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The King, the Cardinal, the Concubine, and the Chronicler: A Lesson in Fluid Prejudice

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ABSTRACT

George Cavendish's *Life of Wolsey* is one of the best known contemporary biographies from the Tudor era. Written during a time that has fascinated historians for centuries, Cavendish's work has been used and quoted by many authors from many different time periods. These writers produced biographies of Cardinal Thomas Wolsey, the subject of Cavendish's biography; Henry VIII, whom Wolsey served as chief minister; and Anne Boleyn, Henry VIII's love and eventual queen. The dynamics among these three individuals is shown in Cavendish's work and in subsequent biographies related to that era. As time passed, authors became more and more suspicious of the biases inherent in Cavendish's book. Because of this, modern writers use the work sparingly or at least explain the problems with the text before quoting it. Early writers—those writing before the 1990s—had no qualms about using *Life of Wolsey* and had a general faith that the information Cavendish related was true. This change occurred gradually over time and was generally the product of a small number of influential authors.

Keywords: George Cavendish, Henry VIII, Anne Boleyn, Cardinal Thomas Wolsey, Tudor biographies, Tudor England

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“The very ink of history is written with fluid prejudice.” –Mark Twain

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

No era in history has managed to capture and captivate the popular imagination quite like the extravagant times of the court of King Henry VIII. More books, movies, and documentaries have been made regarding Great Harry and his court than any other historical period. The popularity of the time can easily be traced to Henry’s ostentatious lifestyle—including his six wives. Henry’s marital mishaps have provided literary fodder that has yet to be exhausted.

The King’s Great Matter—Henry’s desire to rid himself of his first wife, Catherine of Aragon—is one of the most popular topics of discussion among Tudor scholars. Innumerable books have been written detailing the arguments used both for and against the Spanish marriage. More books, however, have been written about the woman who was the cause of the divide—Anne Boleyn. Henry and Anne were but two of the trio of players involved in the Great Matter; while it would be easy to believe that Catherine was the third, a more reasonable argument can be made for the inclusion of Henry’s chief minister, the man who was given the task of securing a divorce for his master: Cardinal Thomas Wolsey.

George Cavendish, gentleman usher to Cardinal Wolsey, was among the earliest to chronicle this period of time. Since Cavendish had a privileged place within the court, he was able to bear witness to a number of highly important events during the King's Great Matter. Because of this, Cavendish's biography is viewed in an interesting light by historians: while a primary source, the biography was written many years after the events it records had taken place. This places the work within the realm of memoir, a highly variable genre where history is concerned. Memoirs contain the biases of the people who write them, a convention that Cavendish did not escape.

It is difficult to write any serious biography of Henry VIII, Anne Boleyn, or Thomas Wolsey without using the Cavendish text. That said, there are as many ways to interpret his writing as there are biographies about the Tudor era. Early and modern biographers of the King, his queen, and his minister use the Cavendish text in many different ways—generally to help prove the authors' opinion about events or to disprove a damning bit of evidence. The way in which the Cavendish text has affected the content of Tudor biographies has changed in many ways over time.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Henry, Wolsey, and Anne made up a triangle of power, deceit, and manipulation. The struggle for power among these three strong-willed individuals has created what almost constitutes its very own genre of literature. This genre can be broken down into two classes of literature, classes that center around prevailing sentiments of the time periods in which they were written.

Most of the literature about Henry, Anne, and Wolsey—specifically the monographs that have been dedicated to one of the players—can be broken down into two classes: early biographies and modern writings. These classes have distinct characteristics relating to their treatment of the various historical figures or events.

These sentiments tend to revolve around the use of various primary sources. While there is little one can glean from state papers aside from the obvious statements and historical contexts that they provide, writings from eyewitnesses provide a more compelling vehicle for those who wish to study the lives of historical figures rather than the state actions in which they were involved. The most prominent work of this nature for the reign of Henry VIII is the writing of George Cavendish, gentleman usher to Cardinal Wolsey.

Cavendish's work is likely the most quoted and most important source of information from the era of Henry VIII's love affair with Anne Boleyn. Entitled *Thomas Wolsey, Late Cardinal, His Life and Death*, Cavendish's biography is generally called *Life of Wolsey* by scholars. This work is highly biased, reflecting the author's feelings toward Anne, Henry, and Wolsey. In addition, this narrative was written a number of years after the events took place, giving Cavendish the ability to write with the benefit of hindsight. This factor, inevitably, colored his narrative.

Hundreds if not thousands of monographs have been written about the great king and his court; rarely has the Tudor era gone out of vogue with readers and writers alike. These writings have followed a distinct pattern over the years. The early works tend not to question the accepted versions of events and instead dutifully relay them to readers. In short, these writings—which span the period from the earliest Tudor biographies to be considered secondary sources to the late 1970s—follow the Cavendish model and use him as an important beacon of truth for the Tudor era. Modern authors, specifically those from the 1980s onward have been much more apt to challenge accepted notions and to take a more critical look at the original documents from the period. This divide has proved an important turning point for the Cavendish work and its usage in biographies of Henry, Anne, and Wolsey.

In general, the most distinct difference in opinion about these figures circles around the character of Anne. Older biographies paint her as a witch, a seductress, and—in the most outrageous of the literature—a concubine. Newer writings, however, describe Anne as a woman caught up in her father's ambitions. Most notably, Joanna Denny portrays her as a religious woman who undertook the task of securing Henry's love and

affection as a way to help promote the Protestant religion in England. This shift in focus is most interesting and is indicative of a shift away from the accepted “Cavendish” model toward a new way of looking at primary sources.

Scholars of both Henry and Wolsey have also made a shift in the modern biography era. While this change is miniscule compared to the difference in opinion about Anne Boleyn—especially when discussing the biographies of Henry VIII—there are some noteworthy discrepancies between the older and more modern writings.

CHAPTER 3

GEORGE CAVENDISH

Biographies of the great king, Anne, and Wolsey began to surface even before Henry's death. The most noteworthy of these writings was that by George Cavendish. Cavendish was a man whom history would have ignored had he not chosen to use his position in Wolsey's court to create a biographical portrait of his master.

The Life of Wolsey, while considered an important primary source of Tudor life, is not, in its entirety, a primary document. Cavendish did not enter Wolsey's service until the 1520s, although he writes about the Cardinal's life before that period as though he were there. This distinction is not made among many historians, specifically those whose writings focus on the Cardinal. Other authors—those who write on Henry and Anne—do not need to worry about the distinction as the information that Cavendish presents about the eras in history that relate to their subjects is primary: by the time Anne became enmeshed in both Wolsey's and Henry's lives, Cavendish had been Wolsey's usher for some time.

It is important to note that Cavendish was nothing if not biased. Wolsey, in his mind, was a man of strong principles, an honest man who was above reproach. In fact, in the introduction to the Folio Society's printing of Cavendish's book, the editor, Roger Lockyer, writes: "Cavendish is not always a reliable witness. Sometimes out of loyalty to

his master he professes ignorance where it is likely he knew the truth. . . [Wolsey's] principles were not as unshakeable as Cavendish would have us believe."¹ Biased or not, this writing has been an important source upon which countless authors of Tudor biographies have based their opinions and facts for generations.

In his descriptions of Anne, Cavendish uses every tool he possibly could to color her character. She is called a witch, a "foolish girl,"² a "night-crow"³ and a whore among other names. In fact, one of the few kind things Cavendish says about her is that Henry loved her for her "excellent grace and behavior,"⁴ a skill in which "she did excel all other[s]"⁵ in Queen Catherine's entourage. Anne is blamed almost entirely for Cardinal Wolsey's fall from Henry's favor—Cavendish bases this idea on a supposed quarrel that began when the Cardinal and the King forced the end of an engagement that Anne had made with Henry Percy whose father was the Earl of Northumberland. Henry VIII, in Cavendish's work, is seen as a strong, if frivolous king. According to Wolsey's usher, Henry was easily manipulated by those around him.

