

The Influence of Women on the Poetry of Henry VIII

“Alas, my love, you do me wrong.”

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Abstract

The image of the king created in the collaborative play, '*The Famous History of the Life of King Henry the Eighth*' by Shakespeare and Fletcher (1613) makes the drama undeniably one of the most ambiguous literary artworks of the final phase of the English Renaissance, fitting what we have got so far to learn about the monarch himself perfectly. Henry VIII, with an extremely ambiguous reputation among the general public^{vii}, is one of the most recognisable figures of English history. Him being the gluttonous wife-murderer, whom our society has stigmatized him as, is still a moderately widespread approach. Lest we forget about him being the leading character of several revolutionary historical events, including the English Renaissance and Reformation. Henry VIII, as one of the most charismatic rulers of history, however, was not only gifted with the crown of his nation for almost four decades; He was also gifted in literature and poetry, and was therefore, without a doubt, a rather enigmatic monarch, poet, composer, huntsman, husband, lover, and even dancer. Then again, as the proverb says: "Behind every great man there is a great woman"^{viii}, and in the life of Henry VIII, as already known, were many. This raises the question: How did all the women surrounding Henry VIII inspire him to develop the artist whom he became?

This paper is going to deal with the ways in which the women surrounding Henry VIII from around 1500 to 1540, shaped his literary career. The main focus is going to be Henry VIII as not only a king, but also a poet. Cultural phenomena that contributed to the forming of the literature of the age, such as the institution of courtly love of the time is going to be mentioned via several literary pieces, including numerous significant poems and love-letters by the King and his wives. Using the critical method of perspectivism I am, on the one hand, planning to compare and contrast specific historical events, the created image of the king, in Shakespeare's play, *Henry VIII*, and, on the other hand, poems and letters written by him and said ladies. The paper is going to highlight aspects of the relationships between Henry VIII and his mother, sisters, and first three wives: Catherine of Aragon, Anne Boleyn and Jane Seymour; their courtship, the spring of their marriage and later unfortunate separation, as mirrored in their literary pieces. Shakespeare's play and its ambiguity will specifically be discussed, wherein the writers' perspective is going to be interpreted, given that it also deals with and puts specific characteristics of the Tudor era into perspective.

Keywords: the Tudors, love poetry, the courtly tradition, Humanism, perspectivism

Chapter I: Early Years

I.1. Youth Is Frail and Prompt to Do

*“Alas, what shall I do for love?
For love, alas what shall I do?”^{ix}”*

What shall the scandalous, murderous, *Coppernose*^x with a voracious appetite for venison and wine – as well as women – do for love? A man so incomprehensible, of whom William Shakespeare decided not to paint an unblemished picture; typically recognised for his six spouses and several mistresses, the literal lady-killer Henry VIII might not pass as an appropriately romantic soul at first sight. And yet: so many relatives, wives, intellectual companions, and beautiful muses shaped the basis of his inspiration, forming the main theme he could write about, by which they laid the foundation of his literary career. The second monarch in line of the Tudor dynasty^{xi}, with a tremendously ambiguous reputation was initially never meant to become the king of England.

In 1502, his elder brother, Arthur^{xii} died all of a sudden, leaving the throne – and a wife^{xiii} as well – for his brother, Henry behind. On the occasion of his brother’s sudden death, the extraordinarily ebullient adolescent Henry became heir to the throne, and had no choice, but to accept the crown and become king of England. Since Henry was only second in succession, he had had no training for kingship, but for becoming a churchman. *“Henry—though well educated in grammar, languages (especially Latin), literature, philosophy, music, and military skills” —had to catch up in learning about regal responsibilities. Soon after Arthur’s death, negotiations between England and Spain began to discuss marriage between Henry and Catherine of Aragon, his brother’s widow.”* (Okerlund, 2009, p.214) Henry, along with his two sisters^{xiv}, received a prominent education from his mother and such scholars and theologians as the poet John Skelton or William Hone. Therefore, the first three women that had had a didactical influence on young Henry, were his mother and sisters. According to Ridgway, Elizabeth was an extremely beautiful lady, pious and abundantly generous to people in need, while also being patient and deeply loving of her children. *“She spent a great deal of her time with her children, Margaret, Henry and Mary, at Eltham Palace, where it was reported that she taught her son, the future Henry VIII, to write.”* (Ridgway, 2016, p.1)

As claimed in Weir’s study, ‘Henry VIII and His Court’, *“Henry was very well educated in the classical, humanist fashion. Thomas More later asked, “What may we not expect from a king who has been nourished on philosophy and the Nine Muses?”* (Weir,

2000, p.9) Young Henry learnt languages, athletics and even music; He excelled in his studies and developed a rather deep admiration of Catholicism.

The unprepared Henry became heir to the throne and was moved to the Royal court. Moreover, if the pressure of having to rule a whole monarchy was not enough, another abundant trauma had happened to young Henry: only a few months later, his mother, Elizabeth of York, with whom he noticeably had a strong connection, died all of a sudden in childbirth, along with her infant daughter, Catherine, merely days following her birth. According to Weir, *“The death of his mother, Elizabeth of York, in 1503, seems to have affected him deeply: in 1507 (...) he confided to Erasmus that “never, since the death of my dearest mother, hath there come to me more hateful intelligence. (...) It seemed to tear open again the wound to which time had brought insensibility.”*” (Weir, 2000, p.9) The loss of his adored mother had a noteworthy effect on the future king. However, not only the heir suffered from grief and mourning; but also the king, at the time. *“Henry (VII) was not alone in his love and admiration for Elizabeth of York.”* (Okerlund, 2009, p.210) The damage of losing his cherished wife and son caused a rather significant twist in his system and technique of governing. *“Henry VII was devastated by Elizabeth’s death. He ordered his Council to prepare the queen’s funeral and placed Thom as Howard, earl of Surrey and treasurer of England, and Sir Richard Guilford, comptroller of his household, in charge.”* (Okerlund, 2009, p.203) *“When Elizabeth of York died, her three surviving children were Margaret, age 13; Henry, age 11; and Mary, age 6. The king took on the task of preparing the children for the lives conferred by their royal births.”* (p.213)

The differences between his parents must have had a great influence on young Henry’s growth on multiple levels. According to Ridgway, *“Elizabeth of York was the perfect image of a queen, wife and mother.”*^{xv} After a short period of illness, king Henry VII, founder of the Tudor dynasty, breathed his last at the age of 52. He laid the foundation for the Tudors, by uniting the House of Lancaster and York, and leaving a centralised, powerful monarchy with a flourishing trade and a full treasury behind.

