



Young and Damned and Fair: The Life of Catherine Howard, Fifth Wife of King Henry VIII

By Mr. Gareth Russell

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Written with an exciting combination of narrative flair and historical authority, this interpretation of the tragic life of Catherine Howard, fifth wife of Henry VIII, breaks new ground in our understanding of the very young woman who became queen at a time of unprecedented social and political tension and whose terrible errors in judgment quickly led her to the executioner's block.

On the morning of July 28, 1540, as King Henry's VIII's former confidante Thomas Cromwell was being led to his execution, a teenager named Catherine Howard began her reign as queen of a country simmering with rebellion and terrifying uncertainty. Sixteen months later, the king's fifth wife would follow her cousin Anne Boleyn to the scaffold, having been convicted of adultery and high treason.

The broad outlines of Catherine's career might be familiar, but her story up until now has been incomplete. Unlike previous accounts of her life, which portray her as a naïve victim of an ambitious family, this compelling and authoritative biography will shed new light on Catherine Howard's rise and downfall by reexamining her motives and showing her in her context, a milieu that goes beyond her family and the influential men of the court to include the aristocrats and, most critically, the servants who surrounded her and who, in the end, conspired against her. By illuminating Catherine's entwined upstairs/downstairs worlds as well as societal tensions beyond the palace walls, the author offers a fascinating portrayal of court life in the sixteenth century and a fresh analysis of the forces beyond Catherine's control that led to her execution—from diplomatic pressure and international politics to the long-festering resentments against the queen's household at court.

Including a forgotten text of Catherine's confession in her own words, color illustrations, family tree, map, and extensive notes, *Young and Damned and Fair* changes our understanding of one of history's most famous women while telling the compelling and very human story of complex individuals attempting to survive in a dangerous age.

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Editorial Review

Review

"*Young and Damned and Fair* is a gripping account of a young woman's future destroyed by forces beyond her control. Gareth Russell moves effortlessly between Catherine Howard's private, inner world and the public life of the Henrician court, providing an unparalleled view into this tragic chapter of Tudor history. This is an important and timely book." (Amanda Foreman, author of *Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire* and *A World on Fire*)

"This fascinating and ultimately heartbreaking account of Henry VIII's doomed fifth wife brings to life the cruel, gossip-fueled, backstabbing world of the court in which Catherine Howard rose and fell. The uncommonly talented Gareth Russell has produced a masterly work of Tudor history that is engrossing, sympathetic, suspenseful, and illuminating." (Charlotte Gordon, author of *Romantic Outlaws*, winner off the National Book Critics Circle Award for Biography)

"This is a timely and powerful re-examination of Henry's fifth queen who was probably guilty of nothing more than failing to reveal she had been betrothed before her wedding to the king old enough to be her grandfather, and then falling in love with a young man after their marriage. The author has done some beautiful new research to indicate that Catherine was not as foolish as some historians have suggested, and that her death was managed and manipulated by her offended husband, purely for his own revenge. It's particularly strong on the detail of Catherine's short reign and the reaction of those who tried to defend her. I love it when historians take the women who have been neglected by history seriously and study their lives rather than accepting stereotypes." (Philippa Gregory, #1 New York Times bestselling author)

"Securely rooted in the sources and mercifully devoid of sentiment, this is the most fully rounded, best written biography of Catherine Howard we have so far." (Julia Fox, author of *Jane Boleyn: The True Story of the Infamous Lady Rochford*)

"A magnificent account of the rise and fall of Henry VIII's tragic fifth queen - compelling, thought-provoking and above all real. In Russell's meticulously researched narrative Catherine Howard and her household are brought to life as never before." (Adrian Tinniswood, author of *The Long Weekend: Life in the English Country House Between the Wars*)

"In *Young and Damned and Fair* Gareth Russell marries slick storytelling with a great wealth of learning about sixteenth-century personalities and politics. The result is a book that leads us deep into the nightmarish final years of Henry VIII's reign, wrenching open the intrigues of a poisonous court in a realm seething with discontent. At the heart of it all is the fragile, tragic figure of Catherine Howard, whose awful fate is almost unbearable to watch as it unfolds. This is authoritative Tudor history written with a novelist's lightness of touch. A terrific achievement." (Dan Jones, author of *The Plantagenets* and *The Hollow Crown*)