It is easy to determine that Cavendish had strong beliefs about the people around him—specifically those who played a major role in his master's life. The biases that Cavendish printed would hold popular opinion with Tudor biographers for a number of years.

¹ Roger Lockyer, in George Cavendish, *Thomas Wolsey, Late Cardinal, His Life and Death*, (London: The Folio Society, 1962), 8.

² George Cavendish, *Thomas Wolsey, Late Cardinal: His Life and Death Written by George Cavendish, his Gentleman Usher*, Ed. Roger Lockyer. (London: The Folio Society, 1962), 59.

³ *Ibid.*, 177.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 59.

⁵ *Ibid.*

CHAPTER 4

CARDINAL THOMAS WOLSEY

While it might seem imprudent to begin an analysis of a power division among three dynamic personalities with the man who was the first to exit the scene, it does make sense to begin a discussion of the use of a specific, primary biography in subsequent monographs by giving an analysis of the subject of said biography. Cavendish's biography of Cardinal Thomas Wolsey paved the way for many other writings about the king's minister. In addition, it provided a primary source of information for authors of biographies of Anne Boleyn and Henry VIII. Knowing this, it seems that the best course of action is to begin with the man with whom Cavendish spent so much time and energy on chronicling.

Cavendish writes about his master in *Life of Wolsey*: "Cardinal Wolsey. . . was an honest poor man's son, born in Ipswich within the county of Suffolk. . . ."⁶ George Cavendish's description of his long-time master not only summarized Wolsey's humble beginnings, but also provided an explanation for the reasoning behind the animosity that he received from the courtiers in Henry's government. As a "new-man," someone who was not of the old nobility, Wolsey faced a major struggle when it came to finding a place for himself in Henry's court.

⁶ Cavendish, *Life of Wolsey*, 31.

As a young king, Henry VIII preferred to spend his time in pursuit of his own contentment. He did not neglect the ruling of England, but he did give his ministers unprecedented power. Continually searching for someone he could trust, Henry believed he had found that man in Thomas Wolsey, his Royal Almoner. Wolsey took Henry's place at the council meetings concerning the tedium of government and allowed the king to be free to enjoy his youth. He trusted Wolsey, as Charles Ferguson showed in his book, *Naked to Mine Enemies*: "Already [in 1511] he enjoyed the confidence of the young King to an astonishing extent, and he showed that he was resolved to use this confidence to the full."⁷ In addition, author G. W. Bernard stated, "Wolsey has been presented not as a manipulating politician, but as 'the king's cardinal,' a tirelessly working and loyal servant of the king."⁸ The place that Wolsey had carved for himself created much envy among other men of the court and caused him to make many enemies.

The more trust Henry placed in Wolsey, the more there was for the churchman to gain. Wolsey used his financial gains and political prestige to create a place for himself at Hampton Court and York Place to conduct the business of the state and to receive state visitors in style. John Skelton, a political poet of the time, noting the Cardinal's rapid rise to wealth, wrote the following of the Cardinal's court:

Why come ye not to court?
To which court?
To the king's court
Or to Hampton Court?
Nay, to the king's court!
The king's court
Should have the excellence

⁷ Charles W. Ferguson, *Naked to Mine Enemies: The Life of Cardinal Wolsey*. (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1958), 89.

⁸ G.W. Bernard, "The Fall of Wolsey Reconsidered" *Journal of British Studies* 35. 3 (1996), [277-310], <http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdf?vid=8&hid=4&sid=744f947f-f5f5-4eac-b8bf-9a6d7707fcb4%40SRCSM1>. (accessed April 7, 2011), 279.

But Hampton Court
Hath the pre-eminence
And York Palace
With 'my lord's grace'
To whose magnificence
Is all the confluence
Suits and supplications
Embassies of all nations.⁹

Eventually, thoughts such as the one expressed in Skelton's poem would wreak havoc on Wolsey's status in the court and in the king's opinion.

As Henry relied more and more upon Wolsey's ideas and opinions, the Cardinal became a target for a number of plots to bring a new minister to the king's ear. Whispers against the Cardinal—attacking his competence, his piety, and his mannerisms—found their way to the king's attention via those who would see Wolsey fail. Factionalism was a growing problem during the early years of Henry's reign, and these factions provided a vehicle for the nobility to discuss their problems and to conspire against their enemies. No man likes to see those who he considers inferior to himself brought to greatness, and these were the thoughts that motivated many men of Henry's court to turn against the Cardinal.

Henry's infatuation with Anne Boleyn provided the perfect venue for these grievances to be aired. Once Henry had made the decision that he would leave Catherine and make Anne his wife, the Cardinal was called upon to turn Henry's desire into reality. Wolsey's task was difficult and daunting: by pursuing this action, he would be risking his position in the church as well as his position as the king's favorite.

The Cardinal and the king made many different appeals to Rome to convince the pope that he should grant the king's petition for annulment. These pleas fell on deaf

⁹ "Wolsey and John Skelton," 2011. Accessed February 19, 2011: http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/wolsey_skelton.htm

ears—while the king and cardinal argued Leviticus as the religious reason for their petition, the pope returned with lines from Deuteronomy. The passages, quoted here, clearly illustrate the problem:

Leviticus 18:16: “Thou shalt not uncover the nakedness of thy brother’s wife: it is thy brother’s nakedness.”¹⁰

Leviticus 20:21: “And if a man shall take his brother’s wife, it *is* an unclean thing: he hath uncovered his brother’s nakedness; they shall be childless.”¹¹

Deuteronomy 25:5: “If brethren dwell together, and one of them die, and have no child, the wife of the dead shall not marry without until a stranger: her husband’s brother shall go in unto her, and take her to him to wife, and perform the duty of an husband’s brother unto her.”¹²

The inherent contradictions in these passages show the long struggle that awaited Henry, Anne, and Wolsey. Neither pope nor king would give in or change his opinion. Stuck between these two forces was the increasingly powerless Wolsey.

The king placed a large portion of the blame for the unsatisfactory resolution of his “Great Matter” on Wolsey’s shoulders. For his part, Wolsey tried many different ways to bring about the results his king required. He attempted to convince Catherine to agree to an annulment, offering her titles, pensions, and other rewards or by threatening and coercing the queen. Nothing worked. His appeals to Rome were read and rejected and it soon seemed that Wolsey would not be able to get the king his annulment.

Wolsey’s failure was felt most acutely after the overwhelming disappointment of the papal envoy’s court. After years of appeals, the pope agreed to send his envoy,

¹⁰ *KJV Large Print Compact Bible*, (Korea: Holman Bible Publishers, 2000), 157.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 160.

¹² *Ibid.*, 270.

Cardinal Campeggio, to England to make a decision regarding the king's marital status. Unknown to Wolsey, the envoy was not authorized to make a true decision but was to stall and pronounce that the case was too complicated for anyone but the pope to rule upon—Campeggio was to make sure that the case was sent back to Rome and the pope for a decision.

Campeggio's betrayal—as it was seen by the king—was blamed on Wolsey. His fall from favor, a fall that had begun, albeit slowly, after Henry's decision to wed Anne, began in earnest. So much so had the cardinal fallen, that he gave his prized possession, Hampton Court, to the king in an effort to win back favor. While this gift did appease Henry for a short while, nothing could stop the inevitable demise of Thomas Wolsey.

In 1529, the Cardinal was arrested. At this time, Henry believed that the Cardinal was deliberately attempting to frustrate measures to ensure his annulment. Wolsey was released, but he was stripped of a number of his titles, including Lord Chancellor, and was forced to return to his archbishopric in York. Before he could arrive, however, he was met by Henry Percy, now the Earl of Northumberland, and was arrested for treason against the crown. Northumberland took the Cardinal into custody, and they began the long journey back to London and the Tower.

