



*The Mistresses
of Henry VIII*

KELLY HART

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To my husband, Andrew Gatenby

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Chronology

1509: On St. George's Day, Henry was officially proclaimed King Henry VIII. He was described as '*youngling, he cares for nothing but girls and hunting*'. Within weeks, the new seventeen-year-old king had married his brother's widow, the pretty twenty-three-year-old Princess Katherine of Aragon. Henry seemed enamoured with his new wife.

1510: The first rumours surfaced of Henry's affairs with other women; in this year a scandal arose from his affair with Lady Anne Stafford, the married sister of the Duke of Buckingham. The relationship may have continued over the next three years.

1513: Henry invaded France and spent time at Margaret of Austria's court, much of it in the company of Étienne de la Baume.

1514: There were the first suggestions of affairs with Bessie Blount, Elizabeth Carew and Jane Popincourt. Cracks were beginning to show in the royal marriage and there were the first rumours of an annulment.

1516: Jane Popincourt, with a generous leaving present from Henry, returned to France to join her former lover, the duc de Longueville. Katherine of Aragon finally gave birth to a child who would survive to adulthood, Princess Mary.

1517: Around this year, Henry began an affair with his wife's young maid of honour, Bessie Blount.

1519: Bessie gave birth to Henry's only (acknowledged) illegitimate child, Henry Fitzroy.

1522: A marriage was arranged for Bessie Blount, which probably marked the end of her affair with the king. There were rumours she was replaced by '*Mistress Parker*'. Around this time, he became involved with another lady-in-waiting, Mary Boleyn.

1524: Mary Boleyn gave birth to a daughter, Catherine Carey.

1525: Henry ceased to cohabit with his wife, Katherine of Aragon, who was then thought to be beyond childbearing. His relationship with Mary Boleyn came to an end. Henry gave his illegitimate son, Henry Fitzroy, several titles, including duke of Richmond and Somerset. There were rumours from then on that Fitzroy was being groomed as the next king of England.

1526: Mary Boleyn gave birth to a son, Henry Carey, who was later rumoured to be the king's child. The King declared his love for Mary's sister, Anne.

1527: Henry proposed to Anne Boleyn and initiated annulment proceedings to rid himself of the ageing Queen Katherine. Cardinal Wolsey, the King's chief minister, initiated ecclesiastical proceedings against Henry's ex-mistress, Lady Anne Stafford, for adultery with Henry's close friend

1532: Around December, Anne Boleyn became pregnant by Henry.

1533: Henry married Anne in a secret ceremony, although his first marriage had not yet been annulled. Princess Elizabeth was born in September.

1534: The first rumours began of Henry's infidelity with a '*very handsome young lady*' at court. She was said to be popular with the conservative faction and corresponding with Henry's daughter Mary.

1535: Henry embarked on a six-month affair with Anne Boleyn's cousin, Mary Shelton.

1536: Henry attempted to make another maid of honour, Jane Seymour, his mistress. She refused unless he could offer her marriage. Queen Anne was arrested for treason, incest and adultery and executed. Eleven days later, Henry married Jane.

It was reported that Henry regretted his marriage to Jane once he had seen two new ladies at court. Henry's illegitimate son, the duke of Richmond, died aged seventeen, leaving Henry inconsolable.

1537: Queen Jane died giving birth to the future Edward VI. There were no further rumours of Henry having extramarital affairs, except those which led to marriage. He was forty-six years old.

1538: Henry began looking for a fourth wife. Mary Skipwith and Mary Shelton were considered to be contenders, as well as several princesses.

1540: Henry married Anne of Cleves, but was unwilling to consummate the union. After six months the marriage was annulled and he wed Anne's teenage maid of honour, Catherine Howard.

1542: Catherine Howard was executed for adultery. Henry was rumoured to be considering Elizabeth Brooke or Anne Bassett as her replacement.

1543: Henry married Katheryn Parr.

1546: Henry agreed that Queen Katheryn should be arrested for heresy, although he later changed his mind. It was rumoured that Henry wished to replace Katheryn with her close friend, Katheryn Willoughby, duchess of Suffolk.

1547: There was an attempt to make Lady Mary Howard – the king's daughter-in-law – his mistress so she could then control Henry and Prince Edward.

Those involved in this scheme were sentenced to be executed.

Henry VIII died and was buried, as he had instructed, next to Jane Seymour, his '*true wife*'.

*Pastime with good company,
I love, and shall until I die.
Grudge who will, but none deny,
So God be pleased, thus live will I.*

*For my pastance:
Hunt, sing, and dance,
My heart is set!
All goodly sport,
For my comfort,
Who shall me let?*

*Youth must have some dalliance,
Of good or ill some pastance.
Company methinks them best,
All thoughts and fancies to digest.*

*For idleness,
Is chief mistress
Of vices all:
Then who can say,
But mirth and play,
Is best of all?*

*Company with honesty,
Is virtue, vice to flee.
Company is good and ill,
But every man has his free will.*

*The best ensue,
The worst eschew,
My mind shall be:
Virtue to use,
Vice to refuse,
Thus shall I use me!*

Written by Henry VIII

Henry and His Women

He was Bluff King Hal; big, handsome, victor of the jousts and all a sovereign should be. He was a tyrant, irritably shouting at and striking his servants, turning the established Church on its head in his lust for women and wealth. He was a man who married six times but claimed only two had been legally binding; he has fascinated generations since, and has attracted the attention of numerous talented researchers. In this book, I have pieced together all the information on his mistresses, his wives and the women he pursued. Here, we will look at the ladies who attracted the man who could have had anyone – the cream of Tudor society. And they were every bit as intriguing as the man himself.

His most famous mistresses, Bessie Blount, the mother of his son, and Mary Boleyn, the sister of Anne, are well-covered in this book, as well as many women who here emerge from the shadow of the queen: Lady Anne Stafford, sister of the first peer of the realm and Henry's second cousin; Jane Popincourt, one of his sisters' French tutor; Mary Shelton, a poet and cousin of the Boleyn sisters; Elizabeth Amadas, 'witch and prophetess'¹; and Elizabeth Brooke, whose husband had left her because of her adultery. There was also the beautiful Étienne, who enchanted Henry while he was at war in France, the popular maid of honour Anne Bassett, Henry's daughter-in-law, Mary Howard, duchess of Richmond, as well as women he kept in secret houses and the wives of two of his close friends.

People assume that a man who had six wives must have had six hundred lovers and imagine Henry was a consummate philanderer, chasing every female he saw. But Henry was essentially a one-woman man; he had many lovers but was usually faithful to each in turn. In the sixteenth century, it was a common belief that gout, constipation and a red face could be caused by too much sex – Henry appeared to have all of these symptoms. This was why rumours about syphilis took root; people believed that Henry had been so promiscuous, he *must* have caught it. The reality was quite different.

