

Ives, Eric 2004: *The Life and Death of Anne Boleyn*. Malden, Oxford, and Carlton: Blackwell. xix, 458 pp. ISBN 0631234799
Joanna Denny 2004: *Anne Boleyn. A New Life of England's Tragic Queen*. London: Portrait. 374 pp. ISBN 074995051X

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Eric Ives's *Anne Boleyn*, published in 1986, was a groundbreaking biography which sparked the interest in the second wife of Henry VIII. Publishing now his *The Life and Death of Anne Boleyn* Ives is facing an immense responsibility, since this new enterprise demands not only an up-to-date response to the blossoming critical field that has developed in the last twenty years, but also a revision of his own masterpiece. Fortunately, Ives's work has the rare quality of becoming more relevant and enlightening with time: this reappraisal constitutes an authoritative, comprehensive account of the rise and fall of Anne Boleyn, among a multiplicity of interpretations now available to the scholar interested in the field. Although a substantial part of the former material is maintained, Ives makes a sound revision of the state of the art from the critical boom around the 450th anniversary of the queen's beheading up to the present day.

Ives's book principally responds to three monographs, very different in their conception, that have been recently published: Retha Warnicke's *The Rise and Fall of Anne Boleyn* (1989), Antonia Fraser's *The Six Wives of Henry VIII* (1992) and David Starkey's *Six Wives: the Queens of Henry VIII* (2003). Both Starkey's and Fraser's books participate in the revisionist line that analyzes Henrician England as a series of shifts symbolized – and, to a certain extent, provoked – by the changes of queen-consort. Ives acknowledges the validity of their research and incorporates it into his own study: he especially praises Starkey's publication of *The Inventory of King Henry VIII* (1998), “henceforth an absolutely vital text” (xvii). However, Ives focuses on Henry's second wife, and his aim is to correct certain misapprehensions and inaccuracies perpetuated by tradition and rumour.

One of these misreadings of historical material is the claim that Anne was condemned as a result of the miscarriage of a male foetus, the hypothesis at the core of Warnicke's work. Her claim that Anne Boleyn was executed because she was believed to be a witch clashes completely with Ives's political reading of the story. Warnicke is an accomplished scholar and her points have a sociological and cultural interest. Her description of Henry's court colours the traditional picture of sixteenth-century England and discusses relevant points about religious beliefs and superstitions, early modern medical science and the role of women in society, which were frequently overlooked. However, as Ives clearly points out, “Anne Boleyn was so much more important than the circumstances of her execution” (xiii). Warnicke's sociocultural analysis of Anne's downfall inexplicably ignores the political role of the queen-consort in the court. What is more, Warnicke accuses Ives of relying too much on the partisan reports of Chapuys, the Spanish ambassador and friend of Queen Catherine (2003: 239). In fact, Ives does not discard this or any other source of information, but he is

nevertheless extremely careful when dealing with biased testimonies. For Ives, Chapuys is both surprisingly reliable (his network of informers, established throughout his many years as ambassador, was sound and highly effective) and easily misled, either by his own desire to find proofs of Anne's fall from favour and by the numerous enemies of the queen, who did not hesitate to spread false rumours about her. The task of the historian, according to Ives, is to discover reliable information in a myriad of partisan reports.

One of the strengths of Ives's monograph is the analysis of Anne's social and propagandistic role at court. Depictions of the queen have traditionally associated her with beauty or ugliness depending on the faction. From her lifetime, Catholic commentators such as Chapuys and Nicholas Sander focused on her physical appearance, her clothes and style, as a proof of her ambition and cold calculation. Anne's supporters tried to deny this accusation, praising her modesty and her lack of ambition. Now, Ives offers an innovative reading of her outward fashion as a vehicle of propaganda: "her preoccupation with glamour, which older historians have despised as feminine weakness, has now been recognised as a concern with 'image', 'presentation' and 'message' which was as integral to the exercise of power in the sixteenth century as it is in the modern world" (viii). Far from imposing erroneous chronological categories, he explains the mechanisms of court faction and personal rule as the key to understanding Anne's political power. That is the best quality of Ives's argumentation: he is acute and entertaining, and he offers us a picture of Anne which is in perfect accordance with her own time, yet understandable in ours.