Wolsey fell ill on the trip to London, and the retinue was forced to stop at Leicester Abbey. It is reported that he told the Abbot, "Father Abbot, I am come hither to leave my bones among you."¹³ Wolsey died shortly thereafter, on November 29, 1530. Shakespeare writes that the cardinal's final words were, "Had I but serv'd my God with

¹³ Cavendish, *Life of Wolsey*, 219.

half the zeal I serv'd my king, he would not in mine age have left me naked to mine enemies.”¹⁴ With the death of the man, the legend of the king's minister was born.

Cardinal Wolsey, in biographies and popular legacy, is generally seen as King Henry VIII's tireless steward, a worker who was cast aside through no fault of his own. It is thanks, in large part, to Cavendish that this vision of Wolsey survived. Certainly at the time of his death, there was little love among the elite in England for the fallen Cardinal. In fact, there was private celebration around the court among those who were against Wolsey and who favored his fall. In addition to the favorable opinion of his master that was printed by Cavendish, William Shakespeare's *Henry VIII* is relatively sympathetic toward Wolsey. It is Shakespeare who made Wolsey's last words famous, regardless of the fact that Cavendish is the man who immortalized them. The cardinal's final words show his belief that he was brought low by enemies and factionalism at the king's court. This belief is one that Cavendish reiterates in his biography of Wolsey.

Life of Wolsey is the first of many writings about the king's first minister.

Although Wolsey's life has not been as widely chronicled as those of Anne Boleyn and Henry VIII, he has not been ignored by history. A number of works have followed the life of Thomas Wolsey, especially in conjunction with his interactions at Henry VIII's court.

Cavendish, obviously, is one of the most recognized sources for information about Cardinal Wolsey. While scholars still tend to agree that Cavendish made sure to paint his master in a positive light, his work is heavily relied upon by those who wish to study the king's minister, his motivations, and his life.

¹⁴ William Shakespeare, *The Life of King Henry VIII*, Ed. David Hoenerger. (New York City: Penguin Books, 1966), Act III, Scene ii.

Ethelred L. Taunton's 1902 biography, *Thomas Wolsey: Legate and Reformer*, has an extremely high opinion of Cavendish's work and of the truth of the writing. While many later authors would contest certain points of Cavendish's narrative, there were no thoughts of contradicting a primary source in the early 1900s. Taunton writes, "Cavendish [is] a first rate authority for what passed under his eyes. . . ." ¹⁵ This attitude would set the tone for biographies of Wolsey for nearly 100 years. It was not until the modern era of biographies that Cavendish's text was questioned on its merit.

In 1929, Tudor historian A.F. Pollard published a biography of the Cardinal entitled *Wolsey: Church and State in Sixteenth-Century England*. Settled firmly in the realm of the early biographies, Pollard's writing uses Cavendish as a source without any qualms as to the biases in *Life of Wolsey*. Everything that is quoted is presented as factual—Pollard does not look for other sources to back up Cavendish's version of events. While he does not use a limited number of sources, his writing shows that he believes Cavendish. There is no specific passage that spells out his belief, but the way in which Pollard integrates quotes from *Life of Wolsey* shows that he does not question Wolsey's minister.

Another biography, *Naked to Mine Enemies: The Life of Cardinal Wolsey*, was written in 1958 by Charles Ferguson. Ferguson obviously held much respect for the subject of his monograph. The Cardinal is referred to as "my lord of York" and "my lord Cardinal" throughout the text. This noted, any reference to Cavendish is taken as the author intended it: Ferguson writes with the same bias as Wolsey's first biographer. It is therefore easy to determine that he has no interest in undermining Cavendish's authorial authority or attempting to prove Wolsey's usher wrong at any time. This point of view

¹⁵ Ethelred Luke Taunton, *Thomas Wolsey: Legate and Reformer*, (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1970), 11.

makes Ferguson a model of the early biographers' stance when regarding Cavendish and Wolsey.

Neville Williams, author of a number of Tudor monographs, wrote a dual biography of Cardinal Wolsey and a later minister of Henry VIII, Thomas Cromwell, beginning a trend of combination biographies that centered on King Henry's ministers. Williams quotes Cavendish's work extensively throughout the Wolsey section of his book. Interestingly, Williams' use of Cavendish does not tell as much about his attitude toward Cavendish's interpretation of Wolsey's character but rather Williams' belief in the truth of Cavendish's statements about Anne. In one section of his work, Williams writes, "Henry left to dine with Anne Boleyn, now 'more like a queen than a simple maid,' in the privacy of his chamber. During the meal, she worked very hard, as her father had instructed her, to persuade the King not to be forgiving towards his minister."¹⁶ This statement shows Williams' belief in the truth of Cavendish's statements. As this work was written and printed in 1975, it sits firmly within the boundaries of an early biography. Cavendish's statements are taken mostly at face value: the work is used as a primary source, and it seems that the author has not looked at the inherent bias in the book. The only note in the work wherein Williams acknowledges a possible partiality in Cavendish's writing is when he calls the usher "the faithful Cavendish."¹⁷

Following Williams' trend, Jasper Ridley's 1982 combination biography *Statesman and Saint: Cardinal Wolsey, Sir Thomas More, and the Politics of Henry VIII*, discusses the lives of these two men, both of whom were extremely important to the king. Cavendish's work is cited heavily by Ridley; he uses it in a number of manners. Not only

¹⁶ Neville Williams, *The Cardinal and the Secretary: Thomas Wolsey and Thomas Cromwell*, (New York City: MacMillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1975), 123.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 138.

is the work used for proof when regarding dates—Ridley uses Cavendish’s story to prove his theory about when Wolsey was born—but it is also viewed with some measure of suspicion. He writes that a specific story “was unlikely to be true in every detail”¹⁸ and questions some of the stories that were supposedly told to Cavendish by Wolsey. For example, Ridley criticizes the tale of Wolsey’s three or three-and-a-half day trip to Calais. He brings up a number of points that would make this journey less credible, ending his criticism with “Cavendish must have gotten some of the details wrong. . . It is also quite possible that Wolsey may have exaggerated the speed at which he travelled. . . .”¹⁹ This addendum shows that Ridley’s work had a propensity to believe Cavendish’s version of events: he quickly makes an excuse for any inconsistency in *Life of Wolsey* by blaming the subject of the monograph rather than the author. When discussing another incident in Henry’s court, Ridley makes sure to point out that “all the facts fit the story which Cavendish tells.”²⁰ This is an interesting contrast with a later remark written by Ridley, “Cavendish is not always absolutely accurate in points of detail, and even if he correctly heard. . . it gives no hint of what they were discussing.”²¹ When taken together, these statements give the impression that Ridley wants to believe that Cavendish’s writing was truthful if not always accurate.

Nancy Lenz Harvey’s 1980 biography, *Thomas Cardinal Wolsey*, is interesting for its lack of reference to Cavendish. Though introduced in the first chapter, no citations are made to *Life of Wolsey* until Chapter Seven, where Harvey begins her discussion of the Legatine Court. These references tend to be straightforward and place complete faith

¹⁸ Jasper Ridley, *Statesman and Saint: Cardinal Wolsey, Sir Thomas More, and the Politics of Henry VIII*, (New York City: Viking Press, 1983), 20.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 27.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 39.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 220.

in Cavendish. While her limited use of the text could be taken as a silent criticism of the work, the fact that her biography reads more like a novel than a scholarly work would suggest otherwise.