Holinshed, in his Chronicles, wrote about Henry VIII’s accession to the throne: *“After whose (Henry VII) death, vnto the beginning of the reigne of our souereigne lord king Henrie the eight, excéeded not the number of seauen and twentie yeares, (...) and like as his minoritie was by all law and reason an impediment to himselfe to make homage; so was the same by like reason an impediment to the king of this realme to demand anie, so that the whole time of intermission of our claime in the time of the said king Henrie the eight, is deduced vnto the number of thirteene yeares.”* (Holinshed’s Chronicles, 1577, chapter XXII)

I.2.The Fault in Whom I Cannot Set

Weir contends: *“Few mourned that King’s passing, for although he had brought peace and firm government to England and established the usurping Tudor dynasty firmly on the throne, he had been regarded as a miser and an extortionist”* (Weir, 2000, p. 7) After the festivity of lowering the curtains of the suppressive tyrannical authority of king Henry VII, his replacement became his second born son, Henry VIII. *“The contrast between the dead King and his son and heir could not have been greater. (...) The rejoicings that greeted Henry’s accession were ecstatic and unprecedented, for it was believed that he would usher in “a golden world.””* (Weir, 2000 p. 7)

Following the death of Henry’s elder brother, Arthur, however, the alliance with Spain weakened. Thus, a permission of Pope Clement VII for the annulment of Arthur’s and Catherine’s marriage had to be earned, due to Catholic dogmas. Henry and Catherine got married in June 1509, the year of Henry’s ascension to the throne. Contrasting the idea of the institution of marriage of the age, the marriage of Henry and the Spanish princess was not – only – diplomatic, but one of love.

*Alack, alack, what shall I do?
For care is cast into my heart,
And true love locked thereto.”^{xvi}*

“Henry was fond of telling people that “he loved true where he did marry.” He wrote to Katherine’s father: “If I were still free, I would choose her for wife before all others.” In Elizabeth of York’s missal, which he gave to his wife, he inscribed: “I am yours, Henry R., for ever. (Weir, 2000, p. 15)

“He had all the virtues expected of a Renaissance prince.” (Weir, 2000, p. 5) As an appropriate Renaissance man, he held several gatherings with him singing and dancing, he wrote plays and poems, and he participated in jousts. *“Courtly love also had a role in these affairs (jousts). The winning knight would be proclaimed the champion of the day, and receive his accolade from the Queen or the highest ranking lady present. Jousts were usually held in honour of the ladies, who gave favours, such as scarves or handkerchiefs, to their chosen knights to wear in the lists.”* (Weir, 2000, p. 83)

Henry is said to have written ‘Pastime with Good Company’^{xvii} for Katherine, soon after his coronation, on the theme of princely life and interests. In the poem, the lyric self summarises his desires for hunting, singing and dancing, with a wish for the company of –

possibly – a love interest. In fact, he mentions that “*But every man hath his free will*” so it can easily be interpreted that Henry himself must have been very much aware of his own talents and needs. In this sense, the song can also be interpreted as a love poem with the elements of a resume. “*I love and shall unto I die*”. The poem, if interpreted as one on an emotional theme, can be read as a youth searching for meaning and real significance among his everyday duties; or as it seems, the very first phase of love, as the thought of needing a significant other pops up in a young man’s mind.

The first few years of Henry and Catherine’s marriage were spent in love and satisfaction. The influence of Catherine on Henry and his literary accomplishment is exceptional; being the initial and –in a manner of speaking– “original” muse of the new king, she happened to become the illustrative queen figure and inspiration for the earliest love poems. The picture of the queen and her persona “the muse” paved the way for Henry to learn how to use his gift of literature in his literary profession far along. Catherine herself wrote some poems that might have had an influence on the young king, however, the main motivation of the early poetry of Henry was the character itself of his queen, which in fact shows his interest in forming the institution of courtly love.

The institution of chivalry has developed from the 12th century from troubadours to knights, from lightsome romantic melodies to complex literary and musical masterpieces. Weir writes about Henry VIII as a knight, in her study: “*Henry’s view of himself as a knight errant had a profound effect upon his treatment of women. Since the twelfth century the art of courtly love had governed social interaction between aristocratic men and women, and it had enjoyed a revival at the court of Burgundy. A knight was permitted to pay his addresses to a lady who was usually above him in rank and perhaps married—in theory, unattainable.*” (Weir, 2000, p. 28) She goes into detail about the special aspect of courtly love, mentioning a typical dance, where the woman would be the mistress and the man would be the “*unswervingly devoted servant*”. The historian also elaborates the required clothing in such affairs: “*He would wear her favour in the tournament, compose verses in her honour, ply her with gifts imbued with symbolic meaning, or engage in conversations rich with witty innuendo.*” (p.28)

The king and his new queen were in love so deep, that the king, according to Weir, “*In true courtly tradition, [...] wrote poems and songs for her, for example:*

“*Green groweth the holly,
So doth the ivy.
Though winter blasts blow never so high,*

Green groweth the holly.

*As the holly groweth green
And never changeth hue,
So I am, ever hath been,
Unto my lady true.*

*As the holly groweth green
With ivy all alone
When flowers cannot be seen
And greenwood leaves be gone,*

*Now unto my lady
Promise to her I make,
From all other only
To her I me betake.*

*Adieu, mine own lady,
Adieu, my special
Who hath my heart truly
Be sure, and ever shall.*

Staying on the theme of longing for –emotional – company, in ‘Green Groweth the Holly’, the desired person gets unfolded, in the image of a lady. The main focus of the poem, however, changes from the adventurous and exciting activities of a prince, to a more established desire of emotional commitment. Thus, the lyric self reaches to the second phase of emotional maturity, with the desire of love being a safe and sustainable institution of his life. This can be interpreted by the use of the images of holly and ivy, both evergreens, resembling the enduring feature of true love^{xviii}.