Henry VIII deserves to be one of England's best-known kings. He founded the Church of England, radically changing the course of English history and the culture of the nation, and he cemented the union of England and Wales, which stands to this day. He can make a good claim to the title 'Father of the English Navy' and he consolidated and strengthened English rule in Ireland – by the end of his reign he had become 'King of Ireland' instead of the 'Lord' his predecessors had used. But Henry's fame does not lie with these considerable achievements – he is well-known because of his unconventional attitude to women. His determination to give some of his lovers everything they wanted – even the crown off his wife's head, or his wife's head itself – has secured his place in history.

It is unsurprising that Henry had many lovers as most noble families wanted one of their women to attract the king's attention, and they were paraded before him in their costliest clothes and elaborate jewellery. Many of them never washed, had wooden teeth, bad breath and body odour, but they doused themselves in perfume, trowelled on the make-up with a rabbit's foot and fluttered their eyelashes at the omnipotent monarch, and sometimes they were successful in attracting him. Families could receive great benefits from a member of their family being in the king's bed. His queens watched the

ladies-in-waiting carefully, ensuring they dressed conservatively and spent much of their day on the knees praying, embroidering – anything his wife could think of to keep her ladies from becoming a threat; but Henry's queens had to learn to turn a blind eye to his philandering. Nearly all of his affairs were with ladies-in-waiting, who spent most of their time with Henry's wife, creating an awkward atmosphere in the queen's apartments.

The younger Henry seemed to prefer women to girls, choosing females in their mid to late twenties although several teenage maids of honour also became the objects of his affection. Yet he does not seem to have had an exact type, which made it difficult for the courtiers to second-guess his feelings and so influence him through their female relatives. Feisty, submissive, beautiful, plain, intellectual and illiterate are all terms that have been used to describe one or more of Henry's lovers. Yet there was one clear theme from his thirties onwards – he seemed to choose the opposite of the last woman he had fallen for. Henry was considered a demigod by his subjects, so each woman he chose was someone who had managed to stand out in a crowd of stunning ladies. Looking good was not enough (indeed, many of Henry's lovers were considered plain); she had to have something extra special to keep the King's interest.

Henry has been portrayed as a man who did not overwhelm his lovers with generosity, but those who he really loved were well looked after. Bessie Blount became the first royal mistress in centuries whose bastard quickly received a title – and her son was given a double dukedom, making the six-year-old the foremost nobleman in the realm. There is convincing evidence that Henry VIII intended to make their son his heir – elevating Mistress Blount to mother of the king. And if Henry had not fallen in love with Anne Boleyn – or if she had been prepared to accept the usual role of mistress – then England might still be a Catholic country and the Anglican Church never have come into existence, in England or across the world. He was prepared to do whatever it took to have her, with far-reaching consequences.

Henry's wives reflected and, to some extent, influenced his politics, and so did his mistresses. In France, to be the king's mistress was not a secret affair; it was a recognised position at court, coming with its own apartments, power and privileges. Only one of his lovers was given something of the respect she would have expected in France, and this was Anne Boleyn, an exceptional woman by any standards, whose spectacular rise to power was matched only by her dramatic fall. Most princes were notorious for their liaisons, but for Henry these were private relationships not to be displayed to the world, and he would not have given a political position to a woman just because she was attractive. Yet he was very susceptible to subtle influence from his paramours, as his courtiers well knew and an intelligent woman could exploit.

Henry was quite a catch – he was widely considered to be handsome and charming, the life and soul of the pageant, the feast and the hunt, with his boyish charm and boundless energy. It is hard to trust contemporary descriptions of kings – people were invariably dazzled by the splendour of the monarch's clothes, jewellery and entourage, and so all royalty were described as extremely attractive and incredibly intelligent. But there is no doubt that Henry VIII deserved most of the accolades he received. Thomas More described him as a man who made each person he spoke to believe that he or she alone had the King's '*special favour*'.² Yet he was a complex character, full of contradiction. Henry was very learned, spoke several languages and wrote books on theology, but he was also an athlete who excelled in all sports. His people loved him although he could be an insecure egomaniac, vain, manipulative and with a talent for self-delusion. As his reign progressed, these were the character traits that came to the fore, and ladies had far more to gain and far more to lose from attracting his attention.

The dominant females in Henry's childhood would have had a profound influence on his attitude towards women. His mother, Elizabeth of York, and his strong-willed paternal grandmother, Margaret Beaufort, were his female role models – and they could not have been more different. Margaret Beaufort's royal blood had meant she was always in danger. The heiress of the Lancastrian dynasty was the guiding hand in plotting for her only son, Henry VII, to become king of England and she was the force behind the throne throughout his reign. She lived for religion, scholarship and her family; her experiences made her a character of steel. And it was Margaret Beaufort who had the most contact with, and control over, her young grandson, Henry.

Yet it is likely that Henry saw the ideal woman as similar to his mother – submissive. Elizabeth of York was reportedly docile and gentle, the very image of the perfect sixteenth-century woman. As the heiress of the Yorkist kings, she had a better claim to the throne than her Lancastrian husband, but did not seek power or influence in her own right. Henry VIII's only lover who truly fitted this description was Jane Seymour, is the one he chose to be buried with. Henry may have considered it no coincidence that this was the wife God chose to give a male child to, the wife who was all a Christian lady should be. Yet this was not the type of woman who often attracted him; his romantic choices usually veered between flirty, frivolous girls and formidable, intelligent women who were more than a match for him.

Henry did not follow conventions when it came to love, although in every other way he was a very traditional man. Marrying for love was considered eccentric, even insane, but for Henry it helped usher in an era of English nationalist feeling with an English Church and a succession of English queens. Marrying one of his own subjects was a revolutionary idea, but it did not start a revolution in people's attitudes to marriage; most still chose dynastic and financial considerations over more emotional factors. Five times Henry married women because he was attracted to them, and only one of these was a foreign princess with influence and a decent dowry. His choices did not usher in the acceptance of divorce either – they just meant that the archbishop of Canterbury occasionally authorised an annulment, rather than the Pope, and these were still very difficult to obtain.

His wives have emerged in book after book as six very different women, portrayed as feminine icons of the Tudor age. Bessie Blount, Mary Boleyn, Mary Shelton, Anne Stafford, Jane Popincourt and Elizabeth Amadas, as well as his other mistresses, deserve to have their amazing life stories told just as Henry and his wives have; I aim here to rescue them from obscurity. The sixteenth century was a time of profound change in religion and society right across Europe – and some of Henry's lovers were involved in influencing these events. For the first time, the information on Henry's mistresses has been gathered together in one book and we can see the women behind the smokescreen. You know about Henry's queens – now it is time to read about Henry's queans.*

Notes

- [1.](#) *L&P*, XI, no.923
- [2.](#) Cit. Baldwin Smith, *Henry VIII: The Mask of Royalty*, p.34

* Quean: an overly forward woman; hussy.

The Teenage King

*'Company with honesty
is virtue – and vice to flee ...'*

Henry VII had been seen by his people as a miser, and had died an old man without the magnetism and charisma, the common touch, that his son seemed to have been born with. The nation rejoiced at the sight of Henry VIII, a magnificent, fun-loving giant, who was determined to spend his inheritance on lavish displays of power and prosperity. Young Henry had become the only hope of the Tudor dynasty after the death of his brother, Prince Arthur, in 1502, and so his father had mollycoddled him, preventing him from mixing freely with the court or participating in the dangerous sports to which he would dedicate much of his adult life. The Spanish envoy, Don Gutierre Gomez de Fuensalida, wrote that the young Henry was 'locked away like a woman ... he is so subjugated that he does not speak a word except in response to what the King asks him'.¹ Unlike many kings, Henry may not have had a mistress before he ascended the throne.