Possibly the most comprehensive biography of Cardinal Wolsey is Peter Gwyn's 1990 monograph *The King's Cardinal: The Rise and Fall of Thomas Wolsey*. A staggeringly lengthy work—666 pages, the writing covers every aspect of the Cardinal's life in extensive detail. Cavendish's biography is referred to numerous times throughout the work, but Gwyn's most compelling addition to his tome is his own critique of *Life of Wolsey* as a source. Gwyn is a harsh critic of Cavendish, pointing out numerous faults in his biography. The major criticism that Gwyn relates is that Cavendish did not write his work while the events it discusses were taking place—the same criticism as many other authors. Gwyn goes more in-depth with his critique, pointing out that Cavendish wrote his work with the express purpose of paying respect to his master's memory. His work was meant to dispel the negative rumors that had accumulated since Wolsey's death. This created a problem for his narrative, as it meant that he was not documenting what happened as it happened but that he was writing in opposition to unnamed gossips. Gwyn states, "For Cavendish, morality was always more important than accuracy, but it is doubtful that, even to point out the moral, he would have gone to the trouble of complete fabrication."²² Thus, though Cavendish's work has many problems, it is based on fact. Gwyn, it seems, follows the same conventions of Ridley: Cavendish might be wrong at times, but he was no liar.

²² Peter Gwyn, *The King's Cardinal: The Rise and Fall of Thomas Wolsey*, (London: Barrie & Jenkins Ltd., 1990), 3.

Stella Fletcher, author of the 2009 book *Cardinal Wolsey: A Life in Renaissance Europe*, uses Cavendish's biography extensively in her work. She does not seem to accept the usher's version of events, but is not above quoting it when there are few other sources to support her conclusions. Early in her work, Fletcher uses Cavendish's writing to help explain Wolsey's early life—a time period for which Cavendish was not a witness. She does not take his account as truth during this section of her book. For example, when discussing the possible dates for Wolsey's birth, Fletcher seems to criticize Cavendish for the lack of dates his biography possesses. Any rebuke she aims his direction is slight, however. She writes, "Cavendish sheds little light on this matter," but does not offer any further reason for lending credibility—or not—toward *Life of Wolsey*. In another section, she states that Cavendish's writing about a certain event was "based on no more than the cardinal's own recollections."²³

One of the major points of contention for Fletcher is Cavendish's version of the events surrounding the Henry Percy affair. Like other modern authors, Fletcher complains about the lack of dates in Cavendish's work, as well as the inaccuracies of some of the dates. It is generally agreed that Henry VIII had no interest in Anne Boleyn romantically during the Henry Percy affair, though that is exactly what Cavendish would like readers to believe. More specifically, however, Fletcher takes issue with the idea that the Henry Percy fiasco sparked any kind of actual rivalry between Percy's paramour and Cavendish's master. She writes, "It also suits the carefully crafter shape of Cavendish's biography to present Anne as Wolsey's nemesis and to interpret the Percy episode as the source of her—unjustified—determination to seek revenge on him."²⁴ This

²³ Stella Fletcher, *Cardinal Wolsey: A Life in Renaissance Europe*, New York City: Continuum, 2009, 18.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 92.

same skepticism toward *Life of Wolsey* continues throughout Fletcher's narrative. Though she does not ignore the chronicler, she does not accept his writing at face value. It is this distinction that places Fletcher's biography in the same category as other modern writers.

Derek Wilson's 2002 book, *In the Lion's Court: Power, Ambition, and Sudden Death in the Reign of Henry VIII*, discusses the lives of five important men in the court of Henry VIII—one of whom is Cardinal Wolsey. In this section of his work, Wilson uses the Cavendish book to show the relationship between Henry and Wolsey and the intrigue in Henry's court. Wilson criticizes Cavendish's writing based on the fact that it was written many years after the events it described had taken place. When discussing some of the plots against the Cardinal by the anti-Wolsey faction, Wilson quotes Cavendish and then provides commentary, saying:

Cavendish, writing thirty years later, claimed that 'the great lords of the Council. . . ' arranged for him to be sent to France so that 'they might have convenient leisure and opportunity to adventure their long-desired enterprise; and by the aid of their chief mistress (my lady Anne) to vilify him unto the King in his absence.' This is a conflation of events viewed in retrospect and it attributes or Wolsey's enemies more cunning and organisational skill than they possessed.²⁵

This is one of the most straightforward critiques of Cavendish's writing in modern biography. A direct contradiction, Wilson's analysis shows clearly the bias in *Life of Wolsey* as well as the historical inaccuracies it contains.

On the Henry Percy matter, Wilson also contradicts Cavendish, saying that "there is no evidence that [Anne] nursed a grudge."²⁶ This statement is echoed by other modern writers, but Wilson takes it one step farther by heaping criticism on other authors who have shared Cavendish's view. While he does not call any of them by name, he simply

²⁵ Derek Wilson, *In the Lion's Court: Power, Ambition, and Sudden Death in the Reign of Henry VIII*, (New York City: The Random House Group Limited, 2002), 240.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 248.

acknowledges them as earlier writers who followed Cavendish's writing and then goes on to disprove their ideas and theories. It is an interesting stance to take, and it further emphasizes the biases in Cavendish's biography. This stance does not change when he discusses other events: in many places where Cavendish describes Anne as the instigator of events, Wilson finds other primary sources that disprove the usher's recollections.

Wilson's biography is interesting because of his attitude toward his subject. It would be easy to think that someone who would spend his time researching a subject would be inclined to think the best of that subject. Not so of Wilson. While his work is not negative toward Wolsey, he has no inclination to believe Cavendish just because the usher is favorable toward Wilson's subject.

CHAPTER 5

KING HENRY VIII

Henry VIII was the second king in the still-precarious Tudor dynasty when he took the throne in 1509. His father, Henry VII, Henry Tudor, had a barely acceptable claim to the throne when he won the crown on the field of battle in 1485. His lineage was royal only through a bastard line stemming from the union of Katherine de Valois and Owen Tudor. It was Henry VII's mother, Margaret Beaufort, wife of Edmund Tudor, who pushed her son to fight for the crown. For the rest of his life, Henry VII struggled to make the new royal family legitimate in the eyes of Europe—the fledgling royals were seen as upstarts by most of the continent.

Henry VIII was educated as befitted a royal son; he was especially well versed in theology, since as the second son he was expected to enter the church when he came of age. The death of his elder brother, Arthur, paved young Henry's path to the throne—and England's path toward Protestantism.

Arthur, the Prince of Wales, married Catalina of Spain, daughter of Ferdinand and Isabella, in 1501. Once in England, Catalina became known as Catherine of Aragon. The marriage to Arthur was brief; only a few months after the wedding, Arthur became ill and died in Wales, his young wife at his side. The few months that they were married would become one of the most contested periods of time in Tudor England. Specifically, the

question of whether Catherine and Arthur had consummated their marriage would have great importance during Henry VIII's quest for an annulment of his marriage. This question was pivotal: Catherine insisted that she and her first husband had not known each other as man and wife. She swore that Arthur had been too frail and sick for such activity and refused to budge from this point. Henry and Wolsey found witnesses who would swear that the couple's sheets were soiled with blood after their wedding night—a symbol of consummation. During the annulment proceedings, these stories would be repeated in a trying game. It was Henry's word against Catherine's, and no one knew who to believe.

After Arthur's death, Henry VII began to discuss what to do with the Spanish princess who was stranded on his island. Negotiations between the English king and Ferdinand would continue until the death of Henry VII. First, Catherine was promised to the new Tudor heir. Then, the kings began to discuss the possibility of a union between the newly-widowed Henry VII and the young princess. A decision had not been reached before Henry VII died.

Henry VIII, by all accounts, had distinct plans to marry Catherine even while his father was still alive. He married Catherine just two short months after his father's death: on June 11, 1509. This marriage was called into question long before it actually took place. Because Catherine was Henry's brother's widow, there was much discussion about whether the marriage would be valid under papal law. Much was written on this subject, and the pope was consulted on the matter. Eventually, the pope would grant a dispensation that would allow Henry to marry Catherine regardless of any familial affinity. This document was granted in 1503. Although history tends to portray Henry as

a passive character during this time, he was anything but. While these discussions were taking place, it seems that Henry changed his mind on more than one occasion. He made clear his intent to marry Catherine, but later signed documents stating that he had serious doubts about that course of action. Henry's childhood declaration stated that he had qualms of conscience about marrying his brother's widow and that he believed that to do so would be seen as wrong in the eyes of God. When this declaration was written, Henry was between 12 and 15 years of age. This writing would be used as evidence during the struggle to attain an annulment—interestingly, it is also the first reference to the king's famous conscience.

