talk. Within a fortnight she had put on a notable entertainment at Hanworth, with a guest list both large and select, but she pointedly omitted the French resident, who was duly and satisfactorily incensed.⁸¹ Soon after, Bishop Fisher and Thomas More were executed, and Francis I's reaction to the news, laced with comments about Anne's morals, lowered the temperature of Anglo-French relations still further.⁸² Anne might be 'wholly French', but by the summer of 1535 this threatened to become yet another liability, and a serious one.