

AFTERWORD

ANYONE MIGHT THINK that there has been enough written about the Tudors! I, too, have made a contribution to this huge library. But there are still characters never explained or understood, and one of the greatest is Jane Boleyn, Lady Rochford.

There are good reasons for this – she was a minor Tudor woman, and, like all Tudor women, not much was recorded about her in her own time. We don't know the date of her birth, we don't have any lengthy letters, we don't even have a portrait of her, though Hans Holbein sketched many of her friends.

She was not named as a witness in the trials of her husband and sister-in-law, and George Boleyn's complaint that he was being convicted on the evidence of a woman did not identify that woman as Jane. Research now suggests that she was not one of those who gave evidence against him and his sister, and we have a letter from her to George, promising to speak to the king for him.

And yet she is blamed. Years after the trial, after her own disgrace and death, her reputation was destroyed by the accounts that she had betrayed her husband and her sister-in-law. These were not unbiased new findings, but part of the rehabilitation of Anne Boleyn's reputation when her daughter, Elizabeth, took the throne. The new queen's mother had to be exonerated, without blaming the queen's father, Henry VIII. The building of the Tudor story, supporting their right to rule, was the start of the whitewashing of Henry VIII's reputation. The price was the vilification of Jane.

This is my first novel since writing *Normal Women: 900 Years of Making History*, an exploration of how women's history is missing from what we read as complete history books. It became clear that the unstated, often unconscious, biases of historians have skewed the history of what women actually did. Even when there was evidence before them of independence, agency, and logical action, historians have still reported dependence, weakness, and even madness. Jane Boleyn's history is a striking example of this.

Even though she was hardly mentioned in the first accounts of the trial, Jane was later blamed for a murderous plot against her husband, and then for going on to pimp her kinswoman, Katheryn Howard, into an affair with a courtier which led to their deaths. Why – the all-male historians of the Victorian period asked themselves – why would a woman do that? Their only answer was that she must have been profoundly wicked – and terribly unladylike. 'Jane Boleyn the monster' was born out of widely held Victorian beliefs that women are naturally sexually frigid, naturally domesticated, and naturally lacking in ambition. Thus, any successful woman courtier tainted by sexual scandal cannot be a lady, cannot be a heroine. Indeed, she is so unwomanly, she is barely human. She is a monster.

This image of the monster-Jane was revised by new attitudes to women from the 1960s onwards, though a more liberal view of female sexuality has done her no favours, but instead has created a new lens of shame. The new, sexually liberated imagined Jane is driven by perverse desires as a voyeur. This Jane takes sexual pleasure from watching: first her husband with his sister, and then her young cousin with her lover.

And there her reputation was fixed, until more recent publications began to assert the common-sense view that Jane Boleyn could not have been a successful courtier, holding down a highly desirable post through five reigns, in the grip of an uncontrollable sex addiction or murderous spite.

Of course, Jane is not the only historical character to be written and rewritten according to the changing views of historians.

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In time, everyone is revised. I, too, have been part of that re-imagining. I wrote of Katherine of Aragon as she was when she first came to England – not the tragic, old, defeated woman of most of the histories we read. Anne Boleyn's public reputation has gone from an imaginary, murderous, incestuous, adulterous villain, to Protestant heroine, and even martyr, as each different generation of historians has sought and found a different Anne Boleyn. My first Tudor novel, *The Other Boleyn Girl*, was written from the point of view of Anne's sister, Mary Boleyn, who (I think) could have been deeply afraid that what was being said of her sister was true; my novel describes her worst fears. Jane Seymour was the great favourite of Victorian historians, a quiet wife who had the grace to die in childbirth, and there are not many records of her short, married life for recent historians to revise. Nobody looking seriously at Anne of Cleves' enchanting portrait could believe Henry VIII's report that she made him impotent – but Team-Henry historians supported that story for five hundred years, until more forensic analyses of Henry focused on his accidents and illness. And Katheryn Howard's reputation has risen since her disgrace, with the increased understanding and sympathy towards young, sexually active women.