Once king, Henry began to make up for lost time, and was 'never still or quiet'.² He was not revelling in his new-found freedom, and as his courtiers knew, this was likely to include spending time with beautiful women; many of the nobles would have been competing to find him a mistress. One courtier, George Cavendish, described Henry at his accession as 'young, lusty and courageous'. Thomas More wrote that: 'Among a thousand noble companions, the King stands out the tallest, and his strength fits his majestic body. There is fiery power in his eyes, beauty in his face, and the colour of twin roses in his cheeks.'⁴ And with his crown, as well as his personal attributes, many ladies would have been very attracted to the teenage king.

According to the French ambassador, in 1509: 'Henry is a youngling, he cares for nothing but girling and hunting'.⁵ His councillors could deal with the rest. The young king quickly became the centre of a group of young and hedonistic men, all of whom were anxious to keep him amused. He spent little time with his aged councillors and began to favour those who had not served his cautious father. However, matters of state did not weigh heavily on Henry's young mind; he wished to pursue women to entertain and to be entertained, to bring back the glamour and excitement that the court had lacked during his father's reign.

But there was one important issue for Henry to resolve. He was betrothed to Princess Eleanor of Austria, but announced that his father had begged him to marry Princess Katherine of Aragon instead. Henry had previously been affianced to Katherine, but this had been set aside because the alliance was no longer so advantageous to the English, and her father had not paid her dowry in full. The betrothal had easily been declared void, after genuine concern from ecclesiastics, including William Warham, archbishop of Canterbury, over the legality of any marriage between Henry and Katherine. This was because she had been, for five months, the wife of Henry's brother. Even though she insisted that the marriage had never been consummated, this still made her Henry's sister under church laws, and

such he could not marry her. A papal dispensation had allayed most people's concerns, but the affinity was still an easy ground on which to end the engagement – and later the marriage.

Declaring that it had been his father's dying wish was one way to placate the rejected Prince Eleanor and her powerful family, but the marriage was probably Henry's decision alone. It was a choice based on politics and attraction; it certainly caused great relief and joy to Katherine and her servants. It was a show of England's might that Henry was married to a daughter of the Catholic king. Princess Eleanor would have been as good a match, but Katherine and Henry had met at court many times and, throughout her widowhood, Katherine had clung to the belief that Henry would marry her if he was allowed to. The Spanish ambassador saw 'no likelihood of it'⁶ but Katherine was proved right. Now the chivalrous knight had rescued the damsel in distress.

The Infanta Katherine had been in England, impoverished and excluded, for over six years waiting to see if the king would marry her, caught between the tight-fistedness of her father and of her father-in-law. She had been kept deliberately short of clothes, of the servants that were considered essential to the dignity of a daughter of Spain, of money to pay the servants she did have. She was now the queen and she and the nobility were exultant. It had been six years since there had been a queen in England, and so there had been few women at court. Now Henry was in charge of his own destiny and many young women were arriving, excited to become ladies-in-waiting, and ready to serve the queen – and their king.

Katherine was a popular choice as queen, with the courtiers, the common people and with the king. She was strong-willed but deferred to her husband; she was astute and had been trained from birth to play the role of queen consort. She set about befriending the highest nobles in the land, defusing some of the annoyance felt at court that the king befriended any man who amused him, and she chose as her motto: 'Humble and loyal'. The twenty-three-year-old princess was considered attractive; she was very short, and had fair skin, which may have come from her English heritage. She had long, auburn hair, and she often wore it loose. She was slightly plump, which was considered both attractive and a sign of fertility, the most important attribute a queen could have.

Isabella and Ferdinand had five children who survived to adulthood, so the English hoped that Katherine would be as fertile as the mother she resembled in many other ways. Fertility in a wife was so important that it was endlessly speculated about, with all the court trying to work out from the woman's mother and grandmothers if she was likely to be a good breeder. Yet Katherine does not seem to have always taken care of herself. Even from early on in Henry's reign, Katherine's fasting was very committed, with Luis Caroz, the Spanish ambassador, reporting that it was causing irregular periods.⁷ Courtiers would repeat Henry's private information to foreign ambassadors, even regarding the queen's menstrual cycles, to help ascertain if she was pregnant or likely to become so.

On 11 June 1509, fifty days after Henry VII's death, Henry and Katherine were married and they had a spectacular joint coronation. Henry wrote to his father-in-law that 'My wife and I be in good and perfect love as any two creatures can be'.⁸ This appears to have been more than mere flattery, but any passion from Henry's side seems to have evaporated within the first five years of marriage. Yet chivalry, admiration, friendship and respect for her lineage remained. Katherine was a significant influence on Henry, particularly in the early years of their marriage, although his respect for her opinions was partly based on the usefulness of the alliance between England and Spain. Katherine was devoted, from the very beginning of her marriage, to the young man who had rescued her after six years of insult and deprivation. Her obvious attachment to her husband was touching and pleased the court.

Katherine has been described as Henry's first love; she was certainly the first woman he publicly displayed affection for. Her good looks and exotic appeal may have encouraged Henry to marry her without worrying about the rest of the dowry or the theological objections to marrying one's brother's widow. Henry is said to have bragged openly at court about how his wife had been a virgin on the wedding night, which later he dismissed as 'spoke in jest, as a man jesting and feasting says many things which are not true'.⁹ Doubts about their marriage would come later, when Katherine was old and unattractive.

The royal couple enjoyed hawking, riding, dancing and all the other festivities of the court. After being in limbo for so long, Queen Katherine must have been euphoric, and pleasing this young woman would have appealed greatly to Henry. Katherine was probably the only one, other than his sister, who could really understand Henry's childhood and his responsibilities, as she had also been born and raised to rule. She admired, studied and patronised the work of English humanists and encouraged Henry to do the same, as well as helping many foreigners come to England to spread their knowledge and to study further. She was one of the most highly educated young women of her age, and, like Henry, had been educated in the humanist tradition. Erasmus, the leading humanist scholar of his age, thought Henry very learned, but Katherine of Aragon even more so. They seemed a good match.

In 1511, at the christening of their son Prince Henry, who lived for only seven weeks, Henry wore clothes embroidered with the letters H and K entwined on them. At some earlier jousts, Henry wore Katherine's initials on his sleeve. This was unusual; princes did not usually choose their wives to parade to court. Henry did far more than was expected of a royal husband to show affection for his wife. The king seems to have been genuinely enamoured; in the books the entertainment costs were repeatedly written down as 'for the Queen's pleasure' and 'for a gladness to the Queen's grace'.¹⁰ He valued her opinions on everything from music to politics.