The ground-breaking poem can also be interpreted as a Christmas carol (the use of holly and ivy as seasonal greenery), by which it can be viewed as an incredibly revolutionary piece of art, since Christmas carols were, during the Tudor era, still in their infancy. Henry VIII, as a poet, therefore contributed to the development of the style to a surely great extent. Not only did he, however, write the poem, but also composed the melody to it.

Besides shining the light on his inarguably splendid poetic abilities, Henry and his first wife, with whom he also spent a great amount of time in her apartments, also brought up several scientific topics. In ‘Henry VIII and His Court, Weir claims that: “*After each midday meal he was usually to be found in the Queen’s apartments, discussing politics, theology, or books, receiving visitors, or just “taking his pleasure as usual with the Queen.”* She also states, that “*His (Henry VIII’s) chief desire was to please her.*” (p. 15) Thus, Catherine was not only able to inspire her king in his literary career, but also in his general awareness, which

then most probably lead him to make more powerful decisions, -or at least, sounding diplomatic enough.

Several men of literature wrote about Henry, including William Shakespeare himself. In his play, 'Henry VIII', Act II, Scene IV, his character of Catherine of Aragon talks about his husband in an inarguably charming voice:

*The King your father was reputed for
A prince most prudent, of an excellent
And unmatched wit and judgment.
(ll. 45-50)*

Once the cruel, tyrannical and oppressive king Henry VII passed away, a general relief characterised the atmosphere of the society. The treasury was completely full, and the highly acclaimed, 18-year-old, athletic, handsome, and intelligent Henry got the crown. "*The manly king* (Henry VIII) *vigorous, physically imposing, brilliant, and charismatic (...)*" (Bordo, 2013, p. 37) Him having the blood of both houses York and Lancaster, Henry VIII was extensively supported by his nation.

The King's unlimited generosity though costed a rather uncomfortable amount. Henry VIII, in the early years of his reign, spent greatly on favours asked by his closest men of parliament, which then lead to serious financial crises. Going on expensive conquests against France, enabled him to occupy several parts of the country^{xix}, although it resulted in the treasury getting empty.

One of his poems, 'Whoso that will all feats obtain' ^{xx} is again, written on the theme of love, this time in its third phase, wherein the whole institution of love is getting questioned. "*Is worse than death? Let it be proved!*" However, for the first time, the lyric self describes love as the direct or indirect –a matter of the perspective- source of several emotional states, let them be of positive "*for love enforces all noble kind*" or negative "*and disdain discourages all gentle mind*" connotation.

Henry VIII, however, did not collapse, he maintained his pride, since: "Katherine adored him (...) Soon after her marriage, her confessor described her as being in "the greatest *gaiety and contentment that ever there was.*" *All that was needed to complete the royal couple's happiness and secure the succession was a son.*" (Weir, 2000, p. 15)

Thus, the king had to turn back home, with great hopes of a male heir. On 18th February, 1516, after 4 unsuccessful pregnancies, the long awaited heir, Mary Tudor was born.

Chapter II: Anne Boleyn

II.1. If Love Now Reigned as It Hath Been

Catherine of Aragon, neither being able to uphold the diplomatic association between Spain and Britain nor giving birth to a male heir, had, as a queen, failed her duty. Hence Henry searching for a new wife, besides dozens of his mistresses, had laid eyes on one of Catherine's ladies in waiting, Anne Boleyn. *"Katherine knew, as well as Henry did, that she would never bear him another child. She also knew, although she may not have sympathized with, his burning desire for a son. She was a deeply pious woman, and the religious life had appealed to her in the past. There would have been no question of dishonour, and no need to defend her daughter's rights."* (Bordo, 2013, p. 26)

Shakespeare's character, named Suffolk, talks about the King's first divorce and possible new queen in Act III, Scene II of *Henry VIII*:

*The Cardinal's letters to the Pope miscarried
And came to th' eye o' th' King, wherein was read
How that the Cardinal did entreat his Holiness
To stay the judgment o' th' divorce; for if
It did take place, "I do," quoth he, "perceive
My king is tangled in affection to
A creature of the Queen's, Lady Anne Bullen.
(ll. 40-47)*

The Pope denied Henry getting a divorce from Catherine, owing to strict Catholic protocols. Their failed marriage was just on the threshold of becoming a political scandal, which the king could not at all tolerate to happen. *"(...) Thomas Wolsey, anxiously, assured the pope that he would stake his own soul that the king's "conscience is grievously offended" by living in a marriage that was contrary to God's law (...)"* (Bordo, 2013, p. 37)

In the play, the character of Wolsey, being an emotionally mature man discusses the case of Anne (and Catherine) in a rather empathetic tone:

*I know your Majesty has always loved her
So dear in heart not to deny her that
A woman of less place might ask by law:
Scholars allowed freely to argue for her.
(ll. 135-140)*

The King therefore decided to request his council against the Pope by creating a completely separate, independent church: The Anglican Church, of which he became the Supreme Head. *"But it neuer paid anie thing to Rome, bicause it was erected by king Henrie the eight, after*

he had abolished the vsurped authoritie of the pope, except in quéene Maries, if anie such thing were demanded, as I doubt not but it was: yet is it woorth yeerelie 315 pounds, seauen shillings thrée pence, as the booke of first fruits declareth.” (Holinshed, 1577, Chapter II) As a result, the king had finally turned out to be able to divorce Catherine and marry Anne.

