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The Role and Influence of Anne Boleyn

In 16th century England, the concept of gender equality was entirely foreign to nearly all citizens. The idea of organized feminism did not emerge until the mid-19th century, and the influential American feminist movement followed over a hundred years later (“The Women’s Movement”). While a modern feminist is often defined as “a person who believes in the social, economic and political equality of the sexes” (Adichie), it can be difficult to label women advocating for their rights before first-wave feminism had yet to be introduced. For this reason, historians have coined the term “proto-feminist” to describe individuals who anticipated the movement, but cannot accurately be identified as a part of it. At the time of the Protestant Reformation, the role of women began to shift. While it was centuries prior to any form of a structured feminist campaign, individuals began to support women’s rights through their actions, words, and increased power roles/resistance to restrictive gender expectations. One woman, Anne Boleyn, who served as the Queen of England for three years, managed to subtly champion women’s rights in her own way. During her short but impactful reign, Anne Boleyn defied 16th century societal norms ultimately establishing herself as a proto-feminist.

For Great Britain, the 16th century served as a period of unrest and change. Despite this, traditional expectations of a women’s place in society remained. The time was heavily dominated by men, while women were expected to remain “meek and submissive” (Lambert). As women were viewed as the “weaker sex” (when regarding physical strength and endurance), the idea that they required care and guidance by their male superior was established. The opportunity for women to make decisions for themselves were few: marriages were arranged, education was generally prohibited, and careers often did not exist outside of the position of a housewife .

Women were prevented from inheriting their family's titles or money, causing them to constantly be in "possession" of either their family or husband (Trueman). This led to a woman's inability to speak out, utilize her power, or showcase her intellectual ability. From the time she was born, the life of a woman was paved, with little room for her to select her own path.

When evaluating the common standards of a 16th century woman, Anne Boleyn's explicit resistance of the expectations immediately becomes clear. Not only was she literate (as proved by her correspondence with King Henry) but she forged the way for her marriage. Refusing to remain a mistress, Anne Boleyn, through her powers of persuasion, became Henry VIII's wife, and, subsequently, queen. Further, Anne continued to defy these standards throughout her lifetime. Her life came to an end when she was accused and ultimately beheaded counts of treason, adultery, and incest, which she denied. Before the execution was complete, Anne protested these claims. She described her "jealous fancies" and her failure to demonstrate to the king "that humility which his goodness to me, and the honours to which he raised me, merited" (Weir). Rather than outright denying the charges against her, she admitted to a different "crime": not remaining in her expected "place" as a wife, mother, and queen. In her final address, she recognizes her transgression against the behavioral norms of a woman, and how that has led to the subsequent harsh consequences. Henry's decision to order an execution (as opposed to an annulment) is assumed to lie in the fear her control instilled in him (de Lisle). As she continued to break social norms and assert what limited power was afforded to her, she assumed a role yet to be experienced by women.

Around the year 1501, Anne Boleyn was born at Bickling Castle in Norfolk, England into a family of nobility. Her father, Sir Thomas Boleyn, later became the Earl of Wiltshire and

Ormonde, and her mother, Lady Elizabeth Howard, served as a lady-in-waiting at the royal court. Anne spent her youth in France, and did not return to England until 1522 when she followed in her mother's footsteps and established her place in King Henry VIII's court (Hanson). Originally, Anne was set to marry the Earl of Numberland, Henry Percy, until King Henry VIII, infatuated with his lady-in-waiting, ordered against it (Norton 74). In 1526, King Henry began to make advances towards Anne. Following the dissolution of his marriage with Catherine of Aragon (and, subsequently, the separation from the Roman Catholic Church), Henry VIII married Anne Boleyn in 1533. Later that year, she was coronated as the Queen of England. At the time of her marriage, Anne was already pregnant with Henry's child. While Henry expected the baby to be a boy, she gave birth to the future Queen Elizabeth I. Anne failed to produce a male heir during their next three years of marriage, and Henry soon became interested in another woman of the royal court: Jane Seymour. In 1536, Anne Boleyn was beheaded on false counts of adultery, incest, and conspiracy, as ordered by King Henry VIII ("Henry VIII").