Their lives were a constant round of entertainments and the ladies were the centre of court life, the dances and the masques. As a person's rank was judged by how many servants he or she had, the queen had to have a plethora of attendants. Noble blood was not always enough to get them a place at court – Henry VIII demanded that all his wife's ladies be '*fair*'¹¹ and that they had to be dressed splendidly, at their own considerable cost. Ladies-in-waiting spent most of their time with the queen, but, as Katherine would learn, many of them also spent time with the king.

It has often been asserted that Henry was faithful to Katherine until he was first linked to Bess Blount, five years into his reign. In reality, Henry was involved with other women from the very beginning of his first marriage. He seems to have been attracted to Katherine at first – a bonus for an arranged marriage – but there were many other tempting offers for the teenage king. And within a year of marriage, the whole court was aware of who the king's lover was. And his wife was devastated by his betrayal.

Henry's desire for Lady Anne Stafford caused a scandal that reverberated around Europe. In March 1510, only a year into his marriage and while the devoted Queen Katherine was pregnant, Henry strayed. Anne Stafford was a dangerous choice – she was the sister of the premier peer of England, Henry's second cousin, and a married woman. Edward, duke of Buckingham, was outraged that his sister could demean the family by becoming the mistress of any man, even a king. Descended from Edward III several times over, the Staffords were suspected of considering themselves more royal than the Tudors.

Most families would have been pleased that the king had chosen their relative. The personal was truly the political under Henry VIII, and so the courtiers tried to excel at the pastimes he enjoyed, and

went to extreme lengths to gain his friendship. Court was all about trying to get the ear of the king; was natural that to spend nights next to that ear would be an advantage much sought after. Mistresses provided sex and companionship for their lover, but they were also useful to other courtiers, as being close to the king's favourite meant being close to the king himself. A mistress would often distribute patronage or even head factions. This is why families were often happy for their relatives to commit adultery if it was with the king – it provided the whole clan with access to power. Unfortunately for Henry, the duke of Buckingham did not see it that way.

In 1503, it had looked likely that Henry VII would die without an adult heir; his son was then only twelve years old. As Henry VII claimed the crown more through conquest than through bloodline, this did not bode well for the future of the Tudor dynasty. People began to speak of offering the throne to the duke of Buckingham, or perhaps Edmund de la Pole, if the King died, but 'none of them spoke to my lord prince'.¹² Knowing this would have left Henry VIII very wary of these noble families of royal lineage. If Henry VII had died then, it is likely that the Lady Anne Stafford would have become a princess and young Henry would have mysteriously died, or at best been driven into exile. It is little wonder that, only seven years later, the duke of Buckingham thought his sister too good to be the mistress of a Tudor.

The Staffords were the most aristocratic family in the country. In the fifteenth century, when the mighty Howards were yet to have a member rise even to the position of baron, the Staffords were a well-established ducal family. Anne Stafford was descended from Edward III through three lines, and she was Henry's cousin several times over. Her family had a much simpler and less disputed lineage than that of the Tudors. A Lord Stafford was called to Parliament in 1299 – the Tudors were unheard of until two centuries later. But Buckingham failed to realise that times had changed – without the support of the king of England, all his titles, his impressive ancestry, meant nothing.

With Anne Stafford, as with his other mistresses, Henry tried to conceal his affairs from the queen and his court. He had very little privacy, just like all other Englishmen of his era. He was not alone when he went to sleep, dressed or when he went to the toilet – even ordering a plate of food involved an elaborate procedure, with strict etiquette to be observed. His father had created a separate area, the Privy Chamber, where entry was heavily restricted and those servants who were allowed access were selected most carefully. Here he had his bedroom and private rooms, his library, his own gardens. This gave the monarch an air of unavailability that made contact with the king all the more sought-after.

Henry VIII took this one step further and built more rooms within his palaces to separate himself. This meant he could be more discreet as to whose company he kept than could most courtiers and kings. Francis I of France had only three rooms to himself. Yet secrets were still extremely difficult to keep at Henry's court, with everyone living in such close proximity to one other. It was then that friends such as William Compton were useful, as they could arrange for the king to meet women at their London residences or houses near to whichever palace the king was then residing in.

If the king wished to spend the night with his wife, there was a ceremonial aspect to it; he would be dressed in his night robe and led by his gentlemen of the chamber and other servants to his wife's apartments. He would usually have sent a message that he would soon be arriving, or occasionally he would appear unannounced. His grooms would accompany him down the passageway connecting his apartments to his wife's and then some would wait outside to accompany him on his return and to guard him. Before they left the room, they would have to check for intruders by thrusting their swords beneath the mattress and into any other potential hiding place. His sexual visits to his wife were governed by etiquette based on years of tradition but a similar procedure must have been required for when he saw his mistresses, for there was the constant danger of assassination. Henry's two uncle

known to history as the Princes in the Tower, had 'disappeared' and his maternal grandfather had tried to have Henry's father murdered on a number of occasions. It was unthinkable for the king to be left entirely alone.

As soon as the queen had received the message that he wished to spend the night, her ladies-in-waiting would have begun to prepare her for bed. They would have undressed her, helped her into her nightclothes, taken off her headdress and combed her hair. Then her attendants would disappear and the two would be left alone. The lady who would usually sleep at the bottom of the queen's bed would discreetly absent herself. The ladies-in-waiting would all therefore have been aware how often Henry was visiting his wife at night. Anne Stafford would have regularly prepared Queen Katherine for bed with the king, with both women fully aware of the other's relationship with him.

The duke of Buckingham was informed, allegedly by his sister Lady Elizabeth Stafford, of Anne's affair and he went to investigate.

Whilst the Duke was in the private apartments of his sister,^{*} who was suspected with the King, Compton came there to talk with her, saw the Duke, who intercepted him, quarrelled with him, and the end of it is that he [Compton] was reproached in many very hard words. The King was so offended at this that he reprimanded the Duke angrily. The same night, the Duke left the palace, and did not return for some days. At the same time, the husband of that lady went away, carried her off and placed her in a convent sixty miles from here, that no one may see her.

The King, having understood that all this proceeds from [Elizabeth Stafford], the day after she [Anne] was gone, [he] turned her [sister] out of the palace, and her husband with her. Believing that there were other women in the employment of the favourite such as go about the palace insidiously spying out every unwatched movement in order to tell the Queen, the King would have liked to turn them all out, only that it has appeared to him too great a scandal. Afterwards, almost all the Court knew that the Queen had been vexed with the King, and the King with her, and that the storm went on between them.¹³

To offend the monarch was a dangerous move, but Buckingham seemed unconcerned. He had never been a close friend of Henry's, but he had now made an enemy of the king. Henry, as Buckingham would discover, was not a man who forgave easily. As the first duke in the realm, Buckingham does not seem not to have felt the need to stoop to the sycophancy lower courtiers indulged Henry with. Many people believed that the king would not strike so high in the nobility, unless it was for far more than careless words. But this was not the medieval era, when the king had been the first among equals and his nobility were omnipotent within their local areas. The Tudors had changed this – now the king was the absolute ruler, and woe betide *any* subject who forgot this, peer or peasant.