There is a strong connection between her rise and fall and Henry's need for an heir. The king started to consider his illegitimate son, the Duke of Richmond, as a possible candidate for the crown; Catherine was outraged at the idea that Henry wanted to annul the marriage in order to remove any obstacles to his plan (83). Henry's harsh treatment of Mary, his daughter by Catherine, hid in fact a certainty that she was the rightful heir to the crown: in canon law, a child conceived 'in good faith' was legitimate even if the marriage was later considered null. Thus, Mary became "the focus for all dislike to Anne and everything she appeared to represent" (197). The birth of Elizabeth, evidencing Anne's failure to conceive a male heir, would sign her fate. Nevertheless, there were also other reasons whose combined effect led to her execution. Anne's prominent position in political and religious circles made her the target of Catholics, who resented her influence, and of certain noble families like the Seymours, who coveted her power. All these factors united to overthrow the queen and to replace her with a new, much more pliable consort.

Ives is a remarkable scholar who has managed to lead the critical avant-garde for the last twenty years, and his minute analysis of the second wife of Henry VIII has inevitably conditioned all subsequent biographies of the queen. Indeed, the latest contribution to the field, Joanna Denny's *Anne Boleyn, A New Life of England's Tragic Queen*, acknowledges the long critical tradition that precedes her own book and presents it as an innovative approach to the story.

Denny's work combines facts and speculation, scholarly erudition and a novelist's prose style in order to provide the reader with an unusual, highly provocative account of the queen's life and death. The author is also a relative of Sir Anthony Denny, who was one of Henry VIII's courtiers. Denny, prompted by these personal circumstances,

has made a fine effort. However, the flaws of her biography are manifold. The main problem with the book resides precisely in its hybrid nature between history and novel: the story lacks a specific audience or a coherent academic structure. The scholar is uncomfortable at the uneasy balance between facts and opinion; likewise, the profusion of names and data is overwhelming and unnecessary for the non-initiated reader, who is likely to get lost when trying to distinguish between characters such as William and Hugh Latymer among others. Denny's argumentation is somewhat erratic, shifting from the topic of the king's waist to Reformation in Europe in a few pages (8-10), intertwining history, theological debate and mere gossip.

The author laments that the treatment of the figure of the queen has been traditionally flat and strongly biased, but her description of Henry's court is equally full of literary clichés. Henry's antics and tyrannic rule are explained as the work of "his sycophantic entourage, which flattered and fawned on him, competing for his favours" (12). Much of the argumentation is devoted to refuting Chapuys (and, consequently, those who credit him), whom she plainly dismisses because "his English was so poor that he could not understand what was being said around him" (2). Catherine is described as an arrogant, self-confident woman, disloyal to England, who did not hesitate to lie in order to save her face when she protested that her marriage to Arthur had not been consummated. Denny even contends that Catherine invented a false pregnancy in order to secure her position in the English court, a suggestion that is not present in other biographies. She is said to have depended too much on her Spanish confessor, who is compared to Rasputin himself (77). Moreover, the Catholic queen is described as "superstitious and fanatical in religious excess" (83), the proof being, according to the author, that she was "convinced of the effectiveness of the intervention of the Virgin Mary and an entire calendar of saints" (80). Finally, she is said to have been a traitor to her adopted country, asking her nephew Charles V to invade England. Mary, Catherine's daughter, is portrayed as histrionic, childish and stubborn; she is said to be full of fears for her safety and well-being, which Denny rejects as unsubstantiated, although they proved real according to historical evidence (see Starkey 2004: 443-445, 515-522).