In Shakespeare’s play, the character of Catherine describes herself as:

*I am a most poor woman and a stranger,
Born out of your dominions, having here
No judge indifferent nor no more assurance
Of equal friendship and proceeding
(ll. 15-20)*

Meanwhile, “*The woman who had set his (the King’s) heart ablaze was Anne Boleyn.*” (Bordo, 2013, p. 37) While still being married to his first wife, Henry became smitten with Anne. She found her way to the King’s heart so much, that: “*By 1527, he was writing her letters describing being “stricken with the dart of love” for more than a year. The signature of these letters was sometimes accompanied by a tiny heart.*” (Bordo, 2013, p. 37)

Anne Boleyn differed from all of Henry’s previous mistresses, including her own sister, Mary, who once had been Maid of Honour to Katherine. Weir claims, that Anne might have had more ambition to herself than virtue, since she rejected the King’s demand of becoming his lover, or acknowledged mistress: she wished to become Queen. According to the historian, *it was indeed a “piquant and even humbling situation” for Henry, as he imagined himself to be such a great King to encounter.*” (p. 173)

Legend has it that Henry VIII had fallen so head over heels in love with Anne Boleyn that he even had written a traditional English song, ‘Greensleeves’. Concerning him already being a greatly cherished composer and songwriter (and the first king to become one), while even having his own songbook^{xxi}, him writing another love song was resolutely believable. Later, however, it was made clear, that “*Nor did Henry write “Greensleeves,” which is probably Elizabethan in origin and is based on an Italian style of composition that did not reach England until after his death.*” (Weir, 2000, p. 92) Greensleeves is neither included in any of Henry VIII’s songbooks, since it was first recorded in the Stationer’s Register, 1580.

Anne Boleyn was not a simple mistress of Henry VIII. She stayed an exceptionally self-assured woman, who –unfortunately – could not remain self-reliant at the same time. She definitely had a strong will of becoming queen –on the side of Henry VIII –, as the peak of her career, which definitely led to some serious rivalry between her and Queen Catherine later on. Weir claims, that Anne Boleyn focused on her remarkable career, as she publicly debuted at the English court. Formerly, she had been a member of the court of Margaret of Austria,

then spent years in the household of Mary Tudor. Later on, she became Maid of Honour to Queen Claude. Anne had gained a fine education thanks to her time spent at the Burgundian and French courts, and learned “every sophisticated accomplishment”. Anne was therefore undoubtedly noticeable among the ladies at the English court, for she was “so French in her manners.” (p. 159)

Anne Boleyn even wrote her own ‘Books of Hours’, out of which unfortunately only three have remained. ‘Books of Hours’ during the Middle Ages were traditional prayer books, containing a diverse collection of psalms, prayers and further manuscripts, in Tudor times, for example courtly devotion. The books by Anne Boleyn, to this day, draw an exceptional significant illustration of how devotees used an object of religious conviction, with the purpose of exchanging amorous literary artpieces.

In *The Life and Death of Anne Boleyn* (2005) Eric Ives mentions that the books by Anne were mainly written in French, however, some notes and poems are in English. For example, on page 240, the following quote can be found:

*“Remember me when you do pray,
That hope doth lead from day to day.
Anne Boleyn”*

Since –according to Ives – Anne wrote this caption on the theme of the coronation of Catherine, the fact of Anne’s desire of becoming a ruler one day can easily be interpreted. Whereas in Shakespeare’s *Henry VIII*, the character of Anne makes some rather ambiguous declaration about herself becoming queen, for instance in Act II, Scene III:

*How you do talk!
I swear again, I would not be a queen
For all the world.
(ll.55-58)*

In the same scene, the character of Anne is also represented as being fairly indistinct about the Queen herself, contrary to real-life events:

*Not for that neither. Here’s the pang that pinches:
His Highness having lived so long with her, and she
So good a lady that no tongue could ever
Pronounce dishonor of her—by my life,
She never knew harm-doing! —O, now, after
So many courses of the sun enthroned,
Still growing in a majesty and pomp, the which
To leave a thousandfold more bitter than
'Tis sweet at first t’ acquire—after this process,
To give her the avaunt!
It is a pity Would move a monster.
(ll. 5-10)*

According to the popular legend, Henry wrote the song to Anne, during the early years of their courtship, while Henry was still married to Catherine. Anne and her sister being members of Catherine's Ladies, most probably, Henry was able to make contact with Anne, with ease. The fact of Henry –as a regular king of the time – having dozens of mistresses besides his wives had never been a secret. In her study, Weir claims that *“Henry conducted this affair with even more discretion than he had the last, so much so that there is hardly any contemporary evidence for it. We only know about it because, in 1528, Henry asked the Pope to give a dispensation for him to marry Anne Boleyn even though he had placed himself within the forbidden degrees of affinity with her by having sexual intercourse with her sister.”* (p. 148)

Anne Boleyn, as stated before, was unlike any other mistress of Henry VIII. He wrote not only poems and songs for her, but also, in great courtly tradition, wrote numerous “lengthy, anecdote-filled” (p. 24) – love letters to her. At the end of his letters, Henry usually drew little hearts, symbolising his love and affection for Anne. *“Wordplay between lovers was very popular at the Tudor court, with each adopting ciphers composed of initial letters. When Henry VIII wrote to Anne Boleyn, he often ended his letters with a cipher, enclosing her initials within a heart.* (p. 28) Not only did the generous king draw and write about his feelings for Anne, but also represented them via precious and expensive gifts, such as jewellery, or dresses. *“Jewellery in the form of ciphers was common.”* (p. 28)

Unfortunately, the answers from Anne Boleyn were possibly destroyed by the queen consort herself. As Weir claims, courtly love did not necessarily involve actual affection. Her explanation is that in some cases it was the lady's “favour and kindness, expressed through profitable patronage” that the man in question required to accomplish. Courtly love was also habitually held responsible for treachery, although physicality as such was not its chief purpose. Henry VIII led his courtships in keeping with its “rules”, though, he was a man just like any other, who was mainly driven by sexual desire. (p. 28)

Due to the admiration of their courtship and the lack of Anne's responses to the letters, *“mainstream fascination with Henry VIII, Anne Boleyn, and the Tudor court has remained fairly consistent throughout the past several decades”* as claimed in ‘A Social Edition of the Devonshire Manuscript’. However, during recent years the public interest had broadened into not only the literature of Henry and Anne, but that of the Tudor period en bloc.