Both Buckingham and his sister Elizabeth, Lady Fitzwalter, were close friends of Queen Katherine and it was probably one of them who told the queen. Katherine was heavily pregnant and it was therefore dangerous for her to suffer emotional trauma. The unborn heir was of paramount importance to the Tudor dynasty and Henry was fuming that the hysteria over this incident may have endangered the pregnancy. Contemporary wisdom held that sex during pregnancy was both immoral and risky for the baby; therefore it is not surprising that it was at this time, a year into his marriage, that we first hear of the nineteen-year-old king taking a mistress. Anne's siblings' interference and his wife's overreaction had resulted in this unnecessary and embarrassing scene.

Lord George Hastings, Anne's husband, was in a very difficult position. He had several titles – he was the 3rd Baron Hastings, the 4th Baron de Moleyns, the 5th Baron Hungerford and the 6th Baron Botreaux. But if his grandfather had not been attainted and executed by Richard III, George would have also been an earl. He was determined to regain the earldom of Hastings, and so by carrying his wife off to a convent, he was taking a risk. But he not only had to keep the king onside; he had also to appease Buckingham, his powerful brother-in-law.

Along with Anne's brother, Henry Stafford, Lord Hastings was part of the king's inner circle of

friends. This was a position he would have been intent on retaining. Henry Stafford had been given the title 'earl of Wiltshire' around 1510; this may well have been connected to the king's relationship with Anne. It had been in his family for the last two generations but Stafford was not automatically entitled to it. After his death, the earldom was given to the father of Henry's then-mistress, Marjorie Boleyn, who also had a slim claim to it. Henry was showing himself as a king who was remarkably generous to his friends.

An interesting part of this story is the reaction of the queen. She was 'vexed with the King' and 'almost all the court knew ... the storm [that] went on between them'.¹⁴ Katherine should have been aware that husbands, especially royal ones, were unlikely to be faithful, but she was devastated. Her mother, Queen Isabella, had been unhappy about her husband's infidelities but accepted them, as queens had little other option. According to the records, Katherine wept and ranted at her embarrassed husband; but she learnt her lesson. As far as we are aware, she did not berate the king again for his love affairs – until his mistress, Anne Boleyn, tried to obtain a position above what his other lovers had accepted.

Kings were rarely faithful, especially as their marriages were principally arranged for dynastic purposes and for the furtherance of their foreign policy. Several kings, including Henry's father, Henry VII, are thought to have had no mistresses at all; but this was unusual and rarely admired. Feared and lauded his fidelity to his wife, considering it suspect in a man who could have any woman he wanted. People expected a powerful man to have many mistresses and the king should not let down his public image. Many subjects lived vicariously through tales of the king and his court.

In 1521 Wolsey and Henry were handed their opportunity to bring down the belligerent duke of Buckingham. One of the duke's employees wrote to Wolsey, alleging that Buckingham had bragged of an astrologer's prediction that he would become King of England. To even discuss the king's death was high treason, and the duke seemed to be wishing for it. Buckingham apparently made this worse by adding that he believed most people would support his accession, rather than Henry's daughter or any of the Tudor line. He was also said to have hinted that he would overthrow Henry in battle and discussed how his father had planned to assassinate Richard III.

The duke had shown a lack of judgement on a number of occasions since he had stormed out of the court in anger at Henry's affair with Anne. He had arranged the marriage of his son to Ursula Pole, whose grandfather had been Edward IV's brother – and no rumours of illegitimacy damaged his claim to the throne as they did for Edward IV and Henry VIII's other royal ancestors. It was risky for an aristocrat to acquire this much royal blood, but Buckingham, like all at court, wanted his children to make advantageous marriages – this was not proof of treacherous intent. Buckingham has been described as pompous, but at a time when pride in one's lineage was considered only proper, he had reason to be arrogant. Anne Stafford does not seem to have shared her brother's egotism about the family ancestry – her later relationship with the low-born Compton confirmed that.

A man of Buckingham's influence and birth was a potential danger to the king. Even in September 1519, the Venetian ambassador wrote that 'were the King to die without heirs male, he [Buckingham] might easily obtain the crown'.¹⁵ If Henry had a legitimate son, the duke's arrogance and bloodiness might not have been such a threat, but after twelve years of marriage, it was clear that a healthy boy may never arrive. It is likely that the lack of a male heir was at least one of the reasons that Henry felt the need to have Buckingham executed. The Tudor dynasty, especially Henry's young daughter, needed to be protected; the Staffords had become a serious threat.

Buckingham was beheaded on 17 May 1521 for treason. It had been a long time since a nobleman of his stature had been executed and it served as a reminder that none were safe if they thought

themselves above the king. On Buckingham's arrest, Henry took the opportunity to curtail the power of some of those connected to him, whether they had been implicated in this case or not. Anne does not seem to have been included in this 'purge'. Whether he had been truly angered by his wife's affair or not, Lord Hastings had managed to retain his position. The king created Hastings the earl of Huntingdon in 1529,¹⁶ and in 1538 he was described as a man 'of great power' although also of 'little discretion and less experience'.¹⁷ Whether Anne was close to her brother or not, his execution must have shocked her to the core and brought back painful memories of the family's troubles after her father was executed on Richard III's orders. That her ex-lover was the protagonist in her brother's downfall would surely have upset her further.

Buckingham's arrest and execution were met with widespread disbelief across Europe. When Charles V heard, he wrote to his aunt, Katherine of Aragon: 'Then the butcher's dog has pulled down the fairest buck in Christendom.' Although many people blamed Thomas Wolsey, the king's low-born chief minister, Henry was fully behind this arrest. Reports from foreign courts show that it was widespread belief that Henry's attack on a Stafford could start a civil war. The English knew better: Henry was in full control of the country – and who could they now replace him with?

By this point, Anne's affair with the king, which had ended around eight years before, was probably just a distant memory to her and her family. She was busy producing a child a year for her husband, who had quickly allowed her to rejoin court life. She had little chance of persuading the king to spare her brother, especially as the evidence, whether fabricated or not, was enough to show that Buckingham could be a serious menace. We have no evidence to show that the man who was probably by then Anne's lover – William Compton – spoke up for her brother either, although he was a close friend of Henry's and had significant influence over him. He probably knew the king too well to try to change his mind once it had been made up; he also did not want to associate himself with the traitor. Even Buckingham's sons-in-law gave evidence against him. Compton was one of those who benefited financially from the redistribution of Buckingham's lands; he received Maxtoke Castle in Leicestershire from the attainder.

Her husband evidently forgave her, but this was not the end of Anne's infidelity. Few women could risk being brazen in their adultery, but women near the top of the social hierarchy, such as Anne Boleyn, Bouchier and Elisabeth Brooke, could afford to follow their hearts. By 1522 Anne was in a committed relationship, so serious that her lover had made extensive provision for her in his will. And this relationship was with Sir William Compton, who was not only a close friend of the king's, but is also thought to have been his go-between during Anne's relationship with Henry. Compton was said to have helped organise the king's rendezvous with several lovers. Compton was the Gentleman of the Stool – Henry's closest attendant, who accompanied him even to the toilet – and was given a huge number of offices and favours during Henry's reign.