Katheryn claimed in her confession that she was sexually abused, and this has led to a rewriting of her history as a victim, rather than a thoughtless nymphomaniac. Alas, there are still some determined dinosaurs, but most people see that Katheryn did not give full consent to the two so-called lovers of her childhood and cannot be seen of as knowingly, consciously, consenting to her marriage with the king. The disparity of power was so great that the seventeen-year-old niece of a highly ambitious uncle could not have refused the King of England. Gareth Russell's recent biography of Katheryn Howard emphasises her youth and inexperience as well as her flirtatious nature.

Recent historians have pulled back from the view of a hyper-sexual Jane Boleyn as well. Julia Fox's thoughtful biography offers

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us a portrait of a loving wife and loyal sister, neither accusing her husband nor relishing his adultery. But Jane cannot simply have been in the wrong time and place – a key witness at two trials for royal adultery, and two royal divorces.

I think the answer to the mystery of her career is to be found in the turning point for the Boleyn family. When they were disgraced in a show trial against a flirtatious queen who had lost her husband's love, failed to give him a son, and had no powerful supporters, Jane did not share their disgrace. The Boleyn sister and brother and their supporters died on the scaffold, and the Boleyn parents retired to the country, but Jane sailed on into the next reign – well paid, promoted, and respected. She was appointed almost at once to serve the new queen, Jane Seymour.

She even benefited from a law, passed in Parliament, that gave her an improved widow's dower. How did she get this? Neither the Boleyns nor their great family, the Howards, could, or would, have done this for the widow of a traitor. I think it can only have been Thomas Cromwell, at the peak of his success, building a spy and management network throughout the court and country. I think Cromwell brought her back from temporary disgrace and then used her as one of his many lady-spies in the queen's rooms, through three reigns.

When Jane Seymour died and Anne of Cleves arrived, it was Jane Boleyn who was her chief lady-in-waiting, but not even her warnings of the failure of the marriage could save Cromwell from the plotting of his great rivals and enemies, the Spanish party, who continued to support their heir, the Roman Catholic princess Lady Mary.

Cromwell did not survive the divorce of his candidate, Anne of Cleves, though I think he and Jane created the evidence for the divorce; and his death left Jane without a spymaster and patron. But she still had the fortune that he had won for her – the magnificent Blickling Hall in Norfolk was hers for life, with other lands that paid rent. She could have retired from court and lived on her lands as

a wealthy widow. She was rich enough to be an attractive wife and could have married again. But she did not.

You don't have to be a Victorian historian to imagine that Jane was ambitious. The court life was all she had known from girlhood, and the arrival of young Katheryn Howard at court was a wonderful opportunity for Jane to advise and guide another queen, especially as this one might outlive her husband. There is no historical evidence that Jane was hoping to be lady-in-waiting to a queen regent – that part is my fiction. But 'my' Jane – the Jane of this novel – has studied Henry VIII all her life, and sees, as everyone saw in real life, his deterioration in these years.

We know that she helped Katheryn and Thomas Culpeper to meet, fully aware of the danger. The great question about Jane is why would she do this? The outdated answers – firstly that she was murderously wicked, then that she was sexually perverse – are, I think, very unlikely. If Jane's was jealous of her queens, why did she help Anne of Cleves to safety and prosperity? If she was compelled by voyeurism, she could have satisfied it without fatal danger to herself, her young kinswoman, and her family. The fact that she was in the room when the lovers met – even when they were sexually active – is not proof of her perversity, nor of theirs, but of an attempt by all three to cling to a sort of respectability. And though shocking to the Victorians, and perhaps to us, we must remember that in medieval England people often had sex in crowded rooms with others watching or hearing; privacy is a modern invention.

Jane cannot be accused of being a pimp in the Howard–Culpeper affair, even though they both blamed her once they were caught. Nobody reading Katheryn's letter to Thomas could think that this was a girl tricked into meeting an unwanted suitor. Her letter – which I quote in the novel – are the words of a young woman deeply in love. She wrote,

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'I never longed so mucche for [a] thynge as I do to se you and to speke wyth you, the wyche I trust shal be shortely now, the wyche dothe comforte me verie much whan I thynk of ett and wan I thynke agan that you shall departe from me agayne ytt makes my harte to dye to thynke what fortune I have that I cannot be always yn your company.'