"Scholarly yet highly readable...fresh and compelling...a stunning achievement...Catherine is given a makeover so complete that she is virtually unrecognizable from the hopelessly naive girl of traditional history books." (*The Sunday Times*)

"Russell's is an excellent account, putting the oft-ignored Catherine in her proper historical context....he is a scrupulous historian." (*Daily Mail*)

"Bold...assured...A novelist turned historian, he veers with laudable theatricality between the claustrophobic and the panoramic, from intimate, febrile exchanges in noble and royal households to the public spectacle of courtly high diplomacy...Let us hope he fixes his sharp eye on the further, more opaque past--here is a historian unafraid of the dark, whether of depravity or documentation." (*The Daily Telegraph*)

"With exemplary skill, Gareth Russell puts clear blue water between his and other, more romantically inspired treatments of Catherine Howard's story by using the workings of her household as a framework for his interpretation of her sixteen-month period as Henry's queen." (*the Times Literary Supplement*)

"Russell's portrait effectively underscores the machinations of this volatile court, the treachery of sycophants, and the importance of the all-seeing servants. Dense with material and flavor of the epoch." (*Kirkus Reviews*)

"Russell expertly tells a tale of jewels and dancing and thrilling trysts that sees Catherine move dizzily towards the block." (*Literary Review*)

"Highly readable and peppered with engrossing stories, this book is also fascinating for its details about what was considered sexually moral in 16-century England. Biography lovers and those intrigued by the lives of the royals will welcome this tragic story of Henry VIII's fifth wife." (*Library Journal*)

"A robust portrait of a complex individual...a painstakingly thorough and original revaluation of both Catherine and of the mad scramble by the members of her household to protect themselves rather than their queen." (*Booklist*)

"To the vivid phrasing of a novelist he adds a forensic eye for fact and an encyclopedic knowledge of the personalities of the late Henrician court....Russell is a formidable new talent from whom big things can be expected, surely." (*BBC History Magazine*)

"[A] fascinating new book...In revisiting Catherine Howard's story, Russell seeks to shift the emphasis from the personal to the professional, stressing how the households of queens and powerful noblewomen could become focal points for a level of power and influence earlier historians haven't always fully credited." (*Open Letters Monthly*)

"Thorough in his research, convincing in his analysis, and eloquent in his telling of Catherine Howard's life story... exquisitely written. Gareth Russell's writing style simply stated rivals that of Stacy Schiff and David McCullough....Beyond the outstanding historical content, this book provides a wonderful writing lesson in the art of biography composition...Write this down and take it to the bank. Gareth Russell is one "big bio" away from joining the world's elite biographers composing in the English language today." (*QueenAnneBoleyn.com*)

About the Author

Educated at Oxford University and Queens University, Belfast, Gareth Russell is a historian, novelist, and playwright. He is the author of *Young and Damned and Fair: The Life of Catherine Howard, Fifth Wife of King Henry VIII*; *The Emperors: How Europe's Most Powerful Rulers were Destroyed by World War One*; and *An Illustrated Introduction to the Tudors*. He lives in Belfast, Northern Ireland.

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Young and Damned and Fair



Chapter 1

The Hour of Our Death

Renounce the thought of greatness, tread on fate,

Sigh out a lamentable tale of things

Done long ago, and ill done; and when sighs

Are wearied, piece up what remains behind

With weeping eyes, and hearts that bleed to death.

—John Ford, *The Lover's Melancholy* (1628)