In 1527, seventeen years after her affair with Henry, Cardinal Wolsey tried to prosecute Anne and Compton for adultery through the ecclesiastical courts. The cardinal would not have dared do this if Compton and Anne had still been in such high favour with the king. However, they denied the charges. Compton took the sacrament and swore on it that Anne was not his lover.¹⁸ But when he died the following year, his will showed that he had left money for masses to be said for her soul every day, and he left her the profits from some of his lands in Leicestershire.¹⁹ His will had been written in March 1522 and he did not change it before he died in 1528, indicating that they had been in a serious relationship for at least six years, and probably far longer.

It was still risky for a woman to be the mistress of a man, even of a king. English women

especially noblewomen, were less restricted than elsewhere, which shocked many visitors. But this does not mean that they had much freedom by modern standards. They were still expected to marry and have children; they still stood a good chance of dying while doing so. Sex outside marriage was illegal and the penalty was to be flogged and made to walk barefoot through the streets, a punishment that was dished out to Jane Shore, Edward IV's mistress, twenty-six years before Henry's reign began.

Jane was convicted of harlotry by Richard III, soon after her lover's death. She was made to walk barefoot in front of a cross, carrying a taper and dressed only in her petticoat through the streets of London. She was ogled by large crowds, who had gathered to see the late king's mistress near-naked and she was then imprisoned in Ludgate. Despite widespread infidelity, England was still a country where people lived in terror of Hell. '*Thou shalt not commit adultery*' was a Commandment and even at court they were aware of the potential consequences of disobeying these teachings.

After the execution of her brother, Anne remained at court. Buckingham's son recovered some of his father's less significant titles, but not until Edward VI's reign. The Staffords were damaged – and Lady Anne Stafford's affair with Henry VIII may have started the resentment that led to the fall of the whole family. But despite Buckingham's demise, being a Stafford still gave her high status at court. She became a countess and her relatives remained in many influential positions. But her family never regained their previous influence and status.

From the late 1530s, Anne was a servant of Henry's daughter, Mary. Anne died in 1544 and was buried in Stoke Poges, Buckinghamshire. At the time of her death, Henry was married to his sixth wife – a very different man to the teenager who had flattered her with his attentions. Hastings had died a few months earlier. Their offspring carved out successful careers at court during the reigns of Henry's three children.

We have no evidence as to when this affair ended. There is one source that reveals much about Henry's love life – the list of his New Year's presents. For New Year 1513, the king gave Anne Stafford 30 oz of silver gilt, his third most expensive present that year out of the many he gave.²⁰ This suggests that the affair may have resumed when Anne returned to court from the convent and lasted another three years. There is little other explanation as to why she would have been so high on his list. The only evidence of their affair is from 1510, but we have nothing to tell us if removing her from court ended their relationship. His wife and her husband and brother may have been furious at first, but if Henry had wished to continue the liaison, he would have done so.

Circa 1514, Anne gave birth to her son, Francis Hastings, later the 2nd earl of Huntingdon, and she had seven more children who survived childhood. It is surprising that there is no record of her conceiving during her first five years of marriage. It may be that she was not living with her husband for at least part of this time, or simply that any children did not survive. Her relationship with the king may have finished around 1514, although there has never been a suggestion that Francis Hastings was Henry's son. Yet as Anne was unfaithful throughout much of her marriage, and Hastings knew this and yet acknowledged *all* her children as his own, there is a reasonable chance that there was at least one cuckoo in his nest, whether the king's or Compton's.

We know Henry was involved with Anne in 1510, but for the next three years, there is no record of Henry having a mistress. He gave every outward impression of being enamoured with his own wife, something that pleased the country greatly. The lovers' knots displayed around the palaces, with H's and K's, or H's and C's entwined; receiving envoys in the queen's apartments and allowing her to act as an unofficial Spanish ambassador; publicly showing his respect for her opinion and lineage; this was far more than most kings did for their wives. Henry was a romantic idealist, and Katherine of Aragon knew how to make him feel like a chivalric knight. But however good a husband he appeared

he was probably still regularly unfaithful.

Notes

- [1.](#) *Calendar of State Papers, Spanish*, 449
- [2.](#) Da Lodi, contemporary; cit. Erickson, *Great Harry*, p.91
- [3.](#) Cit. Fraser, *The Six Wives of Henry VIII*, p.60
- [4.](#) *Thomas More, B.L. Cotton MSS*; cit. Weir, *Henry VIII: King and Court*, p.2
- [5.](#) Cit. Weir, *The Six Wives of Henry VIII*, p.79
- [6.](#) Cit. Mattingly, *Catherine of Aragon*, p.92
- [7.](#) Cit. Weir, *Henry VIII: King and Court*, p.10
- [8.](#) Cit. Weir, *The Six Wives of Henry VIII*, p.1068
- [9.](#) *L&P*, VI, p.168
- [10.](#) *L&P*, II, pt. II, p.1490
- [11.](#) *L&P*, XV, no.229
- [12.](#) Cit. Fraser, *The Six Wives of Henry VIII*, p.42
- [13.](#) *CSP, Spanish*; cit. Weir, *Henry VIII: King and Court*, p.123
- [14.](#) *Ibid.*
- [15.](#) *CSP, Venetian*, II, p.5611
- [16.](#) *L&P*, IV, no.6084
- [17.](#) *L&P*, XIII, no.732; in 1538
- [18.](#) *L&P*, IV, pt. II, 4442
- [19.](#) *L&P*, IV, pt. II, 4442
- [20.](#) Murphy, *Bastard Prince: Henry VIII's Lost Son*, p.13

* Chapuys does not state which of the Stafford sisters Henry was involved with. Several factors point to Anne, particularly that she later lived openly in adultery with William Compton; there is no recorded stain on Elizabeth Stafford's reputation. The confusion over which Stafford sister was involved led some to believe that he was pursuing both sisters – the original source is clear that he was only one of them.

Chapter 2

A French Affair

*'Youth will needs have dalliance,
Of good or ill some pastance ...'*

But it was not only Henry's relationships that were being debated. Caroz, the Spanish ambassador, wrote to Katherine of Aragon's father to express his concern about her close relationship with her Spanish confessor. Another Spanish ambassador, Fuensalida, considered Fray Diego Fernandez a troublemaker. The confessor was extremely controlling of Katherine and her household, demanding her obedience in all things, particularly before her marriage. Yet there is no reason to suspect that Katherine's reliance on Fray Diego was indicative of a sexual relationship, despite the concerns of some of Katherine's servants and the ambassadors. It would be almost unthinkable that a woman of Katherine's character would indulge in an affair.

Yet for a princess, it was not simply the truth, but how it appeared to others that was important. Katherine described Fray Diego as *'the best that ever woman in my position had'*.¹ Her behaviour with him was more indiscreet than the friendships Anne Boleyn would have. In an age where men went into the priesthood as often for a good career as out of piety, spending large amounts of time alone with a man – and being affectionate towards him in public – was dangerous behaviour for any lady. Fray Diego was not leading a celibate life in England, and had acquired a reputation as a womaniser. However, Henry must have been unconcerned; Diego did not return to Spain until around five years later.