Therefore, some literary pieces from the early Tudor era were able to maintain an existence, including The Devonshire Manuscript, which is a completely hand-written

miscellany –or rather anthology – of chivalrous poetry collected by several members of Henry VIII's court and Anne Boleyn's trusted contacts. Mary Shelton, Anne's cousin, Lady Margaret Douglas, a niece of the king, and Lady Mary FitzRoy the Duchess of Richmond, the sister of Henry Howard^{xxii}, being the only daughter-in-law of Henry VIII; They not only assembled the majority of prevalent, high-class poems, but also incorporated fragments of their own poetry.

The Manuscript is considered to be the most extensive piece of early Tudor poetry and an accurate representation of artistic ventures of Renaissance women. Henry VIII could not have been the only one getting his inspiration from qualified 16th century ladies, henceforth, among the lines of the Devonshire Manuscript, literary pieces on the theme of female virtue (or wickedness) can be found, including the collected lines of Richard Hattfield:

*“All women have vertues noble & excelent
Who can perceyve that / they do offend
dayly / they serve god with good intent
Seldome / they dysplease there husbandes to theyr lyves end
Always / to plese them they do intend /
shrewdness neuer / man may fynd in them srewdnes
comonly / suche condycyons they haue more & lese*

In the first stanza, the institution of marriage is in focus, presented by an image of the relationship of women and their husbands, with a minor insight of religious values. In this stanza, from a female perspective, the main active character is in fact the female, (or women as such) as they have two simultaneous activities: actively serving God, by which, indirectly displeasing their husbands. The term “shrewdness” in the 6th line can also be interpreted in two ways, one of them being about women's wittiness, the other about their general “shrew-y” behaviour after getting married. (An earlier example can be Shakespeare's ‘*The Taming of the Shrew*’, 1623)

*What man can percyve that women be evyll
euery man that hathe wytt . gretly wyll them prayse
ffor vyce : they Abhorre with all theyre wyll
prudence mercy & pacyence ./ they vse always
ffoly wrathe & cruelte / they hate As men says
meknes meekness & all vertue . they prattyse euer
syn . to Avoyde vertues they do procure*

The second stanza is written from a male perspective. In contrast to the previous one, it features men as the active character and their perception about women and their above mentioned wittiness: “Every man that has wit” being in their right mind to decide how they

wish to perceive women in their lives. Women are also said to “practice every sin”, as a contrasting perspective to the first stanza’s theme of serving God with good intent.

*Sum men speke mucche evyll be women
truly . theyfore they be to blame
nothyng . A man may chekk in them
haboundantly . they haue of grace & good fame
Lakkyng . few vertues to A good name
in them fynd ye . All constantnes
shrewdness they lak perde . all shrewdnes As I ges”*

The last stanza functions as a conclusion to the previous ones, from both perspectives. It can also be interpreted as a dialogue between the female and male character, depending on the use of punctuation. For instance, where it is mentioned, that “some men say, women are evil” or “they have of grace and good fame—lacking”. The poem as a whole serves a whole perspective on the differences of men and women, with a highlight on women’s ambiguous temperament. In this sense, the poem can be interpreted as an extraordinary approach to the question of both contemporary feminism and – toxic – masculinity.

The Manuscript also contains examples of the earliest Tudor courtly poems, together with the works of Sir Thomas Wyatt, of which one of the most eminent is ‘My Lute Awake’.

*“My lute awake! Perform the last
Labour that thou and I shall waste,
And end that I have now begun;
For when this song is sung and past,
My lute be still, for I have done.*

*As to be heard where ear is none,
As lead to grave in marble stone,
My song may pierce her heart as soon;
Should we then sigh or sing or moan?
No, no, my lute, for I have done.*

*The rocks do not so cruelly
Repulse the waves continually,
As she my suit and affection;
So that I am past remedy,
Whereby my lute and I have done.”*

‘My Lute Awake’ is a perfect example for courtly love poetry of the era. According to ‘*The English Lyrics of the Henry VIII Manuscript*’ (1997) by Siemens, “My Lute Awake” a poet can be seen, singing to his “instrument of accompaniment” talks to his adored female addressee of his stanzas in a rather straightforward manner. (...) In order to comprehend the archetypal

notions of the lyric –related to its musicality- of the English Renaissance, (...) and noting the musical situation implied by a poetic piece of literature –for example this one of Wyatt-, the reader can also recognise how many lyrical manuscripts of the early years of the English Renaissance appear in both forms: completely non-musical pieces and as those directly customised to musical compositions. As a conclusion, (...) a component of the lyric mode can be identified, which “crossed, or disregarded, the boundaries between song and verse.” (pp. 32, 33)

II.2. To Lovers I Put Now Sure This Case

IN turning over in my mind the contents of your last letters, I have put myself into great agony, not knowing how to interpret them, whether to my disadvantage, as you show in some places, or to my advantage, as I understand them in some others, beseeching you earnestly to let me know expressly your whole mind as to the love between us two. (First part of the first love letter of Henry VIII to Anne Boleyn, 1527)

On the word of the first few lines of the first letter, Henry could definitely be willingly affectionate towards women he was interested in, but according to Weir, never embarrassingly so. *“It has been suggested that he was not an inspiring or romantic lover, but his letters to Anne Boleyn, (...) prove that he was capable of deep passion and sentimental feeling. The fact that Anne Boleyn held him off for at least six years proves not that Henry lacked ardour, but that he was too much of a knight and a gentleman to resort to rape.”* (Weir, 2000, p. 88)

The letters perfectly represent the possible core of the romantic connection between the King and Anne. Altogether, there are seventeen letters, dating from 1527 to 1529, and they can be found in the Vatican archives today. However, as mentioned before, unfortunately, the replies of Anne Boleyn got lost. In the letters of the King, he directly declares his deep desires of retaining his wondered woman, both mentally and physically. In one letter, the King writes to Anne: *“Henceforth my heart shall be dedicate to you alone, greatly desirous that so my body could be as well”* – by which it becomes crystal clear that Henry had not only been a high and dry romantic, but a rather passionate lover as well. *“I wish you in my arms”* – Henry declares in another letter. He also referred to himself as a servant repeatedly in his letters, which indicates a feeling of a perhaps little unhealthily passionate yet inarguably strong connection. *“Written by the hand of the servant who in heart, body and will is, Your loyal and most ensured servant: H.R.”* Most probably, however, Henry VIII did not suffer from Stockholm Syndrome, or at least, obviously, was not diagnosed with

it. He sometimes even requested Anne to: *“Give yourself up, body and soul, to me, (...) at this time private with you.”*

Henry VIII, was neither not afraid to express his rather extraordinary erotic desires. In the tenth letter, he told Anne rather courageously, that he was about to send her *“some flesh, representing my name, which is hart’s flesh for Henry, prognosticating that hereafter you must enjoy some of mine, which I would were now. . . I would we were together an evening.”*

In the same letter, Henry also wrote about Anne’s sister, Mary.