As the second of Henry's six wives, Anne Boleyn may have appeared as merely a pawn in the royal court's game. During the 16th century, the English monarchy was known as the Tudor Dynasty. Coming into power in 1485, the House of Tudor was a Welsh/English royal house which remained until 1603 -- ending with Anne Boleyn's daughter, Elizabeth, who died without a legitimate heir. The second monarch in the Tudor Dynasty was none other than Henry VIII himself. Roughly ten years older than Anne Boleyn, he was never expected to take the throne until the death of his brother, Arthur. In an attempt to affirm the Tudor's relations with Spain, Henry married Arthur's widow, the princess of Spain: Catherine of Aragon ("The Tudors"). When she failed to produce a male heir, Henry VIII sought an annulment of their

marriage. After being refused by the pope, Henry appointed himself as Head of Church, subsequently separating England from the Roman Catholic Church. With the recent rise of Protestantism across Europe, in accordance with the recent separation, a call for reform had effectively begun in England. Through this division, the Church of England (later known as the Anglican Church) formed, enabling King Henry to successfully annul his marriage (“Henry VIII”).

Despite being one of many, Anne Boleyn separated herself early on in her courtship with Henry VIII. While their marriage was short, they had maintained an extended relationship, dating back to 1526 (Schmid). Their original courtship was heavily documented through correspondence -- specifically, Henry’s numerous love letters. Their interactions through letter writing continued up until her execution, with documents of each of her responses to his incriminations (Malham, John and Oldys, William 183-201). Of his six wives, Henry’s pursuit, attraction, and infatuation is only recorded through letters for Anne Boleyn. She is set apart from the rest through the origins, nature, and documented dynamic of the relationship. Further, Anne Boleyn differentiates herself through the way she asserts the limited power awarded to her as queen and manipulates her relationship with Henry VIII.

Anne Boleyn is often identified in particular (of Henry’s six wives), due to her assumed role as a catalyst for the Protestant Reformation. Of course, this is not false -- Henry’s desire to wed her sparked the necessity for annulment (ultimately leading to the separation of England and the Roman Catholic Church) -- but Anne Boleyn’s significance goes beyond regarding her simply as a *figure* for change. Rather, Anne Boleyn words and actions designate

her as representative pushing for gender equality, the epitome of resistance to 16th century norms.

Labeling Anne Boleyn as a type of feminist requires liberties to be taken with the definition of the term. Typically, feminism is defined as, “the belief that men and women deserve equal rights and opportunities,” and it is accepted that a feminist is one who supports and advocates for this idea (“100 Women”). While it is true that Anne Boleyn failed to ever articulate the trivialization of women or challenge the patriarchal society of 16th century England, there was no opportunity or appropriate forum for her to do so. Tudor England presented no possibilities in which this would be well-received (“The Tudors”), and thus Anne resorted to subtle actions and assertions of power.

There is no doubt that Anne Boleyn had been introduced to the topic of gender equality. During her years in France, Anne Boleyn served as a lady-in-waiting to Queen Claude, alongside a woman known as Marguerite de Navarre (Hanson), whom Anne later described, through a letter, to have made strong impressions on her. A Protestant married to a Catholic, de Navarre is widely regarded as a peacemaker in the time of fierce religious warfare. Promoting literacy and protestantism, she is known for her radical views on Christianity. Further, Marguerite is also remembered for her work, *Heptameron*, which drew attention toward feminist ideologies and misogynistic beliefs (Webber). This collection of 72 short stories depicts men and women trapped in a confined space with one another, arguing over a variety of issues, with the predominant one regarding sexes. Her action alone of writing and publishing verse (as she was one of very few women to do so at the time) stands as a call for gender equality. Historian Mary Potter, author of *Gender Equality and Gender Hierarchy in Calvin's Theology* described

Navarre, “affirm the equality of women and men before both God *and* humankind.” This is accurate as she is often referred to as a “biblical feminist,” addressing both her revolutionary ideas in terms of both religion and advocacy of women’s rights (Sommers). While Anne Boleyn’s path searching for gender inequality did not exactly resemble that of de Navarres, her influence -- through religion and breaking gender restrictions -- on Anne can be identified as she embraced feminism in her own way.