A benefit of being executed was that one avoided any chance of the dreaded *mors improvisa*, a sudden death by which a Christian soul might be denied the opportunity to make his peace. So when Thomas Cromwell was led out to his death on July 28, 1540,¹ he had the comfort of knowing that he had been granted the privilege of preparing to stand in the presence of the Almighty. The day was sweltering, one in a summer so hot and so dry that no rain fell on the kingdom from spring until the end of September, but the bulky hard-bitten man from Putney who had become the King's most trusted confidant and then his chief minister walked cheerfully towards the scaffold.² He even called out to members of the crowd and comforted his nervous fellow prisoner Walter, Lord Hungerford, who was condemned to die alongside him for four crimes, all of which carried the death penalty. Lord Hungerford, whose sanity was questionable, had allegedly committed heresy, in appointing as his private chaplain a priest rumored to remain loyal to the Pope; witchcraft, by consorting with various individuals, including one named "Mother Roche," to use necromancy to guess the date of the King's death; treason, in that both his chaplain's appointment and the meeting with the witch constituted a crime against the King's majesty; and sodomy, "the abominable and detestable vice and sin of buggery," made a capital crime in 1534, in going to bed with two of his male servants, men called William Master and Thomas Smith.³

Rumors, fermenting in the baking heat and passed between courtiers, servants, merchants, and diplomats who had nothing to do but sweat and trade in secrets, had already enlarged the scope of Lord Hungerford's crimes. The French ambassador reported back to Paris that the condemned man had also been guilty of sexually assaulting his own daughter. It was whispered that Hungerford had practiced black magic, violating the laws of Holy Church that prohibited sorcery as a link to the Devil. Others heard that Hungerford's true crime had been actively plotting the murder of the King.⁴ None of those charges were ever mentioned in the indictments leveled against Hungerford at his trial, but the man dying alongside him had perfected this tactic of smearing a victim with a confusing *mélange* of moral turpitudes guaranteed to excite prurient speculation and kill a person's reputation before anyone was tempted to raise a voice in his defense.

The hill where they now stood had been the site of the finales to some of Cromwell's worst character assassinations. It had been there, four years earlier on another summer's day, that George Boleyn had perished before similarly large crowds after Cromwell arranged a trial that saw him condemned to death on charges of incest and treason. The details of Boleyn's alleged treason had been kept deliberately vague during the trial, while the prosecution's fanciful descriptions of his incestuous seduction of his sister the Queen had been excruciatingly, pornographically vivid. Boleyn, as handsome as Adonis and proud as Icarus,

had defended himself so well against the accusations there had been bets that he would be acquitted.⁵ When he was not, when he was condemned to die alongside four other men two days later, no one could risk speaking out for a man found guilty of committing such a bestial act.

Within the Tower's sheltered courtyards, Boleyn's sister Queen Anne was executed in a more private setting, before a carefully vetted crowd of around one thousand, which was tiny in comparison to that allowed to gather beyond the walls to watch her brother perish—and now Cromwell and Walter Hungerford.⁶ Like Thomas More before her, another political heavyweight in whose destruction Cromwell had been intimately involved, Anne Boleyn had embraced the sixteenth century's veneration for the *ars moriendi*—the art of dying.

The veil between life and death was made permeable by the teachings of Christianity. Everywhere one looked, there was proof of society's lively fascination with the next life. Death was the great moral battleground between one's strengths and weaknesses; the supreme test came when the finite perished and the eternal began. To die well, in a spirit of resignation to the Will of God and without committing a sin against hope by despairing of what was to come next, was a goal endlessly stressed to the faithful in art, sermons, homilies, and manuals. Within the great basilica of Saint-Denis in Paris, the tomb of King Louis XII and Anne of Brittany, his queen, showed the couple rendered perfect in the stonemasons' marble, united atop the monument, their bejeweled hands clasped in prayer, their robes and crowns exquisitely carved, but beneath that sculpture the craftsmen had offered a very different portrait of the royal forms—there, the bodies of the King and Queen were shown twisting and writhing in the first stages of putrefaction, their feet bare, their hair uncovered, and their flesh pullulating with the onset of corruption.⁷ Throughout Europe, these cadaver tombs, the *transi*, were commissioned by the rich and the powerful to show their submission to the final destruction of their flesh and with it the removal of this sinful world's most potent temptations. In corruption they had been born and so through corruption they could be born again.