As touching your sister’s matter, I have caused Walter Welze to write to my lord my mind therein, whereby I trust that Eve shall not have power to deceive Adam; for surely, whatsoever is said, it cannot so stand with his honour but that he must needs take her, his natural daughter, now in her extreme necessity.

The lines about Eve and Adam signify Henry’s magnitude of both literal and theological acquaintance, by using biblical metaphors, precisely in accordance with the style of the literature of the era. Several ideas of Catholicism are present in the letters of the King, which perfectly shows his reliance of the pope of the time, since the Church of England was yet to be founded. *“In one letter he refers to his having had rooms prepared for Anne at court, “which I trust ere long to cause you occupy; and then I trust to occupy yours.”* As Weir claims, it *“must have required all Anne’s strength and presence of mind to resist such passionate addresses.* (Weir, 2000, p. 181)

Severe ambivalence can be found in the tone of the letters, as some of them are having a highlight on the romantic side of the relationship, while others were written under the lines of the institution of practicum.

One letter was written with “the hand of him that longeth to be yours,” while another ended with him “wishing myself, specially an evening, in my sweetheart’s arms, whose pretty dukkys [breasts] I trust shortly to kiss.” Growing ever more ardent, he avowed in a later letter: “I trust within a while after to enjoy that which I have so longed for, to both our comforts. . . . I would you were in my arms, or I in yours, for I think it long since I kissed you.” (p. 181)

By letter 15, 1528, the King had started to mention several problems of their relationship itself. He even told Anne, that they could not continue their romantic involvement *“till you repair hither”*. Although he called Anne “Darling” a tone of despair can be felt all through the lines.

DARLING, Though I have scant leisure, yet, remembering my promise, I thought it convenient to certify you briefly in what case our affairs stand. As touching a lodging for you, we have got one by my lord cardinal’s means, the like whereof could not have been found hereabouts for all causes, as this bearer shall more show you.

The King ended this letter “*written with the hand of him which I would were Yours.*” The tone and vocabulary of the letters show how the courtship of Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn changed and developed year-by-year. Putting a period to an era, the final section of the last love letter of the King to Anne, “*written with the hand which fain would be yours, and so is the heart*”, goes:

The unfeigned sickness of this well-willing legate doth somewhat retard his access to your person; but I trust verily, when God shall send him health, he will with diligence recompense his demur. For I know well where he hath said (touching the saying and bruit that he is thought imperial) that it shall be well known in this matter that he is not imperial; and thus, for lack of time, sweetheart, farewell.

II.3. It Is Not for Him, We Know It Well

*“O, my heart! and O, my heart,
It is so sore!
Since I must needs from my Love depart;
And know no cause wherefore!”^{xxiii}*

“Farewell! a long farewell, to all my greatness!”^{xxiv}

“Until 1528, Henry VIII enjoyed good health, but from then on he was troubled by a series of minor ailments. He began to suffer feverish headaches and “rheums,” which could have been due to catarrh, migraine, rising blood pressure, or even the head injuries he had received. (...). His surgeon, Thomas Vicary, temporarily cured it, but it would later recur.” (Weir, 2000, p. 186)

King Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn got married 5 years later, in January, 1533. They enjoyed spending time together as they had several interests in common, including dancing, hunting, or even making poetry and composing musical pieces. According to Weir, just like Henry, Anne was also devoted to music. She would play the lute, and was skilled on her clavichord, which she adored decorating with some green ribbons. Anne is also said to have composed her own songs and even written theatricals, but unfortunately, none of her works are remained an existence. Anne was also described as talented in dancing, similarly to Henry. What is more, she even developed many new steps “which are yet known by her name or those of the gallant partners with whom she danced them.” (p. 175) Anne, with a French spirit, inspired Henry VIII in several ways. She talked, danced and dressed like a true Frenchwoman, by which she brought a fresh and vibrant atmosphere to the essential of English tradition and manners. “*Anne was still predominantly French in her ways. She was “very expert in the*

French tongue” and, given her graceful manners, no one would have taken her to be English, “but a Frenchwoman born.” (p. 176)

“Henry was probably a little in awe of this formidable woman with her strident opinions and inflammable temper, and certainly resentful towards her. However, she was his queen and it was hoped that he would soon honour her as the mother of his son.” (p. 238) Although their relationship started as one of the fairy-tale kind, it unfortunately did not end like one. Anne, just like Catherine, had failed her duty as queen. Neither were able to give birth to a male heir. Instead, to Henry’s sorrow, Anne Boleyn gave birth to an infant daughter, who later became one of the most significant queens of British history, Queen Elizabeth I. By 1535, the relationship between her and Henry VIII had weakened significantly, *“despite their show of cheerfulness” (p. 238)* Anne was not considered to be that fresh, appealing French-inspired woman who had captured the heart of the King, as she started aging. *“Chapuys was soon to refer to her as “that thin old woman,” and one courtier described her as “extremely ugly.” (p. 238)* Anne started several arguments with Henry in public, by laughing at his clothes and his poetry, for example. She was even said to be bored in the company of her King. *“She remained unpopular and controversial, and her very existence was a barrier to a closer understanding with the Emperor. She exercised so much influence over public affairs that it was said that she wielded more authority than Henry or Cromwell.” (p. 238)* These aspects, that caused a rather uncomfortable atmosphere of their relationship, altogether led to Henry’s fatal decision over Anne’s destiny. Anne Boleyn got accused of adultery, incest and conspiracy against the king.