Henry soon found other mistresses, although most of them were probably short term. In 1513 he was consumed by the idea of war and decided it was time to conquer France. He had been King of England for four years and was determined to assert his authority on the international stage. Since 1337, when Edward III had laid his claim to the French throne, each king of England had also styled himself 'King of France'. France was far too large for Henry VIII's medium-sized army to conquer, but he was determined to prove himself in battle. His wife was back home sewing flags for the war effort, running the country and worrying about the danger he was in – while he was careering around the French countryside and entertaining local ladies.

From the beginning it was clear that the enterprise was doomed and Henry would be betrayed by his allies. The Holy Roman Emperor, Maximilian, and Henry's father-in-law, Ferdinand of Aragon, were wily old men – Ferdinand had been praised by Machiavelli himself for his cunning. They wanted the King of England to cause problems in France, but they were not interested in seeing him become the ruler of two powerful kingdoms. Henry was still young and naive and they guessed that a *show* of support, and the provision of some entertainments – including attractive women – would distract the young king until it was too late.

While he was away, Henry appointed Katherine 'Governor of the Realm', giving her all the authority of the king himself. She was kept busy arranging a campaign against the Scots, who had predictably invaded the north of England while the English army was stretched elsewhere. The queen

was left in charge of a council that had never taken orders from a woman before and she coped admirably. Once a week she sent Henry a letter, informing him of important matters of state but also showing the genuine concern one would expect from a devoted wife whose husband was at war; she declared that she could be ‘never in rest until I see letters from you’ and begged Wolsey to remind Henry to ‘avoid all manner of dangers’.² Henry did not respond himself, but asked Wolsey to write the replies.

Henry’s army swiftly conquered their first target, the city of Thérrouanne. For a month after this the weather was too bad for an assault on the next city, Tournai. Henry spent this time building relations with the premier family of Europe and ensuring he mixed business with pleasure. He spent his time with Maximilian, the Holy Roman Emperor, the Emperor’s sister Margaret, Regent of the Netherlands, and Margaret’s court, impressing them with his jousting, archery, dancing and mastery of several musical instruments. Among Margaret’s maids of honour were a Flemish woman named Étiennette de la Baume and a twelve-year-old English girl called Anne Boleyn.

A month later Henry conquered Tournai, an important city which bordered the emperor’s territories and was a major route for transferring goods across Europe – and all without Henry ever personally fighting a Frenchman. After a couple of months, Henry’s army achieved the victory he craved – the Battle of the Spurs, during which the English chased after French soldiers who were under instructions not to fight. It was stretching the truth to label it a battle, but Henry’s army captured some French nobles and sent them back to England to be held for a ransom. The only time this whole adventure was dampened was when Henry’s close friends, Sir Edward Howard and Sir Thomas Knyvett, were killed in a skirmish at sea. The English army had conquered only two significant French towns in an otherwise embarrassingly fruitless campaign, although Henry had shown that he could be a player on the European stage. Queen Katherine was far more successful – the English response to the Scottish invasion had resulted in the death of King James IV and half his noblemen, preventing Scotland from threatening English security for a generation.

The French king had paid little heed to this incursion and after Henry took Tournai, Louis simply paid him to leave. Ferdinand had already signed a peace treaty with France, as had Maximilian; Henry was only informed after the event. Henry returned home to a hero’s welcome which was somewhat overshadowed by his wife’s achievements during his absence. When he was reunited with his wife, ‘it was such a loving meeting that every creature rejoiced’.³ Yet Henry was furious with Katherine for encouraging him to rely on her double-dealing father, and their relationship never quite recovered from this humiliation.

The following year, Henry received a letter from Étiennette and it is from this that we know of Henry’s brief relationship with her. She was a noblewoman, the daughter of Marc de la Baume, Lord of Châteauvillan, and she was not the only de la Baume in history to attract the attention of a king; the next century, her kinswoman Louise-Françoise de la Baume became the *maîtresse-en-titre* of King Louis XIV of France. Étiennette seems to have attracted Henry soon after his arrival in Lille. She wrote to Henry because she was about to get married, and he had apparently promised her ten thousand crowns as a wedding present – perhaps as compensation for her lost virtue. In August 1511 Étiennette became the third wife of the elderly Jean Neufchatel, seigneur de Marnay. We have no indication of her age, but her husband was sixty-two, which is perhaps why the marriage was childless.

She sent the letter to Henry with ‘a bird and some roots of great value, belonging to this country’. She first reminded him who she was:

When Madame [Margaret of Austria] went to see the Emperor, her father and you at Lille, you named me your page “et

n'avoie autrement nom de par et d'autre chouses" and when we parted at Tournai you told me, when I married, to let you know and it should be worth to me 10,000 crowns or rather angels. As it has now pleased my father "*me marier*", I send bearer, an old servant of my grandfather, to remind you ... *la plus que* your very humble servant, E. la Baume.⁴

We do not know if he kept his promise. She also wrote to Henry of how: 'you spoke many prett things to me'.⁵ Henry was by now being regularly linked to other women.

By 1514, cracks were beginning to show in the royal marriage. In this year, Henry, 'for love of lady, clad himself and the court in mourning',⁶ possibly on hearing that Étienne was getting married, but probably in connection to a woman at the English court. The infidelities continued, but his strong relationship with his wife had only been damaged, not destroyed. The trickery of her father had dented Henry's trust in her, and around this time rumours started that Henry was planning to annul his marriage after five years. It was reported in Rome that: 'The King of England means to repudiate his present wife because he is unable to have children by her, and intends to marry a daughter of the French duke of Bourbon.'⁷ The next month there were similar rumours in England.⁸ We must be careful not to let hindsight guide our conclusions on this possibility; Katherine was pregnant at the time, so it is highly improbable.

In the Tower of London it is still possible to see Henry's armour from 1514, showing love knots with 'H' and 'K' decorating the metal. The King had been riding into the jousts as 'Sir Loyal Heart' paying tribute to the lady he was 'serving' in the sense of courtly love – his wife. Their initials and even their images were entwined on candlesticks, cups, basins and salt cellars.⁹ But during 1514 Katherine lost much of her political influence to Thomas Wolsey, and her place in Henry's heart to the succession of her own ladies-in-waiting. She was now twenty-eight and had endured several traumatic pregnancies and births, which would have taken their toll on her figure; her foreign connections had helped Henry little and she was no longer the grateful young woman who lived to please her husband. The royal couple were drifting apart.

Around this time, the Venetian ambassador described Queen Katherine as 'rather ugly than otherwise'. Other sources report similar unflattering comments and Katherine had recently given birth to her third child – by the end of Henry's affair with Bessie, she had given birth to six children and probably also suffered miscarriages. Her hair was turning from the red which had attracted so much admiration to a dull brown. Around 1518, Katherine is thought to have begun to wear a hair shirt which would not have made her more attractive to Henry. All her praying had not helped her, but she turned more and more to her religion as Henry turned away from her. It was only as their marriage progressed that their differences, in age and personality, made themselves obvious.