In the sixteenth century, life was precious, truncated at any moment by plague, war, or one of a thousand ailments that would be rendered treatable in the centuries to come, and so the people embraced it with a rare vitality. But living well, as Anne Boleyn had noted at her trial, also meant dying well.⁸ Christians were supposed to die bravely because of the surety of mercy that even the weakest and most sinful was guaranteed by their religion, provided he or she had respected its doctrines and honored its God. Before they were marched to the hill, Cromwell told Lord Hungerford that “though the breakfast which we are going to be sharp, yet, trusting to the mercy of the Lord, we shall have a joyful dinner.”⁹ To the overwhelming number of Henry VIII's subjects, Christianity was not a theory, it was not a belief system, it was not one religion among many—it was, more or less, a series of facts, the interpretation of which could be debated, but whose essential truth was inescapable and uncontested. The result of this way of accepting and experiencing their faith was that sixteenth-century Christians often behaved in ways which were paradoxically far more devout but also far more relaxed than their modern-day coreligionists. The line between sinners and the flock was not so clearly delineated, because even the worst members of society were still, in one way or the other, almost certainly believing Christians. All men were weak, all men would fail, all men would die, all men could be saved.

To many of their contemporaries, there was an inextricable link between Cromwell's submission to mortality and the ascent in royal favor of the Duke of Norfolk's niece, a view vividly captured by the juxtaposition of Cromwell's death and the King's marriage to the orphaned Catherine Howard on the same day. In the countryside, beyond the stench and sweat of the crowd assembled to watch Cromwell and Hungerford's deaths, Edmund Bonner, Bishop of London, prepared to preside over the King's wedding service. The pretty palace of Oatlands sat in a rolling deer park, its loveliness marred only by the building work that the King, with his passion for architecture, had ordered three years earlier when the manor had come into his

possession.¹⁰ A fortune was spent on transforming the seldom-used Oatlands into a retreat fit for the sovereign. An octagonal tower, still a work in progress on the day Cromwell was struck down, was added to the courtyard. Terraced gardens were constructed with multiple fountains, each one an enormous extravagance splashing cooling streams of water. An orchard, its mature trees groaning under the weight of fruit, offered shade to the heads of courtiers and servants, as they endured the stifling heat. The orchard was new, but the trees were not. They had been uprooted from Saint Peter's Abbey and brought to grace the King's gardens when the abbey was shut down, its brothers expelled and its possessions stripped by Cromwell's inspectors. The stones that built the little palace's expansion had come from the Augustinian priory at Tandridge as it was pulled down to make way for aristocratic demesnes. The price paid by many of his subjects for the King's religious revolution weighed heavily and silently on Oatlands, but as thick carpets from the Ottoman Empire, chairs upholstered in velvets and cloth of gold, gilt cups, bejeweled table services, and beds hung with cloth of silver were all processed into Oatlands, there was little outward sign of the tribulation that had gone into making it suitable for the royal household.¹¹

Edmund Bonner was an Oxford graduate in his early forties. Bonner had risen from relative obscurity, which encouraged accusations that he had been born out of wedlock, to become England's ambassador to France and, after that, Bishop of London.¹² He had secured both his ambassadorship and episcopacy through Thomas Cromwell's patronage, yet like everybody else he had abandoned Cromwell in his hour of need. The latter's frantic letters from prison, entreating royal mercy from Henry, written in a disjointed and panicky mess compared to his usual precise calligraphy, had gone unanswered, as all of Cromwell's former dependents turned their faces from him, as if he had never existed.

A celebrated person's execution, his final public performance, was such an exciting event that people made the journey into London especially for it. Vast numbers of people surged through the city, converging on Tower Hill to watch the annihilation of the detested commoner who had somehow risen to become Earl of Essex—a sign of royal favor given to him only a few weeks before he was arrested at a meeting of the Privy Council and taken to the Tower. The last ascent in the life of the Englishman who had risen farther than anyone else in his century was the wooden steps to the scaffold. Thomas Cromwell had not been a popular figure, but royal advisers seldom are. Snobbery played a large role in shaping his reputation—an English diplomat described Cromwell as a man who had been “advanced from the dunghill to great honour”—but so did his actions.¹³ Ruthless, determined, brilliant, and utterly Machiavellian, Cromwell had overseen the destruction of many an aristocratic career and the evisceration of the old religion in England. Many of his opponents blamed him for tearing asunder the spiritual framework that they had lived, and hoped to die, by. The sacraments and liturgies of the Church had given a rhythm to the year; they had bestowed the tools for salvation on the faithful for centuries, and marked every major moment in a Christian's life. In 1536, Cromwell had weathered a traditionalist uprising's attempts to remove him from power, but he could not survive the loss of the King's favor four years later. His enemies surrounded him, and he was condemned to death on a long list of crimes that included heresy, treason, and financial corruption.