Anne’s brother and sister were notorious for their sexual adventures, and even her mother’s reputation was suspect. Given such a background, it is hard to believe that she had remained virtuous, and almost certain therefore that her calculated refusal to succumb to the King’s advances stemmed from self-interest and ambition rather than her much vaunted moral principles.” (p. 176)

On 19 May, 1536, after being found guilty, she was taken to the Tower of London, where she was beheaded by no other than a French swordsman. In addition, this makes her the only person not executed with an axe, as a way from the king of showing mercy. Anne Boleyn, second wife of Henry VIII, is contemporarily referred to as ‘Queen of a Thousand Days’ as she was married to the king for 3 years and 3 months. During her last days in the Tower, Anne Boleyn was still able to honour literature and write her last 2 poems, ‘Defiled Is My Name Full Sore’ and ‘O Death, Rock Me Asleep’. ‘Defiled Is My Name Full Sore’ is on

the theme of her innocence, while 'O Death, Rock Me Asleep' is a poem on the acceptance of the unescapable prison of her destiny.

Defiled Is My Name Full Sore

*Defiled is my name full sore
Through cruel spite and false report,
That I may say for evermore,
Farewell, my joy! Adieu comfort!
For wrongfully ye judge of me
Unto my fame a mortal wound,
Say what ye list, it will not be,
Ye seek for that can not be found.
/Anne Boleyn, 1536*

'Defiled Is My Name Full Sore' is an easily interpretable literary piece about Anne's despair about being decapitated soon. However, the piece is not a simple farewell-note, since the lyric self does not bid her adieu to an audience or loved ones, but to her own feelings and sensations, such as joy or comfort. Her innocence is mentioned by the 5th line, which states her being wrongfully judged.

O Death, Rock Me Asleep
"O Death, rock me asleep,
Bring me to quiet rest,
Let pass my weary guiltless ghost
Out of my careful breast.
Toll on, thou passing bell;
Ring out my doleful knell;
Let thy sound my death tell.
Death doth draw nigh;
There is no remedy.
My pains who can express?
Alas, they are so strong;
My dolour will not suffer strength
My life for to prolong.
Toll on, thou passing bell;
Ring out my doleful knell;
Let thy sound my death tell.

/Anne Boleyn, 1536

*Death doth draw nigh;
There is no remedy.
Alone in prison strong
I wait my destiny.
Woe worth this cruel hap that I
Should taste this misery!
Toll on, thou passing bell;
Ring out my doleful knell;
Let thy sound my death tell.
Death doth draw nigh;
There is no remedy.
Farewell, my pleasures past,
Welcome, my present pain!
I feel my torments so increase
That life cannot remain.
Cease now, thou passing bell;
Rung is my doleful knell;
For the sound my death doth tell.
Death doth draw nigh;
There is no remedy."*

In contrast to the previous poem, 'O Death, Rock Me Asleep' is written on the theme of admitting to one's unchangeable fate, "I wait my destiny". The piece can be read as a prayer to Death itself, "Bring me to quiet rest" or the reappearing "Toll on thou passing bell". The last stanza connects to the previous poem in its leading idea: saying goodbye to life itself, past pleasures and present pain.

Chapter III: Jane Seymour

III.1. An Bliss Obtain At Our Last End

*“O my good lord, that comfort comes too late;
’Tis like a pardon after execution”^{xxv}*

A few days following the execution of Anne, king Henry VIII was offered the hand of a French princess, Madeleine. Nonetheless, as he himself declared, he was no more interested in French manners, as they had had too much experience of it already. On 30 May, however, the king married another young and possibly-fertile enough wife material woman, a previous maid-of-honour to Queen Catherine, Jane Seymour; In the hopes of finally getting a male heir, which desire of his finally became reality.

About the early life of Jane Seymour, not a considerable amount of documents has remained, as she had not been considered important enough. Her parents were only “second-rate gentries”, as a result of which, a document with a clear birthdate of hers is likewise absent; as she was born into a family of twelve, with several brothers, her birth was not considered to be an event of significance. However, out of her 9 siblings, only 5 survived until adulthood. Jane Seymour, just like her husband, was never meant to become a monarch. Unlike Henry’s previous wives, she could barely read and could only write her signature, for she did not receive a proper education. She was, however, talented –according to the conventions of the era – in many of the contemporarily acknowledged “ladylike abilities”, like sewing and embroidery: she was a “woman of consummate art”. Owing to these, the influence of Jane on Henry’s literary work could be interpreted as essentially making him take a break. This raises the question: was the obnoxious lady-killer an empathetic romantic in reality? Though not continuing his intellectual journey, Henry was recorded to raise an interest in embroidery^{xxvi} himself, just like his third wife did.

On 12 October 1537, for Henry’s great delight, Jane gave birth to a male child, the future King Edward VI, making her the only wife of the king that was able to maintain the idyllic –male- bloodline. However, unfortunately, following the jubilation of the new heir, only two weeks later, Jane died of post-delivery consequences. Subsequently to her death, Henry wore black for 3 months. Jane was the only one to receive a queen’s funeral, and was buried into a customised grave, the making of Henry ordered.

Jane Seymour, not being able to read and write, not recorded to be particularly wealthy or beautiful, still earned the privilege of being the favourite wife of King Henry VIII, for being able to produce an appropriate heir to the throne. During the mourning phase of the

widowed king, he gained weight, which lead to his diabetes and several other health issues. The third wife of King Henry VIII, who did not write a single poem or love letter to the king, who had so little influence on the majority of society that even Shakespeare did not mention her in his play about the king. Jane Seymour, the woman who did not even participate in significant literary activities, was still able to play a part in Henry's intellectual journey and inspire him in a way that no one else could. Years later, according to Henry's will, he even ordered to be buried next to her.

Conclusion:

The artpieces of King Henry VIII definitely have their place in literary history. His songs, poems and letters present several components of his own personality, with a glance of uniqueness, for not being perfectly truthful to the status quo of the era. Henry broadened the comprehension of the poetic genre he decided to work within; thanks to his wives, he gave courtly love lyrics a rather subjective personal tone, and he even created a more prominent lyrical individual persona.

Being the second son of Elizabeth of York gave Henry the opportunity of improving his artistic talents from an incredibly young age. Gained from his mother in his childhood years, his extraordinary awareness in theology, music and literature made it possible for Henry VIII to become one of the most highly regarded poets of his time.