Susan Bordo, a modern feminist philosopher and Professor of Women and Gender Studies at the University of Kentucky wrote the 2013 historical biography, *The Creation of Anne Boleyn: A New Look at England’s Most Notorious Queen*. In describing Anne Boleyn, Bordo states: “Blushing bride, boisterous husband; it was just the way it was supposed to be. But Anne was not a blusher. Spontaneous and intense in an era when women were supposed to silently provide a pleasing backdrop for men’s adventures, Anne had never ‘stayed in her place’ (78). Through her coercion of King Henry VIII, Anne rose through the ranks to become arguably the most powerful woman in England. Her success was entirely a result of her own doing. Her rise from Henry VIII attempting to make her his mistress (during her days as a lady-in-waiting), to making her his wife may have been short-lived and selfish, but it was nonetheless unprecedented (Ryrie 358-360). Anne broke barriers: she refused to remain complacent among her male superiors and succumb to the expected mold of a 16th century English woman. Rather, she took advantage of her situation, involving herself in church reform, manipulating King Henry VIII, and ultimately establishing herself as a rarity of her time.

While Anne is most often recognized for her role as a catalyst for the Protestant Reformation, her beliefs and actions in transforming religion can be reinterpreted as evidence of

her push for feminism. In her contributions to “The Blackwell Companion to Protestantism,” author and professor at the Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary, Cynthia L. Rigby writes:

Since the time of the Reformation, feminist thinkers have raised their voices from among the Protestant ranks. As disciplined Christian believers, they have drawn from Protestant doctrine in arguing for the full inclusion of women in every sphere of life. They have loved the tradition, they have critiqued it, and they have contributed to shaping it (334-5).

Since English historian and martyrologist John Foxe’s *Book of Martyrs* (a polemical account of numerous Protestants who suffered under the Catholic Church) was published in 1563, Anne has been widely accepted as a Protestant reformer. While she never openly presented herself as a Protestant, she certainly embodied a variety of qualities as that of a religious reformer. Anne often indulged in reading radical religious literature, leading her to favor biblical translations and be identified as a schismatic (Bernard). Further, Anne is often described as a Protestant martyr by emphasizing her acceptance of death, rather than its causes, as martyrs are often used to teach “the art of dying well in the Christian faith,” and is a theme which Foxe implements to identify many of his chosen martyrs (Foxe).

While Anne Boleyn *did* exemplify aspects of a Protestant reformer, much of this designation stems from her role in the separation of England from the Roman Catholic Church, as well as the impact her daughter (Queen Elizabeth I) had on the Protestant faith. In regards to the latter, Anne did not hold significant influence over her daughter, having died when she was still young. While Elizabeth was an open Protestant (who is credited with restoring Protestantism to England), Anne was a product of the times, and had yet to fully embrace the emerging faith

(Hanson). When it comes to the former justification, it must be noted that Anne's true impact in the separation between the Church and England lay in her manipulation of Henry VIII.

Ultimately, she had very little impact on the actual separation, but *did* serve as the spark to the annulment, and, subsequently, the disunion (Norton). Again, it is important to remember that her role in prompting this separation was a result of her desire to marry King Henry, and her ability in successfully obtaining her goal. Ultimately, Anne's Protestant leanings were a demonstration of her push for power as a woman, leading to the conclusion of her role as a proto-feminist.