The crowds entering the capital on July 28, 1540, came from every background, with well-born women wearing veils to shield their faces from the sun, while urchins wore battered hand-me-down cheap leather shoes which prevented their feet from being cut on the animal bones and refuse that littered the city streets. With no rain, the mud in the streets had become a dry dust that would turn into ankle-depth filth when the clouds broke in autumn. The spectators passed through the capital's eighteen-foot-high defensive walls via one of the seven gates. Those traveling in from the Hampshire countryside entered through Newgate, while those from Smithfield, home to a bustling meat market, accessed the city at Aldersgate. Smithfield also contained London's designated red-light district, the aptly named Cock Lane. Subtlety in the assigning of place names was not a medieval strong point. The southern city of Exeter had renamed one of its rivers Shitbrook, because of the amount of feces and waste it contained, and in Oxford, students hoping for an early

sexual experience courtesy of the town's prostitutes could find it on Gropecunt Lane, a narrow alley that ran from just opposite the university church of Saint Mary the Virgin down to the entrance of Oriel College.¹⁴

Rather more elegant sights awaited those who were traveling towards Cromwell's execution via The Strand, a long straight road lined with the episcopal palaces and impressive homes of the aristocracy. The Strand had been the site of the Savoy Palace, principal residence of Richard II's powerful uncle John of Gaunt, until it was burned down during the Peasants' Revolt of 1381. It had eventually been replaced by the Hospital of Saint John the Baptist, one of the most impressive medical establishments in early modern Europe, founded under the patronage of Henry VIII's father. Near the hospital was one of the Eleanor Crosses, funerary monuments erected by a grief-stricken Edward I in 1290 to mark each of the fourteen spots where his wife's coffin rested on its final journey to Westminster Abbey. This, the last put-down before the internment, was now where professional water-sellers traded their wares, taking advantage of the area's excellent plumbing which on occasion pumped the local fountains with wine or beer to celebrate an especially significant royal event—the last time had been for the birth of the heir to the throne, Prince Edward, in 1537. On a hot and busy day like this, as families and groups of friends swarmed towards the Tower, the Charing Cross water-sellers could reasonably have expected to turn a handsome profit, but even at this early stage of what turned out to be the hottest summer of the sixteenth century, the Westminster plumbing was struggling to provide the capital's wealthiest region with the water it needed.¹⁵

There was no sign of similar deprivations at Oatlands, where any eastern- or western-facing windows above the quadrangle provided views either of the orchard with its purloined apple trees, an octagonal dovecote, or ornamental gardens circling the fountains. We cannot say for certain where in Oatlands Catherine Howard resided during her wedding visit. Recent excavations of the palace have given us a better picture of its layout, and the safest guess would be that her rooms were in the Queen's apartments, located in the palace's southern towers between the inner and outer courtyards. From just above the entrance to the inner courtyard, she would have been able to see the ramp that had recently been installed to help her husband-to-be mount what must have been a particularly sturdy steed. Beyond the walls lay the deer park where she and the King would spend a few days of hunting as part of a ten-day honeymoon.

Catherine was in her late teens, slender, like most of the Howard women, with a "very delightful" appearance, according to the French ambassador.¹⁶ The court's temporary reduction in size and then its removal to the relative obscurity of Oatlands fueled speculation that she was already pregnant; Catherine's petite frame gave lie to the story, but it would be weeks before she was unveiled to the public again and the stories could finally be put to rest.¹⁷ Sixteenth-century weddings were not usually romantic occasions, and the modern idea of writing one's own vows or of putting the couple's affection for one another at the center of the ceremony would have struck Catherine and her contemporaries as bizarre. It was, like an execution, a formal occasion governed by established precedent; there was a proper way of doing things, and as she made her way down to the recently renovated chapel near her husband's tower, to stand in front of Edmund Bonner, Catherine, keen to adhere to etiquette after a lifetime spent learning its nuances, had no intention of making a mistake.

