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Mistreated & Misremembered: A Tale of Two Annes

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“An Argument from the Afterlife”

Henry VIII:

You put a curse on me, a bewitching
like those of Greek myth, forced
to repeat and atone for a single mistake,
miscarrying any faith in you.

I have it worse than Atlas, he merely shrugs
while I've been damned to the devil's whore herself,
forced to spend those thousand days
over again in contentious conversation.

I should have cut off your head and
kept the tongue.

Anne Boleyn:

You may have burned my portraits and spurned my name,
but tell me how is your sweet little Jane?
always more pale than pure,
her dullness mistaken for obedience.

I am exceedingly grateful for your patience
as you waited an entire week
before announcing the engagement,
tell me, had my head entirely rolled
off of the pedestal yet?

As for my crimes,
the empty promises you called lies,
represented by a daughter, all I could supply.
And you, foolishly seeing marriage vows as contracts of servitude.

Henry:

Elizabeth, the fiery Tudor
inherited my hair, my wit, your shame.
Ironic how the great concubine
produced the virgin Queen,
if only a girl could continue on the family name.

Anne:

Ironic how the man who made her
a bastard now claims her success,
tell me, was it arrogance that swelled your waist?
Interesting, how her red hair, once
a mark of my malevolence,
like the sixth finger you and your cronies concocted,
what was I again, oh yes, Satan's servant.
I may have seduced you with my mysterious
eyes, but they did not guard a dark soul,
you were merely misguided, though

recognizing intelligence in a woman
was always a mystery for you.
Yet, whose portrait resides next to her own?
The mother you never let her know,
our daughter's beloved ring, communicating
what politics and your pride would never allow.

“The Flanders Mare at Henry VIII's Grave”

Was I so hideous?
that even the great Henry could not mount
nor ride the horse he claimed was his fourth bride?

Did I smell so sour?
Or, had your senses finally caught up
to the pungent wound on your leg,
perhaps to the countless crumbs in your beard.

You questioned by virtue,
yet believed the ludicrous lies of my lusty replacement,
and I
so naïve at your lack of nurture,
a mere kiss all you could manage,
believing it enough to deliver your spare,
instead, my face deemed unsuited to breed.

Divorce granted out of politics
over politeness,
ever called “the King’s beloved sister”
as if incestuous nicknames would nullify our union,
for we both know they were not meant to ease my embarrassment.

I was your shortest marriage,
and here I stand,
outlasting all the others,
over *you*.

Short sighted ignorance—or possible impotence
made me an example of
platonic placidity and spinster survival.

The rest of my days, teaching purity as politics to the other Anne’s daughter,
lying in wait for the day of her coronation’s arrival.

Historical Notes

The way I view Henry's legacy is not through any great military or political achievement, but in the way that he and his entire reign seemed to have revolved around his desire for a male heir. The ruthless and unflinching tactics he used never considered the feelings of the women he married, instead treating them as mere objects for his desire. Interestingly, the great heir who continued and expanded the Tudor legacy was Henry's daughter, Elizabeth I, given to him by his second, and most maligned, wife Anne Boleyn—the first beheaded in the list. The poetic justice that I saw in this turn of events inspire me to provide or return to the voices of the wives that their husband, and much of history, took away. Discovering more about their lives only bolstered my interest in the women and during my research. I not only found many interesting facts, but also several intersecting facts which connected the women beyond the husband they all had in common.

The two wives who provide the source material and speakers of the two poems are the wives who I see as the two most misunderstood; other than the beheading of his fifth wife Catherine Howard, I see these two speakers as the most mistreated wives, as they have many commonalities outside of their shared husband and first name. Other than beheading Anne and then divorcing the other Anne, Henry besmirched their names and reputations, making himself and his image shine in comparison to his “lacking” brides, whether that be in virtue or beauty. He helped set in motion ruthless rumors and nicknames which still define these women today, despite more recent and critical historical analysis. The entire reason the English Reformation occurred during Henry's reign was because he was frustrated with his first marriage to Catherine of Aragon, who had only provided him one daughter, the later infamous “bloody” Mary I. Also, Catherine was a few years older than Henry and had initially been his older brother Arthur's bride, but after he died shortly into their marriage, Henry's family, wanting to keep their political alliance, had the two marry one another. Henry later used her marriage to his brother as evidence that their marriage should be annulled, despite her own claims that she was still a virgin when she married Henry, which seems likely given her faith and the incredibly short union with Arthur. Due to Catherine's family's influence in Europe—she was the daughter of Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain, who had united the country and funded Christopher Columbus' voyages to America—and her strong Catholic faith, Henry was denied the

annulment he sought. This led to Henry declaring himself the head of church and state in England, meaning he was not subject to the Pope's influence could grant a divorce to himself and remarry whenever he saw fit.