I think Jane helped the lovers because she saw the opportunity for herself. I believe that she looked at Katheryn Howard, nearly thirty years younger than her injured, overweight, deteriorating husband, and thought: this could be a dowager queen of England. If Katheryn could get pregnant and crowned before the king's death, she would have a good chance of being on a regency council ruling England. If she gave birth to a royal son, her importance was guaranteed – and so was Jane's. But how was Katheryn Howard to conceive?

Jane knew that the king was frequently impotent and had been so for years. He had been occasionally impotent with her sister-in-law, Anne Boleyn, he conceived a son with Jane Seymour; but complained that he could not consummate his marriage Anne of Cleves – Jane was even commissioned to state this as evidence for the divorce. Jane may have thought that the only way Katheryn Howard was going to get pregnant was by another man: Thomas Culpeper.

Jane had good reasons to help the lovers meet: their dangerous bond linked them forever in a treasonous conspiracy that guaranteed her future, either as trusted ally or a blackmailer. But in the novel, as fiction, I suggest that this woman, who had never been in love, whose life was always dedicated to ambition and the hard-hearted flirtations of a court, saw a real love, a tender love between two young people, and was inspired to help them.

Unspoken thoughts and unwritten emotions are always the material of fiction, and not of history, which cannot see or record them. So, this part of my novel is all fiction. But it is based – as my fiction always is – on the facts that history does know and report. We know that Jane took a fatal risk to help Katheryn and

Culpeper be together, and that she played the part of chaperone at the meetings where he did no more than kiss Katheryn's hand. Far from throwing them into bed together, she helped them meet and talk. The two never confessed to doing more than falling in love and meeting in secret. Jane never confessed to more than helping them to do that. What they seem to have wanted was to be together, to court like young lovers, and what Jane seems to have done is help them do that.

We know nothing about Jane's education, except that her father was a famous scholar, specialising in translations from Greek and Latin to English. He gave his works as New Year's gifts to the king and to Lady Mary – as I describe in the novel. David Starkey's work on Jane's father, Lord Morley, even tells us the titles of his works, and it is from that research that I discovered that Jane's father gave Thomas Cromwell a gift of the works of Niccolò Machiavelli – the famously cynical description of power and tyranny. Whether Jane was trained as a Machiavellian courtier, we do not know – but the connection between her father and Thomas Cromwell is deeply intriguing.

One of the metaphors used throughout the book is the two-faced nature of the Tudor court: the costumes and disguises of the masques reflect the dishonesty of the court of a tyrant. This view of Henry VIII has evolved from the first, Elizabethan view of him as the founder of a nation, and from a post-war view of him as a jolly eccentric. Now, there is a growing understanding of him as a dangerous man: an abuser of women, a false friend, and a tyrant. Like modern tyrants, Henry used the institutions and traditions against his society, he used the law to unlawfully persecute his victims. Advised by Thomas Cromwell, he used the writ of attainder to sidestep treason trials and execute men and women on his word alone. Even more complex: he ordered a new law to execute Thomas More, Bishop Fisher, and many others. He even changed the law which excluded the insane from execution, solely to behead Jane Boleyn, who was either mad or pretending to be mad hoping for asylum under the law's protection. Tyrants

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corrupt good institutions against their people; Henry VIII did this five centuries ago.

Tyranny is the theme of this novel, written in difficult times when so-called ‘strong men’ (or those who posture as strong), are in power. All of us have to decide what offence against our institutions, against our traditions, against our liberties, or against the liberties and lives of others, is our sticking point: the point where we say ‘no’. History tells us that we must find the courage to defend others, and our country’s institutions and traditions before the danger is immediate and personal. By the time the tyrant comes for us – it is too late. We must not be like Jane Boleyn, recognising the dangers too late to say ‘no’, or we will be silenced like her, and the tyrant will write our history, too.