Back in the capital, along the banks of the Thames, formerly semirural areas like Deptford and Woolwich were now shipyards for the Royal Navy, where titanic amounts of money poured into the construction of warships designed to repel the French and Spanish, if they ever came. Londoners grumbled at the despoiling of some of the few green areas left to them; they valued their leaf-dappled refuges so much that earlier in the King's reign thousands had rioted over plans to encroach on the area of parkland around Soho, a district which got its name from a traditional hunting cry, "So, ho!"

Riots were rare in Henrician England, but tensions were constant, and none were more intense than those

caused by the country's break with Rome. Seven years before Cromwell's execution, the King had repudiated papal authority and embarked upon his own version of the Reformation in what rapidly became one of the least articulate government policies in British history. There was absolutely no clear strategy for where the Church of England should go once it was commanded from London rather than Rome. The King, who had harnessed anti-clericalism in Parliament to secure his dream of annulling his marriage to Katherine of Aragon, had then hurled himself into what initially looked like the wholesale dismemberment of English Catholicism. The severing of obedience to the Vatican was the initial step in a legal, cultural, and economic revolution. The monasteries were dissolved, or pressured to surrender, first the smaller abbeys, then the larger and wealthier. On the eve of the Reformation, about one-third of the land in England belonged to the Church, and so the seizure of its assets became an unsavory bonanza for the government and its supporters, whose loyalty to the regime was often bought with gifts of land taken from the religious orders.

The first human casualties after the break with Rome had been the conservatives who could not in good conscience abjure their oaths of loyalty to the Pope. There were some among them who, despite their misgivings, were prepared to acknowledge that canon law just about permitted the King's banishment of Katherine of Aragon and marriage to Anne Boleyn, whom even Thomas More had acknowledged as "this noble woman royally anointed queen," but under no circumstances could they accept that Henry had the right to make himself supreme head on Earth of the Church of England and Ireland.¹⁸ Thomas More, the country's former Lord Chancellor, and the esteemed scholar Cardinal John Fisher went to the block in 1535. The leaders of the Carthusian order of monks were hanged until they were half-dead, cut down to be castrated, disemboweled, and only then beheaded. The country folk from Hampshire coming into London through Newgate for Cromwell's death had to pass by the looming, gray-stoned edifice of Newgate Prison, where three hermits, one deacon, and six monks had been stripped, chained to posts with their hands tied behind their backs, and simply left to starve to death in their cells, rotting towards martyrdom in excruciating pain and their own gathering excrement. One plucky Catholic lady, a doctor's wife, disguised herself as a milkmaid, bribed the guards to let her into the cell, and fed, watered, and bathed the condemned gentlemen. The jailers tightened security after the King irritably asked how the condemned men had remained alive for so long, at which point the brave woman unsuccessfully attempted to continue her mission by climbing onto the prison roof to prize up the tiles and lower herself down into the cell from there.¹⁹

Near the prison was Tyburn, the site of near-daily executions of criminals—rapists, horse thieves, forgers, and murderers. It was here that many of the Carthusian monks met their end after being processed through the streets tied to a wicker hurdle pulled by a slow-moving horse. Back at Smithfield, within sight of the grubby walkways of Cock Lane, Father John Forest had been burned to death atop a pyre that consisted of religious statues, including one of Saint Derfel, taken from a pilgrimage center in northern Wales. The symbols of pre-Reformation Christianity used to destroy one of its most vocal sympathizers—there was a hideous poeticism to it.

For the poorest of the poor, the Reformation initially brought a different kind of martyrdom. Admittedly, the Church had not always done all that it could to alleviate poverty, but as medieval Catholicism's emphasis on charity as a means to secure salvation came under attack by Reformers, beggars would have been a depressingly and increasingly familiar sight for the spectators. This was especially true for those from Smithfield, whose monastic hospital and poorhouse, Saint Bartholomew's Priory, had been shut down during the dissolutions, leaving the local poor and invalided defenseless, friendless, and often homeless. Throughout London it was the same, with those who had relied on the Church, either for charity or work, wandering the streets, joined by the hundreds who poured in from the countryside where the dissolutions had closed off many traditional forms of employment or benefice. Nor were the seized properties being put to edifying use in the postmonastic world. Courtiers, lawyers, and merchants who benefited from the government's liberality often turned the former abbeys and churches into stinking tenements, overpacked and overpriced, where