As the women surrounding him helped the king making a noticeable effort to become a person of arts, he laid the foundation of the new era of the institution of courtly love, with his love letters, songs and poems written to the ladies he loved dearly. As a lyricist and songwriter, in his own court, he defended the honoured traditions of the troubadours, while renewing the genre itself. However, the works of Henry VIII are not only the odds and ends of the era of the troubadours, but also the beginning of a whole new kind of self-expression within an extended literary genre. The lyrics could also be interpreted as a straight line response to the concerns about the lack of an appropriate male heir in which neither Catherine, nor Anne, but only Jane Seymour was successful.

Lest we forget about Henry marrying three other women after his beloved third wife. Since no literary pieces recorded from that period of his life made an existence for today, what can be stated is that following Jane's death, Henry's main focus of life changed. He had no need in following the courtly traditions of the era, as he had lived his –love– life to the fullest already. His very first attempt of love, his original but inherited wife, Katherine of Aragon lead him to a mature and intellectual quality of the institution of chivalry, with several ground-breaking love poems. Her, already, possibly changed Henry's attention slightly, as she could not bring a proper male heir to him. Following Katherine, Henry married the stunning, free-minded, French-spirited woman, Anne Boleyn; with whom he could practice his new interest in the more prosaic form of love letters, as the golden age of his courtship. Finally, he reached his completion, by receiving a male heir from his favourite wife of all, with no more need to chase an idealised woman with his literary gift.

The pieces written by king Henry VIII, being full of ambiguity, just like that about him of William Shakespeare, with phrases about love and courtship, of both positive and negative connotations, bring a sensation of solemn thoughtfulness and literary awareness. Shakespeare was able to create an image of the King and his ladies – especially the first two wives of his – by which their courtship became an institution of a much deeper meaning and importance. With every poem and letter, Henry started to use more and more ways of expression in connection with his emotional state; by which the obviousness of his development in literature becomes confirmed. It seems to have remained ironic, though, that Henry's "career" as a poet comes to an end when he marries the woman who is capable of gifting him with what his royal heart has always desired, and there are no poems whatsoever to chronicle their relationship.

Notes:

Lusty Youth Should Us Ensue, Henry VIII,

ⁱⁱ If Love Now Reigned as It Hath Been, Henry VIII

ⁱⁱⁱ If Love Now Reigned as It Hath Been, Henry VIII

^{iv} If Love Now Reigned as It Hath Been, Henry VIII

^v Lusty Youth Should Us Ensue, Henry VIII

^{vi} Lusty Youth Should Us Ensue, Henry VIII

^{vii} „Much of Henry’s bad reputation comes from his eventful (to say the least) marital life.” (Pruitt, 2018, History) „Henry’s reputation as a magnificent, liberal, and talented prince spread throughout Europe.” (Weir, 2000, p. 64)

Yet by the time he died in 1547, he had acquired the reputation of a tyrant whose hands were soaked in the blood of the many he had executed (p. 04)

^{viii} Writing Explained. (2017, September 17). What Does Behind Every Great Man Is A Great Woman Mean? <https://writingexplained.org/idiom-dictionary/behind-every-great-man-is-a-great-woman>

^{ix} Alas, What Shall I Do For Love, Henry VIII, 1518

^x Henry VIII’s infamous nickname, given following him being issued with cheap currency.

Barksdale, N. (2018, September 1). 8 Things You May Not Know About Henry VIII.

HISTORY. <https://www.history.com/news/8-things-you-probably-didnt-know-about-henry-viii>

^{xi} 1458-1603

^{xii} Arthur, Prince of Wales, Duke of Cornwall, firstborn son of Henry VII.

^{xiii} Catherine of Aragon, Spanish princess.

^{xiv} Margaret and Mary Tudor

^{xv} Unlike his father, since Weir confirms, that Henry VII, indeed might have been cruel to young Henry. In her study, she states: “The Prince’s cousin, Reginald Pole, later claimed that Henry VII hated his son, “having no affection or fancy unto him.”-

^{xvi} A Refrain, by Henry VIII, cc 1518

^{xvii} *Pastime with good company
I love and shall unto I die;
Grudge who list, but none deny,
So God be pleased thus live will I.
For my pastance
Hunt, song, and dance.
My heart is set:
All goodly sport
For my comfort,
Who shall me let?*

*Youth must have some dalliance,
Of good or illé some pastance;
Company methinks then best
All thoughts and fancies to dejest:
For idleness
Is chief mistress
Of vices all.
Then who can say*

*But mirth and play
Is best of all?*

*Company with honesty
Is virtue vices to flee:
Company is good and ill
But every man hath his free will.
The best ensue,
The worst eschew,
My mind shall be:
Virtue to use,
Vice to refuse,
Shall I use me.*

^{xviii} <https://symbolsage.com/ivy-symbolism-and-meaning/>

^{xix} Including Therouanne and Calais, following the Battle of the Sprouts on the 6th of August, 1513.

^{xx} *Whoso that will all feats obtain
In love he must be without disdain.
For love enforces all noble kind,
And disdain discourages all gentle mind.
Wherefore, to love and be not loved
Is worse than death? Let it be proved!
Love encourages, and makes one bold;
Disdain abates and makes him cold.
Love is given to God and man —
To woman also, I think the same.
But disdain is vice, and should be refused,
Yet nevertheless it is too much used.
Great pity it were, love for to compel
With disdain, both false and subtle.*

^{xxi} Henry VIII's songbook, ~1518; *Jane Mallard*, Henry VIII's Psalter, cc. 1540

^{xxii} Earl of Surrey, 1st cousin of Anne Boleyn and Catherine Howard, a founder of English Renaissance poetry, credited for the development of the Shakespearean sonnet

^{xxiii} Oh, My Hear, by King Henry VIII, cc. 1518

^{xxiv} Henry VIII, Act III, Scene 2, William Shakespeare

^{xxv} Henry VIII, Act IV, Scene 2, William Shakespeare

^{xxvi} 'England's Royal School of Needlework' (2011). CBS <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r1lQDmMScU>

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