The woman behind the break with the Catholic Church, Anne Boleyn, remains the most misinterpreted and misrepresented in her narrative, as many Catholics saw her as the reason behind the religious change. They vilified her, making up heinous stories to justify why such a woman could have ever captured the King's attention. Anne, with her dark hair, olive complexion, and dark eyes, was not considered a great beauty of her time which valued fair skin and blonde hair. The accusations against Anne only worsened when she managed to give Henry only a daughter, especially after miscarrying a son. Enraged, Henry had his advisors and councilors arrest Anne, and a bevy of men for a list of made up crimes. She was accused of everything from adultery and witchcraft to incest and treason, as one of the men arrested was her own brother George Boleyn, and having an affair while married to a king was considered treason. Even more fascinating was the fact that, of all the men arrested and tortured, only one man ever admitted to having "carnal knowledge" of the Queen, which, given the circumstances of being viciously tortured, his so-called confession does not make a convincing case. Anne and all the men, including her brother, were beheaded and sent to an unmarked grave.

One of the most amazing pieces of research I found pertained to Anne's true legacy: an amazing role model for her daughter. After Elizabeth I's death, it was discovered that the only two pieces of jewelry she never took off included her coronation ring, which she considered her wedding ring as she was married to England, and her locket ring, which had a large jeweled "E" on its outside and the portraits of Elizabeth I and Anne Boleyn. The secret and prized locket ring shows how, even though Anne was executed when Elizabeth was only three, her father rarely spoke of her, and there were constant accusations and rumors about her, Elizabeth was intelligent enough to separate fact from fiction. With the brief time they had together, Anne made an incredible impression on her daughter. Elizabeth never spoke of her mother, however, constantly emphasizing her similarity to her father, because she felt forced to emphasize her legitimacy and Henry's paternity after he declared Elizabeth and her sister Mary bastards. Her ability to distance her emotions, especially her love toward her own mother, to rule contributed to her lasting legacy that has prevailed and even overshadowed that of her father.

Henry forever remembered the short reign of Queen Jane, as he considered her to be his true Queen and was buried next to her, though his motivations remain suspicious considering she was the one who gave him a son.

His fourth bride, the princess Anne of Cleves, a small kingdom in what is now modern Germany, was also incredibly misinterpreted, as Henry believed her too ugly to consummate their marriage. After commissioning her portrait from the talented realist painter, Hans Holbein, Henry agreed to the arranged match, but, upon seeing her in person, is reported to have said she looked like a horse, leading to the nickname the “Flanders mare.” Though its origins are disputed, the cruelty she faced was certain. Henry described her as having ugly breasts, smelling bad, and doubting if she were a virgin; all of which he stated made him unable and unwilling to consummate their union. However, Henry had now become the obese, limping figure with the ulcerated leg that many associate him with, replacing his younger image of a handsome athlete. After a jousting accident resulted in the ulcer on his leg, he was unable to hunt and play sports as he once did, though he continued to eat the same amount. With this and his older age, others wondered if the King could not consummate the marriage merely because he was not physically able to and if he used the excuse of her ugliness to justify an annulment. Anne, a Protestant, gave in and consented to an annulment and was gifted many lands and money, including Hever Castle, the childhood home of Anne Boleyn. As for the accusations he hurled about her lack of chastity, this was untrue, as Anne had lived a sheltered existence and did not know what it meant to consummate a marriage: she once asked her maids if they thought she could be pregnant since the King kissed her on her forehead every night. Whether or not she was the hideous creature Henry claimed her to be has also been disputed, as other contemporary accounts described her as being pretty and pleasing to the eye.

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