Doubts and declarations aside, Henry and Catherine were married, rather happily, until the 1520s. By this time, the large number of miscarriages that Catherine had weighed heavily on the couple. Their only surviving child was a daughter, Mary, whom Henry believed was useless in the succession because of the patriarchal society valued in England at that time. A male heir was Henry's greatest desire, something he believed that Catherine was unable to give him.

Henry was not a faithful husband to Catherine. He had a number of mistresses, most notably Bessie Blount, mother of Henry Fitzroy, Henry VIII's illegitimate son, and Mary Boleyn, sister to Anne and the alleged mother of a son and daughter of the king. When Anne Boleyn first caught Henry's eye in 1525 or 1526, many who knew of his attraction believed that Anne would become another royal mistress, but that Catherine of Aragon would remain Queen of England.

This arrangement, however, was not to be. For whatever reason—reasons that are much labored over by biographers of Mistress Boleyn—she refused to become Henry's

mistress. Her motives are unimportant to biographers of Henry VIII; they instead focus on Henry's actions after her refusal. Since Anne would not become his mistress, and Henry could not simply forget her, he decided to make her his queen.

This action, of course, necessitated the separation of Catherine from her title and her status. Some biographers stress the difficulty that Henry had with causing such distress to the woman with whom he had lived so long, but none contest the fact that he was willing to upset, hurt, and cause much pain to her if it meant that he would gain the object of his desire.

Henry's desire for the hand of Anne Boleyn caused a half a decade of turmoil, struggle, and argument. Two distinct sides formed as Henry made his intentions clear: in the early years, Henry and Wolsey worked tirelessly to ensure a separation and divorce from Catherine, while she used her connections as a Spanish princess to gain the support of the pope and the Holy Roman Emperor—Catherine's nephew, Charles V, son of her sister Johanna.

Henry and Wolsey sent numerous appeals to the pope trying to get him to grant an annulment on the grounds that Catherine had been married to Henry's older brother, who died young. Using Leviticus as his grounds, Henry cited Bible, asserting that his conscience was reconciled with Leviticus: "And if a man shall take his brother's wife, it is an unclean thing: he hath uncovered his brother's nakedness; they shall be childless."²⁷ A positive reaction was not sent from Rome, however, as the pope dared not anger the aunt of one of the most powerful men in Europe--Charles V—especially since that man had staged an attack on Rome and was now holding the pope captive.

²⁷ *KJV Large Print Compact Bible*, 160.

The pope's compromise in this situation was to send a papal envoy to England to decide the matter. Cardinal Campeggio made the arduous journey west, with specific instructions: stall. Henry and Wolsey believed that the envoy would bring an end to their long trouble, but nothing would come of the trial.

It was not until 1533 that Henry would get the result he desired. By this time, he had discarded his most trusted advisor believing, quite rightfully, that Wolsey was not helping his "Great Matter," but was, in fact, frustrating it. While Cavendish takes a very different view of these events, one fact is certain: Wolsey's fall gave rise to another minister—Thomas Cromwell. Cromwell believed that the best way for Henry to dissolve his first marriage and marry Anne was for him to break with Rome and declare himself the leader of the English church.

Henry took Cromwell's advice. In 1532, he would be declared Supreme Head of the Church in England, a church that remained mostly Catholic but did not recognize the pope as its earthly leader. A few months later, in January of 1533, Henry and Anne were married in a secret ceremony. The timing of the wedding might indicate that Anne was pregnant at the time, a reason usually given for the hurried circumstances under which the ceremony took place, but it is unlikely that Anne would have been aware of her condition: her first child was not born until September of 1533, meaning that the child would not have quickened before her wedding. As miscarriages were common, it does not seem likely that Anne would have informed the king about her condition until after that point in the pregnancy.

Henry now had the task of legitimizing the extreme measures he had undertaken in order to make Thomas Boleyn's daughter queen. Many acts were pushed through

parliament to legalize his marriage to Anne and his leadership over the church. First and foremost was the 1533 Act of Succession, which stated that Henry's daughter Mary was illegitimate and that all of Anne's children would be eligible to inherit the throne. Beyond these measures, parliament passed acts that prevented subjects from appealing to Rome or any other outside power. These laws were called praemunire.

Henry and Anne's first child was due in September of 1533. All expected that the child would be the long-sought-after and hard won male heir that Henry and England so desired. Their expectations were unfounded. Anne gave birth to a princess of England who was named Elizabeth after both her paternal and maternal grandmothers.

With this revelation, Henry's interest in his queen began to wane. After her second miscarriage, Henry started to believe that this marriage was cursed as his first had been. Catherine's death paved the way for Henry to leave Anne—while Catherine was living, had Henry discarded his new queen, he would have been expected to return to the Spanish woman. Henry refused to admit any error in getting rid of Catherine and taking a second wife. Had he gone back to Catherine, he would have been made the laughing stock of Europe. During this time, the strength of the king was representative of the strength of the country. For Henry to admit error would mean that he was undermining the strength of England. This was a fact the king knew all too well, and it was the reason he did not leave Anne even though he was no longer infatuated with her. With Catherine dead, Henry had no misgivings about leaving his second wife.

Charges of adultery were brought against Anne, who denied them. A trial declared her guilty, and she was sentenced to death. Henry's actions at this time are generally left to the imagination as historians tend to focus on the condemned woman.

Based on his actions after her death, it would seem that Henry spent the time of his wife's trial wooing a new paramour: Jane Seymour.

Before her death, Henry sent Thomas Cranmer, the churchman who had married Henry and Anne, to his wife to ask her to sign papers that would annul her marriage. She signed the documents, leaving Henry a single man. Eleven days after his second wife's execution, Henry VIII was married for the third time.

After his death, Henry VIII gained a popular reputation as a gluttonous, fat, murderous monarch who would do anything to get what he wanted. In some ways, he portrayed as a child, one who would stamp his feet and throw a tantrum until everyone around him did what he thought they should. In a more academic view, Henry is the king who set new precedents for behavior, expanded the power of the monarchy, and used whatever means necessary to do what he thought was best for his conscience and for his country. Cavendish does little to dispel this stereotype, showing Henry as a strong king, although one who was reliant on his ministers in order to run the government.

Though references to Cavendish's work are not as prevalent in biographies of Henry VIII as they are in writings about Wolsey, they are still quite common. Most authors of Henry VIII monographs use Cavendish when discussing the relationship between Henry and Wolsey. The treatment of *Life of Wolsey* in these biographies shows the important distinction between the early and modern Tudor biographies.

One of the earliest biographies of Henry VIII from the twentieth century is A. F. Pollard's 1902 work. This work is notable for the source it forgets: Cavendish. Though Pollard would use the work extensively in his 1929 biography of the Cardinal, his writing about Henry VIII used none of the Cavendish biography. No reason is given for the

exclusion of *Life of Wolsey* or for its inclusion in his later book. No matter the reason, this book is exceptional simply because of the major piece of Tudor history that was either ignored, overlooked, or forgotten.

Francis Hackett's biography of Henry VIII was originally published in 1929. As with many historical works from that time, Hackett is more concerned with telling a story than he is with citing his sources; therefore, it is very difficult to determine where much of his information came from. There is only one documented citation of Cavendish in the work, and it describes Wolsey's death and, briefly, the aftermath. Hackett's bias is not hard to discern, however. He has a distinct dislike of the Boleyns, calling them "shameless" among other things.²⁸ His bias matches Cavendish's, meaning that many of the uncited references to the source—which can be found most prevalently in the chapter regarding Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn—are used as pure truth. Hackett does not take into account Cavendish's own opinion of his subjects because these opinions match Hackett's own.