Probably the most unconvincing feature of Denny's book is her startling perpetuation of religious clichés. All Catholics are evil and plotting, and all Protestants are saintly and unjustly persecuted. Many of the political subtleties that are pointed out in Ives's work are here reduced to the all-pervasive dichotomy between true religion and abhorrent heresy; thus, the political confrontation between Anne and Cardinal Wolsey, Henry's chief adviser, is disappointingly simplified as "Anne's poor opinion of Wolsey as a symbol of the degenerate Catholic Church" (59). Catholic writers engaged for centuries in a defamatory campaign against Anne, but Denny forgets that a large section of Reformist thinkers were also against a union that they considered adulterous. Denny attacks Catholic beliefs as if they were in direct correlation with the historical figures she is dealing with, unaware that these ideas are not exclusive of the period and characters she is describing. At some points, the author even interrupts the narration of historical events in order to introduce theological digressions and personal opinions which are totally alien to her main line of argument. For instance, Anne's promotion of the English translation of the Scriptures and her views on the dissolution of the monasteries serve as an excuse to start a debate on the validity of transubstantiation as a

sacrament (252). Denny's work is the last link in a secular chain of Protestant propaganda based on religious prejudice, whose zeal impedes any attempt at impartiality and academic rigour.

Evil Catholics include Anne's uncle, the Duke of Norfolk, and Thomas More, whose portrait is particularly unflattering: he is said to have rejoiced at the torture and martyrdom of evangelicals such as Tewkesbury and Bainham (171). Spain, the Catholic superpower, is represented as an absolutist tyranny imposed by Ferdinand and Isabella, who made use of the Inquisition in order to repress and torture the Jewish people; curiously enough, the author is much more lenient when describing the burnings and exemplary executions ordered by King Henry.

Conversely, Denny's willingness to present Anne as a flawless, perfectly chaste woman becomes problematic when this ideal image is read against historical facts. According to the author, the queen's only ambition after attaining the crown was to use her new position in order to advance the Protestant cause (132). Denny explicitly denies any personal goals or even sexual attraction as possible causes of Anne's surrender; in order to support her views, she contends that "Cavendish confirms the fact that she remained a virgin until she married the King" (107). Apart from the questionable credibility of Cavendish as an impartial source (his *Life and Death of Thomas Wolsey* (1667) is an undisguised vindication of the Cardinal, who had been the writer's master until his death, and all the characters are conveniently moulded to suit this encomium) the claim is utterly impossible, since Anne was already pregnant when she married.

Her death is equally explained as a consequence of her religious beliefs: she had to be removed because she supported reform (261). The Seymours, a Catholic family, were the ideal candidates for replacing the queen with a less contentious consort. Thus, Anne's fall was a conspiracy against Protestants orchestrated by Cromwell, who was afraid of the increasing Protestant influence in court, and was aligned with Chapuys (268).

Denny presents Anne Boleyn as a forerunner, both as a Protestant and as a woman, whose challenge of contemporary conventions was too provocative for her time. However, she exaggerates the break that the queen represents, portraying all women before her as meek, and all Catholics as ignorant and superstitious. She links women's subjugation to Catholic customs and beliefs, claiming that, before Anne, "any woman who showed the least trace of intelligence and independence broke with tradition and was seen as an outsider" (60). The author attempts to explain Anne's tragic fate as the direct consequence of her defiance to the norm; however, she totally ignores women educated within the humanist circle, such as Catherine of Aragon and the daughters of Thomas More. Anne Boleyn was a fine intellectual, but to portray her as the first woman scholar in England is both inaccurate and far-fetched.

The author is well-read and her documentary effort is commendable; however, sometimes she clearly misreads her sources: for instance, on page 105 Denny refers to Alison Plowden (2002) in order to describe Catherine as "bloody-minded", but she misinterprets Plowden's remark, since it was in fact illustrating the defamatory image that Catherine's enemies tried to establish. These inconsistencies and inaccuracies blacken a portrait of the queen which could have been more satisfactorily delineated.

Denny's work will neither convince the scholar nor the reader of non-fiction, although it undoubtedly has attractive qualities for both markets. Her anti-Spanish and

anti-Catholic diatribe might be better received in the English-speaking world, although its undisguised religious bias is likely to alienate many contemporary readers, whatever their personal beliefs might be. The documentary effort of the author surely deserved better results, which hopefully will be achieved in future studies or monographs.

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