Anne's influence over Henry VIII -- which led him to seek an annulment with Catherine of Aragon -- is well documented through correspondence between the two. The love letters are primary sources written directly by Henry VIII, and are located today in the Vatican Library. Only Henry's letters remain, as Anne's responses have since been lost, but much can be inferred from Henry's references and replies. Originally written in French sometime around 1527, there are 18 letters in total. Eloquent and expressive, Henry demonstrates his romanticism and desire to engage in a relationship with Anne. In the introduction to the letters, 18th century English antiquarian and bibliographer William Oldys notes, "It will not be doubted by any that read these letters, that the King's affection to Anne Boleyn was altogether upon honourable terms" (Malham, John and Oldys, William 181). This affection, along with the power Anne holds over him, becomes clear through many of his statements. By letter IV, it is clear that she is attempting to not settle as his mistress, and instead assume the position of wife. He states:

. . . but if you please to do the duty of a true and loyal mistress, and to give up yourself, body and heart, to me, who will be, as I have been your most loyal servant, I promise you that not only the name shall be given you, but

also that I will take you for my mistress, casting off all others that are in competition with you, out of my thoughts and affection, and serving you only (192).

It is clear that Anne Boleyn was unsatisfied in her position as a lady-in-waiting, and longed to be more. While he describes his dedication to her early on, no actions were taken immediately, as the letters continue in a similar fashion. In Letter VIII, which is assumed to have been written around a time they increased engagement (the letters were written closer together), it can be inferred that his claims begin to mean something (Malham, John and Oldys, William). Henry notes,

Though it does not belong to a gentleman to take his lady in the place of a servant, however, in following your desires, I willingly grant it, that so you may be more agreeably in the place that you yourself have chosen, than you have been in that which I gave you. I shall be heartily obliged to you, if you please to have some remembrance of me (194).

At this point, about halfway through the correspondence, Henry gives in to Anne's accommodations. While there is still time before their official marriage, it has been established that he is entirely devoted to her and all of her desires. Further, his response makes it easy to infer Anne's insistence on standing her ground. Refusing to give in to patriarchal dominance was unique for the time, and leads to the conclusion that Anne was exhibiting revolutionary behaviors.

While Anne's love letters to Henry VIII have been lost, one work of hers remains. In a letter written to Cardinal Wolsey, the King's Advisor, she attempts to ask for his assistance in the

annulment of Henry and Catherine's marriage. Her words are straightforward in her goal, and more intriguing is the postscript, written by King Henry, who states: "The writer of this letter would not cease till she had caused me likewise to set to my hand; desiring you, though it be short, to take it in good part." These words serve as evidence to her continued defiance of 16th century ideas. As was shown in Henry VIII's love letters, Anne Boleyn has control over him -- he does as she asks. Even for a task as simple as writing a letter, his complying to her wants was unusual for the time (Trueman). Further, Henry's acknowledgement and acceptance of her literacy (through both sets of letters) was a unique concept, considering the typical prohibition of education for women. Ultimately, Anne exhibited her defiant actions so clearly that they are able to be identified indirectly. While she may not have been openly declaring herself a feminist or requesting equal treatment between genders, her role as a strong woman, and a proto-feminist, becomes evident.

"A woman in her own right—taken on her own terms in a man's world; a woman who mobilized her education, her style and her presence to outweigh the disadvantages of her sex" (Ives). Anne Boleyn was never one to succumb to the patriarchal society she was entrenched in. She paved the way not only for herself but for future women. She set an example as a strong woman and catalyst for the feminist movement -- a movement which, some three hundred years later, became crucial in establishing the rights of women. Just as Anne Boleyn had used the Protestant Reformation to promote feminist ideals, future organizations, such as the Abolition of Slavery and England's Social Purity and Temperance movements, enabled the established feminist movement to emerge ("The Women's Movement"). This allowed for a society to be constructed in which all the restrictions Anne had faced were removed. In modern

day western society, education is required, marriages are no longer arranged, and a woman's life is full of choice and opportunity. While labeling Anne Boleyn as a feminist would be an anachronism, it is undeniable that she played a crucial role in the contributions to the development of feminism, and therefore establishes herself clearly as a proto-feminist.

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