families lived in pathetically cramped quarters with rampant disease and indifferent landlords. The church of Saint Martin-le-Grand was demolished to make way for a tavern; Bermondsey Abbey, where Henry VIII's grandmother Elizabeth Woodville had spent the final few years of her life, became a bullfighting arena, before it was demolished to make way for the private home of a lawyer who worked on the Court of Augmentations, the legal body set up to deal with former monastic lands; the Priory of Saint Mary Overy became a bear-baiting pit. Statues of saints and angels had been torn from their niches and burned in a crusade against the old ways; yet even with such zeal from the iconoclastic Reformers, clear religious policy, vital in an age which still carried the death penalty for heresy, proved elusive.

Thomas Cromwell, rising to power during the break with Rome and then securing his position at the King's side thanks to his indefatigable work on the dissolutions, was seen as the Reformation's henchman by its opponents and "an organ of Christ's glory" by its supporters; he seems to have believed in the Reformation's mission and to have risked much to support those who shared his spirituality.²⁰ Whether he was as indifferent to its human cost as is usually supposed is unclear, but that he never shirked from unpleasant tasks is certain. The quartered limbs and parboiled heads of dead traitors were on prominent display throughout the capital, with the skulls of the most famous offenders sitting atop pikes that jutted out over the nineteen arches of London Bridge. They would stay there until they had been stripped clean by birds and the elements.

Bile and viciousness increased on both sides of the confessional divide as the King, with God in one eye and the Devil in the other, brooded like Shelley's Ozymandias over a kingdom riven with divisions. Who was in and who was out at the center of government changed constantly, and unlike most of his predecessors Henry VIII seemed to want his fallen favorites to vanish into the vast silence of mortality rather than simply leave the sunlight of his presence. Cromwell had previously helped arrange the exits of other favorites; now he was enduring the same agony.

We may know now that the Tudor dynasty was successful in holding on to power, and in preventing both civil war and foreign invasion, in the same way we know that the United States and her allies prevailed in the Cold War, but those attending Cromwell's execution had no such assurances, and paranoia was rampant, a communal insecurity for which the King's glamorously bizarre behavior must bear a large portion of the blame. To have embarked upon something as seismic as the schism with the Vatican without having a clear strategy for the years ahead was foolish, but to then change his mind as often as he did with something as sacred and vital to his people's understanding of themselves was criminally incompetent. When Henry VIII had exhausted the wealth of the Church, he began to lose interest in the Reformation; his natural conservatism reawakened, and he was appalled by the many Protestant sects that were using the newfound availability of the Bible to interpret God's Word for themselves, in many cases reaching conclusions that Henry regarded as rank heresy. The pendulum began to swing in the opposite direction, with legislation known as the Six Articles reaffirming the government's commitment to Catholic theology. Protestants nicknamed the laws "the whip with six strings," and the arrests of religious radicals began once their patron, Cromwell, was no longer in a position to protect them. As events were to show, he could no longer even save himself. Back at Smithfield, the local authorities were busy setting up another pyre to burn three Lutherans—Robert Barnes, Thomas Gerrard, and William Jerome—who had once preached their gospel with Cromwell's support. They were to die on the 30th, two days after Cromwell. With intimidation, espionage, cancerous fears of enemies foreign and domestic, and bitter sectarian tensions, Henrician England and Ireland were countries tottering permanently on the edge, and many blamed Thomas Cromwell for organizing the march to the precipice.

The King had arrived at Oatlands earlier that day. Lucrezia Borgia's twenty-three-year-old son, Francesco, Marquis of Massalombarda, had been visiting London for the last week and he was due to leave that evening;

the King had entertained him with visits to his palaces at Greenwich and Richmond and given him two fine horses as a parting gift.²¹ It was unusual for a traveler to begin a journey in the evening when visibility was poor, so perhaps the marquis had delayed his departure to make sure he witnessed the executions on Tower Hill. If he did attend, his status would have vouchsafed for him a place at the front of the crowd.