It was understandable that a king who could have anything he wanted should decide to take a mistress from one of the many young, beautiful women at the court. Most of their families would have considered this an honour – although not all, as Henry had discovered. The king was a very attractive man, so many women would have been drawn to him. Despite these affairs, Henry and Katherine continued to have a relatively happy marriage. They had much in common: music and masquerade, scholarship and theology.

Peter Martyr, writing from the Spanish court, reported that, in 1514, Henry had blamed his wife for Ferdinand's duplicity and had boasted to her that he had been unfaithful; this was said to have upset her so much she miscarried.¹⁰ This may or may not have been true – we do not know Martyr's source – but it indicates that Henry's infidelity was well known. Henry may have become angry with his wife as it became increasingly clear that she would not bear him a son, but after only five years, he was probably frustrated, but still hopeful. In 1514, along with the rumours of annulment and adultery

Henry was linked to three ladies-in-waiting. The first was Jane Popincourt, an older woman; the other two, Elizabeth Blount and Elizabeth Carew, were aged around fourteen.

Henry seems to have been particularly attracted to French women. As well as Étiennette de Baume in Lille, and later the Francophile Boleyn sisters, Henry allegedly had an affair with Mademoiselle Jane Popincourt. During the Christmas festivities of 1514, Katherine was heavily pregnant and therefore could not participate in the dancing and entertainment. Tradition dictated that Henry ask the next highest-ranking lady to dance – his sister, Mary, or in her absence, a duchess. Instead, for the Twelfth Night masque at Eltham Palace, Henry chose Bessie Blount and Jane Popincourt, low-ranking young women, as his partners.

Jane, also referred to as Jeanne or Joan, was one of the few women Henry had regular contact with during his mollycoddled childhood. It is unclear when she arrived in England, but by 1498 she was tutoring Henry's sisters in French, and she may have occasionally taught the young Henry as well. She would have helped the two princesses, Margaret and Mary, improve their French conversational skills and their understanding of French culture, which was important as it was likely that either Margaret or Mary would marry a French prince. In 1502, when Henry was eleven, Jane Popincourt became a maid of honour to his mother, Elizabeth of York, and then to Katherine of Aragon on Henry's accession.

Jane was, like Anne Stafford, older than Henry. She must have been at least fourteen when she secured a position as the princesses' tutor and was probably older. This makes her at least thirty in 1514; at least seven years older than the king. To be unmarried at this age was unusual. And like many women who had been at court a long time, she did not have an unblemished reputation. Jane had been involved in a scandal four months before she was first linked to the king.

During Henry's invasion of France the year before, there had been only one battle for Henry to celebrate – the Battle of the Spurs. During this skirmish, Henry's men captured Louis, duc de Longueville, a member of the extremely powerful Orléans family. Lord Longueville was a charming courtier, and although he was kept in England as a hostage, he was treated more as a guest and as an extra ambassador for France. The English had been allied to Maximilian and Ferdinand, but Henry made it clear to Longueville that he would prefer to work with the French. Longueville negotiated the continuation of France's annual bribe to England, to stop English kings challenging for the crown of France, and helped arrange the marriage of Henry's sister to the King of France at the same time. And he also began an affair with his compatriot, Jane Popincourt.

Jane had, by then, been in England for at least sixteen years and had become close to the royal family. She seems to have been not only a tutor to Henry's sister, Princess Mary, but also a close friend. In September 1514, Jane was chosen to be a maid of honour to Mary when she married Louis XII. Here was an opportunity for Jane to return to her native land as a confidante of the new Queen of France. Apparently this

was at the suit and desire of my lord Longueville, as he told me and my fellows before; for he told him that the Queen loved and trusted her above all the gentlewomen that she had about her.¹¹

The marriage was not a prospect to delight the heart of a young, beautiful and headstrong eighteen-year-old princess. King Louis may have been very popular with the French people, but the fifty-two-year-old man looked much older than his years, was not in good health and had already been married twice. Mary had been betrothed to Charles, the heir to Spain and the likely successor to the Holy Roman Empire, and was therefore the future ruler of half of Europe. Charles' chin was so deformed that he could not chew his food properly and he was obsessed with clocks; nevertheless, he was young

Mary would have appreciated all the friends she could get when she began her marriage.

Jane would have been a useful ally for the new queen to have at the French court, as she could pass on to her important information and help the English ladies with any linguistic or cultural difficulties. Unfortunately, when Louis saw Mademoiselle Popincourt's name on the list of those to attend his virgin bride, he was horrified. He declared that: 'As you love me, speak of her no more. I would sooner see her were burned!'¹² Mary was said to have been very upset by this. To be considered too immoral for the French court was quite an indictment – the relaxed French attitude to adultery and sexuality would horrify and intrigue much of Europe for generations. But Louis XII wanted his court to be virtuous.

Henry's affair with Jane probably began after Longueville left in the autumn of 1514. Like many of Henry's mistresses she had no faction, no power and so was not a threat to anyone at court. She did not even have powerful relatives at court, who might sweep her off to a nunnery as Anne Stafford's husband had – and she did not have a good reputation to protect. She was first linked to Henry three months after Longueville's departure, and her relationship with the French nobleman appears to have been common knowledge. We hear little more of Jane until she left England in May 1516. Henry gave her £100 when she returned to France¹³ and she soon renewed her affair with the duc de Longueville.

There is no contemporary record of an affair between Henry VIII and Jane Popincourt, but there is circumstantial evidence. It rests on the king choosing her to dance with him in 1514, her willingness to embark on an affair with Longueville, and her large leaving gift; these could all be irrelevant. She had no significant influence, and therefore was of little interest to the ambassadors whose reports we rely on for information about Henry's love life. However, it does seem likely; by tradition, he should have chosen to dance with the highest-ranking lady present, and his choices of Bessie Blount and Jane Popincourt, neither of whom could be argued to fit this criteria, is significant. Jane also, in personality and age, matches the type of woman the king seemed to prefer at this stage of his life.

Notes

- ^{1.} CSP, *Spanish supplement*, p.25
- ^{2.} Weir, *The Six Wives of Henry VIII*, p.115
- ^{3.} Hall, *Hall's Chronicle*, p.567; cit. Mattingly, *Catherine of Aragon*, p.123
- ^{4.} L&P, I, pt. II, no.3163: 17th August 1514; CSP, *Spanish*, III, pt. II, no.854
- ^{5.} CSP, *Venetian*, II, p.139
- ^{6.} *Ibid.*, p.152
- ^{7.} Cit. Weir, *The Six Wives of Henry VIII*, p.121
- ^{8.} *Ibid.*
- ^{9.} *King's Jewel Book*, pp.169, 171 and 174; cit. Fraser, *The Six Wives of Henry VIII*, pp.70–1
- ^{10.} Byrne (ed.), *The Letters of King Henry VIII*, p.42
- ^{11.} Charles, earl of Worcester to Cardinal Wolsey
- ^{12.} L&P; cit. Weir, *Henry VIII: King and Court*, p.175
- ^{13.} TNA, E36/215 f.449

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