

Preface: The Mirror & The Light.

This story begins seconds after the death of Anne Boleyn, second wife of Henry VIII. The gruesome and sensational events of May 1536 had shocked Europe and left the English court seething with rumour and fearful of more arrests. Anne had been accused of treason, having plotted against the king with her lovers. They were named as five men: her brother George, Lord Rochford: three gently-born courtiers, Henry Norris, Francis Weston and William Brereton: and Mark Smeaton, a musician. Thomas Wyatt had also been arrested; he remained alive, but in custody in the Tower.

Many of the negotiations of the Tudor court took place face to face and off the record, so at this distance it is hard to understand the process of Anne's fall. One mystery is the position of the king himself. Did he originate the charges against Anne and her lovers? Did he believe them? Was he persuaded by others to believe them? Or were they a cynical invention to allow him to rid himself of a wife who had failed to provide the son he needed to secure his line, and who had become a political embarrassment to him?

Henry could, and did, have his marriage to Anne dissolved; it was not necessary to kill her. But there were many people who wanted to see her dead. She was a religious reformer, and many regarded her as a heretic. She was a mere gentleman's daughter who had reached the throne by trampling on the rights of her predecessor, Katherine of Aragon — a princess of Spain.

In the course of getting rid of his first wife and marrying Anne, Henry had declared himself the head of the church in England. He was not what we now call a Protestant; the break with Rome was about sovereignty and the status of the Pope, and not — not initially, at least — about changing religious belief. To confirm the new order in his kingdom, Henry required all officer-holders and prominent people to take an oath to uphold his title as Supreme Head, and to recognise Anne's children as his successors. Notable dissidents, like Thomas More and the aged Bishop Fisher, were beheaded.

It is possible that England would have broken away from Rome even if Anne Boleyn had never been born. But her enemies blamed her, and her ambitious family, for the danger in which England stood during her short reign.

Henry's first wife Katherine had died earlier in the year, in embittered exile from the court. After her many pregnancies, only one daughter survived, the princess Mary. Anne had given Henry a healthy child — another daughter, Elizabeth. After that she had miscarried at least twice. Henry found himself without his male heir and without allies in Europe. There were two great continental powers: France, and the Holy Roman Empire. Either could crush England, with military might or economic boycotts. Both were poised to move against Henry. The Pope was holding over him a sentence of excommunication. This was not just a spiritual penalty. It damned a man to hell for all eternity, but it also kicked him out of the club of Christian princes. Any invader could displace him, any assassin strike him down. If the Pope were to put his decree into execution, England would be a

pariah nation, fair game for any predator. Henry's break with Rome was backed by parliament, but he thought, with good reason, that he had not carried the old nobility with him. While they did not dissent openly, they were secretly talking to his enemies abroad; they had their own claimants ready, if the Tudors could be brought down.

While Anne was queen, it was difficult to alter this lethal situation. Henry's ministers could simply hope that the great powers would be too busy quarrelling with each other to interfere in England's affairs. But diplomacy could not lift the tension. This leads to the second mystery: what part did Thomas Cromwell play in Anne's fall?

Thomas Cromwell was the king's secretary and chief councillor. He was a man from a humble background, about 50 years old, a widower with one son. A lawyer and businessman, he had risen to power as protégé to Thomas Wolsey, the glittering prince of the church who had dominated the early years of Henry's reign. When Wolsey failed to obtain an annulment of the king's first marriage, Henry had driven him from power and, it seemed, driven him to an early death. Cromwell had fought grimly for Wolsey's place and reputation, at the risk of his own career. The business of wrapping-up the cardinal's legacy projects brought Cromwell into the king's orbit. What looked like a bad move proved to be a very good one; impressed by his loyalty to a ruined man, Henry began to confide in him. He found him omniscient, original and astute. Cromwell began his spectacular rise in the world.

Sometime before Anne's arrest, Cromwell had told the Emperor's ambassador, Eustache Chapuys, that she had become jealous of his influence and had threatened his life. It seem possible that he had — perhaps with the king's permission or connivance — conspired to ruin the Boleyns, by striking a strategic alliance with the old, papist families, the aristocrats who had been the supporters of Henry's first wife. After Katherine's death, her friends had transferred their support to her daughter Mary, now twenty years old. While Anne was queen, Mary had had been deprived of her title of princess and placed under house arrest. As soon as Anne was dead, eyes turned to her. Her rival princess, Elizabeth, was barely out of the cradle. And perhaps, people said, Elizabeth was not Henry's child at all.

Anne Boleyn's enemies were not naturally Cromwell's friends. If they had allied with him, temporarily, they expected to be compensated. The price was surely that, to survive, he must abandon his own interests and serve theirs. Or quite likely they thought that once he had removed Anne for them, they would bring him down too. The moment of her death left him exposed — a man from nowhere, with no noble family to back him, no affinity, no resources but his own wit. If he had made a bargain, now he must pay the price.