Much as a hush falls when a bride enters a church, a silence settled over the spectators as Cromwell began his final speech.²² He delivered it perfectly, thanking God for allowing him to die this way, in full knowledge of what lay ahead, and confessing readily that he was a wretched and miserable sinner who had, like all Christians, fallen short of the standards hoped for by Almighty God: “I confess that as God, by His Holy Spirit, instructs us in the truth, so the devil is ready to seduce us—and I have been seduced.” Then he began to pray—for the King, for “that goodly imp” the heir apparent—and to ask for prayers for himself, though as a Reformer he was careful not to ask for prayers for his soul after he was dead but solely “so that as long as life remaineth in this flesh, I waiver nothing in my faith.”²³

As Catherine, a svelte young woman with a throat now glittering with pieces from the royal collection, knelt before Edmund Bonner, Cromwell knelt in the sawdust of the scaffold and prayed aloud, “O Lord, grant me that when these eyes lose their use, that the eyes of my soul might see Thee. O Lord and father, when this mouth shall lose his use that my heart may say, O Pater, in manus tuas commendo spiritum meum.”²⁴ Hungerford, his sanity now snapped entirely, kept interrupting, writhing and screaming at the executioner to get on with his bloody business.²⁵ Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey, stood at the forefront of the crowd and watched the scene without pity. He was missing his cousin’s wedding to be here to see his family’s *bête noire* finished off. Later that day, he could not conceal his good mood. It felt to him like a settling of scores: “Now is the false churl dead, so ambitious of others’ blood.”²⁶

More of the Howards may have been at Oatlands to help Catherine, steady any nerves, and as ever, offer advice. A few days earlier, in preparation for the wedding, the King had granted Catherine’s eldest brother, Charles, five properties in London, while their half sister Isabella got a manor house in Wiltshire and all the lands that had once belonged to Malmesbury Abbey. As a gift for performing the service, Bishop Bonner’s debts were paid off by the royal household, and he was given a set of gold dining plate that had been confiscated from his predecessor during the dissolutions.²⁷ The newly enriched Isabella, wife to the Queen’s vice chamberlain, was almost certainly in attendance in her capacity both as Catherine’s sister and lady-in-waiting. This was the second queen Isabella would serve and her husband’s fifth. Both were too clever to give any thought to the merry-go-round of queens consort, or rather, any voice. A woman would soon be imprisoned for asking of the King, “How many wives will he have?”²⁸

At the Tower, Lord Hungerford’s wish that the headsman should acquit his task quickly was not to be fulfilled. Edward Hall described Cromwell’s executioner as “ragged [and] butcherly,” who “very ungoodly performed his office.”²⁹ No more details are provided about what went wrong with the beheading, but rumor began with the claim it had taken three strokes to cut through the minister’s thick neck. By the end of the month, entertainment had triumphed over plausibility with stories that it had taken two headsman half an hour to kill him and allegations that Cromwell’s enemies, who had been seen banqueting and celebrating throughout the week preceding his death, had taken the executioner out to feast him the night before, to get him drunk and hope that with a hangover he would give Cromwell as painful a death as possible. All we know for certain is Edward Hall’s remark that the executioner had carried out the task in an “ungoodly” manner and that afterwards Cromwell’s head was taken with Lord Hungerford’s to gaze and rot from the top of the pikes at London Bridge.

From the little chapel at Oatlands and the imposing towers of London, bells tolled out to mark a wedding and a death. They would toll again on the fifteenth day of August, the Feast of the Assumption, to mark the entry

of the Virgin Mary into Heaven, there to be crowned its queen, as foretold, so the Church taught, in the visions of Saint John in the Book of Revelation.³⁰ Celestial queens had not yet been abolished, despite the best efforts of the Protestant evangelicals and the man who had fallen on Catherine's wedding day. But in a world where statues of Our Lady could be taken from Norfolk and torched in front of large London crowds with Cromwell watching on, it did not seem as if the Virgin Mary was any more secure on her throne than Katherine of Aragon or Anne Boleyn had been on theirs. It was an age of uncertainty and terrifying possibilities, and Catherine Howard was now its queen.

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