Henry VIII: A Study of Power in Action by John Bowle was published in 1964. Like many works before it, this biography does not question Cavendish's authority. Even on the question of dates, a subject on which even some early biographers contested Cavendish, Bowle follows him without qualm. This vein of thinking groups Bowle's biography with the writings of other early biographers.

J. J. Scarisbrick, one of the foremost biographers of Henry VIII, wrote his monograph in 1968. This work relies heavily on Cavendish's narrative, although it says little about the work itself. Nowhere in this writing does Scarisbrick question Cavendish's version of events outright. In fact, he agrees with *Life of Wolsey* throughout

²⁸ Francis Hackett, *Henry the Eighth*, (Garden City, NY: Garden City Publishing Company, Inc., 1931), 210.

the writing. When describing the fall of Cardinal Wolsey, Scarisbrick places his opinion in line with that of Cavendish—he writes that he believes Anne might have held some responsibility in helping push Henry away from Wolsey. In fact, in other sections of his work, Scarisbrick indicates his belief that Wolsey was a strong, honest, and capable servant of the king: an idea that echoes the Cavendish’s opinion. In this way, Scarisbrick has meshed his work with that of the older, earlier biographies of the king.

Lacey Baldwin Smith, a highly respected Tudor scholar, uses *Life of Wolsey* sparingly at best in his 1971 work *Henry VIII: The Mask of Royalty*. The Cavendish work is listed in Smith’s bibliography, but is not cited frequently when discussing the primary focus of Cavendish’s work: the king’s divorce. The halting use of such an important document could possibly be taken as evidence that the author showed skepticism toward the validity of the Cavendish work. Smith does not allow for speculation, however, as he writes:

Tradition says that it was Anne Boleyn who kept Henry waiting at her chamber door for six interminable years until she had won herself a crown, but given the King’s inordinate affection for ritual and the structure of his thinking, it seems almost as probably that it was the husband who insisted on legitimizing his adultery.²⁹

“Tradition,” in Smith’s writing is obviously the ideas set forth by Cavendish and the early biographers who followed him. Smith’s idea here directly contradicts Cavendish’s writing by placing some blame for the Great Matter upon Henry—Wolsey’s usher would be more inclined to name Anne as the cause of all the trouble. This opinion is interesting, considering that Smith’s biography was written in 1971—about twenty years before this kind of thinking became common among Tudor scholars based on other publications.

²⁹ Lacey Baldwin Smith, *Henry VIII: The Mask of Royalty*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1971), 105.

In contrast, Neville Williams' book *Henry VIII and His Court* was also published in 1971, just a few years before his dual biography of Wolsey and Cromwell. Just as in that work, Williams' older biography does not question the validity of Cavendish as a source—showing the common theme of Tudor biographies at the time Smith was writing. In fact, the work is mentioned as a suggestion for further reading in Williams' appendix. He writes that it is one of two “outstanding contemporary biographies.”³⁰ Aside from this note, the contemporary source is not quoted often or credited much.

Carolly Erickson's 1980 biography *Great Harry* does not rely on Cavendish as much as her later biography of Anne Boleyn. This is perhaps because Erickson takes a far different stance about the Cardinal and his personality than Cavendish. Erickson does not view the Cardinal as a noble man who was trying to help his king as Wolsey's usher does. She writes, “Narcissistic, ostentatious, outrageously presumptuous, Wolsey had few admirers.”³¹ This stance was a bit of a deviation from the standard school of historical thought at the time that Erickson was writing—particularly among Wolsey scholars. Her stance does not modernize her use of Cavendish, however. While she does not use his writing for anything related to the actions of the historical figures in her narrative, she does not dismiss his version of events based on his biases or any other problems in his narrative. Instead, she uses his work for background information and dismisses his character portrayals based simply on the fact that Cavendish does not agree with the premise that she sets forth in her work.

In 1984, Jasper Ridley wrote his monograph about the Tudor king. Though he uses Cavendish widely when discussing the king's interactions with Wolsey, Ridley is

³⁰ Neville Williams, *Henry VIII and His Court*, (New York City: The MacMillian Company, 1971), 262.

³¹ Carolly Erickson, *Great Harry*, (New York City: Summit Books, 1980), 133.

not above criticizing the Cardinal's biographer. He writes that Cavendish's version of events leading up to Wolsey becoming the king's chief minister was "oversimplification"³² and challenges his characterizations and dates at other points. Most dramatically, Ridley calls into question Cavendish's version of the relationship between Henry VIII and Wolsey. Ridley writes:

Some of these letters [sent between Henry VIII and Wolsey] have survived, and reveal to us very clearly the relationship of Henry and Wolsey. It was a very different one from that which Giustiniani and Chieregato [two other contemporaries], or Cavendish, imagined. It was neither a case of a pleasure-loving King showing no interest in government and diplomacy, and automatically agreeing to everything that the all-powerful minister suggested, nor of a cowering, obsequious Wolsey being forced to resort to flattery and ruses to trick a stupid Henry into doing what Wolsey wanted. Their correspondence reveals a very successful collaboration between two intelligent men who had the same objectives and usually agreed on how to achieve them.³³

This statement is a dramatic step away from the traditional literature at the time that Ridley was writing. That he challenged a primary source with another, more objective, source shows that Ridley was not firmly planted in the early era of Tudor literature—regardless of the dates during which he was writing.

Alison Weir, a writer of more modern biographies, is skeptical at best of Cavendish's writing. She uses the Henry Percy affair as an indictment of the *Life of Wolsey*, using evidence from other sources to show that Henry's actions might not have been what Cavendish would have liked his readers to believe.

The Henry Percy affair has been told a number of ways by various historians. In brief, Anne Boleyn attempted to make a match with the son of the Earl of Northumberland, Henry Percy. Neither the Cardinal nor the Earl approved the match. Cavendish wrote that the king was in love with Anne already at this time and forced

³² Jasper Ridley, *Henry VIII*, (New York City: Penguin Books, 1984), 58.

³³ *Ibid.*, 86.

Wolsey to break up the match. Here, Cavendish writes, Anne vowed vengeance upon Wolsey for forcing her out of this marriage.

Weir believes that Henry VIII was not in love with Anne at this time. The supposed engagement between Henry Percy and Anne Boleyn took place in 1523. Weir bases her conclusion on a letter that Henry wrote to Anne in 1527 saying that he had loved her but a year. Based on this evidence, Weir shows her skepticism toward Cavendish and his account. She writes:

George Cavendish, who relates this tale, asserts that Wolsey had acted on the orders of the King himself, who cherished a secret desire for Anne Boleyn. There is no other evidence of Henry pursuing her before February 1536. . . Had Henry been so keen on her, he would surely not have allowed her to leave court.³⁴

In other sections of her writing, Weir refuses to believe Cavendish's versions of events—particularly when he begins speculating on the motives of other's actions. For example, Weir offers a secondary explanation for Anne's animosity toward Wolsey: she bases the emotion on Anne's feelings about her father's loss of two positions within the court.

³⁴ Alison Weir, *Henry VIII: The King and His Court*, (New York City: Ballantine Books, 2001), 240.

CHAPTER 6

ANNE BOLEYN

Anne Boleyn was the daughter of courtier Thomas Boleyn, from a family that had, in the early 1500's, raised itself above its humble beginnings. Anne's mother was Elizabeth Howard, of the elite Howard family. Anne's pedigree, when coupled with her father's connections at court, afforded the Boleyn daughter some privileges that would have been denied to other women of her time. When still young—although there is much disagreement among historians about her exact age—Anne was sent to Europe to be educated, first in the court of the Regent Margaret of Burgundy, a member of the Hapsburg dynasty and a great patron of the arts in the Netherlands, and later in the retinue of Henry VIII's sister Mary Tudor in the French court.

Anne's return to England occurred around 1520. She was immediately brought to Henry's court where she served as a Lady-in-waiting to his queen, Catherine of Aragon. Historians tend to agree that although Henry knew of Anne's presence, he did not begin to court her until 1525 or later. From there the story becomes familiar: Henry falls desperately in love with the beguiling young woman, courts her, writes love letters expressing his devotion, and attempts to make her his mistress as he had done with Anne's elder sister, Mary. Anne's reply has also become something of legend: "Your wife I cannot be, both in respect of mine own unworthiness, and also because you have a

queen already. Your mistress I will not be.”³⁵ Although the validity of these lines are in question, the actions that took place after Henry’s letter begging her to become his mistress attest to the fact that Anne must have said something similar.

“The King’s Great Matter,” as Henry’s attempt to divorce Catherine and marry Anne would be known, would not end until 1533 when Henry declared himself head of the Church in England, annulled his marriage to Catherine, and married Anne Boleyn. A sense of urgency had fallen over the king: Anne had finally succumbed to his amorous advances and in January of 1533 became pregnant with the child that Henry believed would be the much-sought-after male heir of the Tudor dynasty.

By all accounts, Anne’s life as queen was not happy. She was plagued by the king’s desire for a male heir, a desire she was unable to fulfill—and an inability for which the king blamed her. The king began taking mistresses, an action that outraged Anne. She fought with him, incurring his wrath on more than one occasion. Anne miscarried at least twice in her three-year reign as queen, and her final miscarriage was the last straw for Henry.

After months of finding that her position in the king’s favor was slipping, Anne was arrested and accused of adultery with five men—including her brother, George. While an investigation of the supposed occurrences of these affairs almost definitely proves Anne’s innocence, she was found guilty by a jury of the nobility and was sentenced to die by burning or beheading, according to the king’s wishes. It was decided that Anne would be beheaded, and Henry sent to France for a swordsman to perform the act.

³⁵ Glenn Crawford, "The Great Matter."

In May of 1536, the five men with whom Anne had been accused were executed. Knowing that the king would go through with the harsh sentence imposed upon her, Anne's terror must have grown. When Thomas Cranmer visited her in the Tower of London, she signed the annulment papers he placed before her. It is unclear whether or not she believed she would be spared should she sign them. Logically, if she were no longer the king's wife—if she said that their marriage had been no marriage—she could not be executed for adultery. She could not, in fact, commit adultery if she and the king had never truly been married. Based on this supposition, it would make sense that Anne would have believed that signing Cranmer's papers would be her salvation.

Only a few days after the men's sentences had been carried out, on May 19, Anne Boleyn was executed for treason. Her final words to those who came to witness her death were:

Good Christian people, I have not come here to preach a sermon; I have come here to die. For according to the law and by the law I am judged to die, and therefore I will speak nothing against it. I am come hither to accuse no man, nor to speak of that whereof I am accused and condemned to die, but I pray God save the king and send him long to reign over you, for a gentler not a more merciful prince was there never, and to me he was ever a good, a gentle, and sovereign lord. And if any person will meddle of my cause, I require them to judge the best. . . and thus I take my leave of the world and of you all, and I heartily desire you all to pray for me.³⁶

Anne's speech was punctuated by her final words as the executioner took his place, "To Jesus Christ I commend my soul."³⁷

Anne's death meant the end of the King's Great Matter. Of the key players in the actions, only two remained: King Henry and George Cavendish.

³⁶ Eric Ives, *The Life and Death of Anne Boleyn*, (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 357-8.

³⁷ *Wriothesley Chronicle* Ed. W.D. Hamilton in *The Tudor Chronicles*. Ed. Susan Doran. New York City: Metro Books, 2009, 169.

The early biographies of Anne Boleyn are, in general, based on the long held belief in the propaganda that slandered the queen after her execution. Maligned as a witch or a seductress, many of these ideas were well established before the death of King Henry. Cavendish, while not going quite so far, certainly does nothing to alleviate this corruption of Anne's reputation. Early biographies repeated these ideas, using Cavendish as evidence for their ideas.

Norah Lofts' largely pictorial 1979 reference work *Anne Boleyn* is interesting in that it follows the early school of thought revolving around the young queen—the Cavendish school—while offering no substantiation for her writing. The lack of references would generally suggest a fictional piece, but the text is written in a manner that supports Lofts' work being labeled “nonfiction.” Evidence from her text shows that she must have leaned heavily on Cavendish's writing, as she maintains a strong bias against Anne Boleyn and shows favoritism toward Wolsey.

Carolly Erickson, author of *Mistress Anne: The Exceptional Life of Anne Boleyn*, follows this same school of thought. Her biography was published in 1984, which places her firmly in the realm of the early biographers. Erickson's scholarship is definitely in question regardless of the number of biographies she has written as she has a tendency to speculate throughout her work. This aside, it is obvious that she has no love for Anne Boleyn: she writes with a complete reliance on Cavendish. When discussing the fall of Cardinal Wolsey, Erickson does show a hint of skepticism about Anne's responsibility, writing that there were other factors that contributed to Wolsey's fall from grace, but she

also notes that Anne was “doing everything in her power to prevent a reconciliation between the two men.”³⁸

In 1976, Marie Louis Bruce wrote her biography of Anne Boleyn, titled, unremarkably, *Anne Boleyn*. Her work is different from the preceding works in that she does not accept immediately the premise that Anne was as manipulative or mean as the general body of work would suggest. Instead, Bruce writes based on primary sources like Cavendish. She takes what he writes as fact, in one section thanking him for the sum of available literature on a certain point. Bruce looks for other sources to back up Cavendish’s writing, but she seems to trust that he is relaying the story as he remembered it. It is a downside of her writing that she seems to forget that Cavendish wrote with a strong bias. She does not allow his bias against the subject of her biography seep into her writing, however, using Cavendish for records of events and conversations rather than commentary.

Antonia Frasier’s *The Six Wives of Henry VIII* was published in 1993. Frasier’s work uses the Cavendish text but not without pointing out some of its pitfalls. For example, she praises the work as being one of the few testimonies about the trial at Blackfriars which was originally the authority to decide on the matter of the king’s annulment. After this bit of praise, however, Frasier criticizes the work because it was written “many years later.”³⁹ In another section of her work, Frasier points out that *Life of Wolsey* was “another source not prejudiced in Anne Boleyn’s favor.”⁴⁰ Frasier’s work,

³⁸ Carolly Erickson, *Mistress Anne: The Exceptional Life of Anne Boleyn*. New York City: Summit Books, 1984, 155.

³⁹ Antonia Fraser, *The Wives of Henry VIII*, (New York City: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), 157.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 124.

because of the skepticism surrounding the Cavendish document, is decidedly a modern writing.

Joanna Denny's work, *Anne Boleyn: A New Life of England's Tragic Queen*, is, by far, the most radical change from the accepted literature. In her account, Anne was an innocent girl, unambitious, religious, and uncalculating. This change is abrupt and a complete divergence from all writings that have come before it. Taking into account the fact that the overwhelming bias in Cavendish's work has colored previous biographies of the ill-fated queen, it would be easy to believe that Denny simply ignored Cavendish's writing, preferring instead to focus on state papers, letters, personal writings, secondary sources, and her own obviously-not-unbiased opinion to create her biography. However, Denny's bibliography includes the original source and it is used frequently throughout her work. It is how she uses Cavendish's words that makes her monograph interesting.

Denny makes it clear early in her writing that she was not going to ignore the overwhelming presence of Cavendish, instead, she wades carefully through Cavendish's manuscript and uses only portions of his work that are not truly damning toward Anne's character. She also makes it a point to call the *Life of Wolsey* into question based on the fact that it was written long after the events it discussed had taken place. The evidence that Denny uses from Cavendish is all supported by other sources, showing that she was aware of the implications of using a biography that had been written so many years after the fact.

Denny is not the only modern author who has taken Cavendish's writings with a grain of salt. David Starkey, author of *The Six Wives of Henry VIII* (2003), writes that

Cavendish's work is "not without problems and there is an infuriating lack of dates."⁴¹ This note aside, Starkey's work uses Cavendish as a storyteller, making use of other primary documents to either support or refute the usher's claims. G. W. Bernard, author of the 2010 biography *Anne Boleyn: Fatal Attractions* seems to share Starkey's frustrations with the lack of dates in Cavendish's work. While he quotes the *Life of Wolsey* and uses information from the work, Bernard is highly concerned with using corroborating evidence to back up the claims that Cavendish makes—and with finding separate writings that may lend some sort of a timeframe to the Cavendish work. Like Denny and other authors, Bernard also questions the Cavendish's validity writing because of the amount of time that passed between the events and the writing. He writes, "There are unfortunately many problems with this much later account. Too much is just too convenient and almost certainly coloured by hindsight. . . ."⁴²

Suspicion of Cavendish is a common theme in Eric Ives version of Anne Boleyn's story. His analysis of the work shows just how deeply he distrusts Cavendish. He writes;

Despite his prejudices, Cavendish goes out of his way to make the point that Anne was still a virgin when she married. . . It is a conclusion which commands respect. After all, it is difficult to traduce Anne Boleyn both for promiscuity before and promiscuity after marriage; if she had always s been as lecherous as some conservatives wanted to believe, Henry was more stupid than wronged.⁴³

While still looking at Cavendish's work as full of opinion and bias, Ives makes a point that cannot be overlooked: the respect that Cavendish felt for Henry had to have some influence on his work. Otherwise, he would have been able to malign Anne to his heart's content. As it was, he wanted to make sure that he did not defame the character of his

⁴¹ David Starkey, *Six Wives: The Queens of Henry VIII*, (New York City: Jutland Ltd., 2003), 273.

⁴² G. W. Bernard, *Anne Boleyn: Fatal Attractions*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 14.

⁴³ Ives, *Anne Boleyn*, 80.

king. Therefore, it is possible that Cavendish held back some of his negative thoughts and feelings about Anne.

Ives does agree with Cavendish on one point: he writes that the fall of Wolsey was “first and foremost Anne’s success.”⁴⁴ He does not, however, attribute this success to Anne’s hatred of the cardinal as Cavendish does. Instead, Ives places Anne as the figurehead of the anti-Wolsey faction in King Henry’s court. He does not imply that she was merely a puppet of these men, but he does make it clear that those who wanted Wolsey to fall from power were unafraid to make friends with the king’s favorite in order to further their own personal agendas.

Alison Weir, the author of a number of books about the Tudor era including the recent (2010) biography entitled *The Lady in the Tower: The Fall of Anne Boleyn*, points out on more than one occasion that Cavendish had no great love for the Boleyns. In fact, aside from using his later poetic writings to prove his bias more fully, Weir uses very little of *Life of Wolsey* in her book. She does not ignore it—the prominence of the biography makes that virtually impossible—but she does not use the work unless Cavendish’s story can be backed up by other sources. Weir’s newest book is also notable for its sympathy toward Henry VIII’s second queen: an entire chapter of her work is devoted to unraveling the mystery of why Anne Boleyn has been so maligned throughout history.

Weir is unique in that her writing provides an opportunity to see how one author’s mind changed over time. In 1991, Weir wrote *The Six Wives of Henry VIII* which gave a survey of all of Henry’s queens but focused (as many of these types of works do) on Henry’s first wife and the turmoil leading to his second marriage. In stark contrast to her

⁴⁴ Ives, *Anne Boleyn*, 124.

newer writing, Weir uses much of Cavendish's writing in her original story about Anne Boleyn. She utilizes quotes from *Life of Wolsey* that show none of the sympathy and feeling toward her subject as *The Lady in the Tower*. In *Six Wives*, Weir allows Cavendish's bias to enter into her own work, although she does use other sources to help back up Cavendish.

The reason for this shift in opinion is unclear. It could be that the prevailing trend of sympathy toward Anne entered into Weir's writing or that she decided she had made a mistake in trusting Cavendish unquestioningly. Whatever the reason, Weir's shift is a dramatic example of the overall shift that historians have made away from the Cavendish text.

Sympathetic feelings toward Anne by modern writers are expressed in a number of ways. In addition to the increasing suspicion of Cavendish and those writers who follow him, Anne's death has been increasingly portrayed as a tragedy. Her final words, once seen as proof of her guilt, are now coupled with a poem that she supposedly wrote on the eve of her execution—a poem that was set to music and attributed to Anne after her death. It reads:

O Death, 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;
Thy sound my death abroad will tell,
For I must die,
There is no remedy. . . .⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Anne Boleyn, "Oh Death Rock Me Asleep," in Denny, *Anne Boleyn*, 311

These lines show a new depth of feeling for the queen, one that was completely eradicated after her death.

Elizabeth Norton appears to be the exception that proves the rule. Her 2008 biography of Anne Boleyn, subtitled *Henry VIII's Obsession*, leans toward the writings of much earlier biographers. While she does question some of Cavendish's points—it appears that she does look for complementary materials—she accepts a number of premises that are generally accepted as false or, at least, grossly improbable by modern historians. A major example of this is the supposed sixth finger that it was said Anne had on her left hand. Norton writes that it is possible for this defect to have existed, whereas all other modern writers either ignore the accusation or dismiss it. This, when coupled with her assertion that Anne consummated her relationship with Henry Percy, shows Norton bias against the queen and makes it easy to understand the reason that she would find Cavendish's account so easy to stomach.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

On January 28, 1547, King Henry VIII, Bluff King Hal, died in his bed at Whitehall Palace. The once handsome, athletic monarch had been reduced to a sick, obese tyrant through the pains of age. An old jousting wound combined with gout and issues related to his weight were blamed for the king's death. Before he expired, he had survived innumerable ministers and five of his six wives. He left a legacy that included a modified religious establishment in England, three children all of whom would take the throne, and a reputation for tyranny, gluttony, and suspicion. With the death of King Henry, only one person remained who knew the story about what had happened during the King's Great Matter: George Cavendish, gentleman usher to the late Cardinal Wolsey.

As one of the most prominent primary works related to the Tudor era, biographers have relied upon George Cavendish's *Life of Wolsey* since its initial printing in the late 1500s. These biographers span a lengthy timeline and their works can be neatly divided into two eras: early and modern biographies. These two categories have distinct characteristics when related to the Cavendish work. The early biographies follow the Cavendish model of thought; whatever Cavendish wrote was believed without pause. Few of these authors made any negative comments about the gentleman usher's

writing—they seemed to overlook entirely the prejudices that Cavendish did not attempt to hide in his book. Modern biographies are more skeptical in their content where *Life of Wolsey* is concerned. The authors of these monographs point out Cavendish's biases and the shortcomings of his narrative. The majority of the problems that authors point out are the lack of dates in his writing, the harsh way he deals with his subjects, and the long expanse of time that passed before he wrote his story. All of these, according to modern authors, cast a pall over Cavendish's work and hinder the accuracy of his writing.

The divide over *Life of Wolsey* shows much more than just the use of one primary work in the vast library of Tudor biographies. It illustrates the variability of all primary sources and shows that they can be used to reveal an author's own bias. In the genre of historical writing, it is highly important to question and analyze primary documents. The problems inherent in Cavendish's biography are but a small sample of the issues that plague primary sources—problems that historical biographers are tasked with solving. Modern authors are moving farther and farther away from the flawed Cavendish text, which shows that increased accuracy in writing is becoming more important in historical writings. History, according to Mark Twain, is written with the hand of fluid prejudice. The use of George Cavendish's *Life of Wolsey* illustrates just how fluid the pen of prejudice can be.

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