

How fiction is presented as fact: The downfall of Anne Boleyn in *The Other Boleyn Girl* (2008)

The Other Boleyn Girl (2008) originated as a best seller novel, which captured the attention of many and inspired historians both amateur and professional alike to delve deeper into the enigma of one of the most controversial Queen's of England to date. The film is star studded with Natalie Portman and Scarlett Johansen playing the lead roles and many young up and coming actors such as Benedict Cumberbatch, Eddie Redmayne and Juno Temple grace the screens to tell the story of Anne Boleyn and her sister, 'The Other Boleyn Girl' Mary.

An opinion of a historical film depends entirely on two things: whether the audience is educated in that history or not, or whether they are watching for entertainment purposes. Therefore, characters in a historical film are anticipated to reflect the audiences pre-conceived ideas of who that character is before the film has even started. Anne Boleyn is a significant character in the history of England, royalty and women as she represents many aspects of the feminine psyche and position. It would be difficult to find an individual who has never come across or heard of Anne Boleyn the 'beheaded', the 'witch', the 'seductress and sorceress'. The second wife of the larger than life Henry VIII. Her persona over the years has altered and contextualised with the times resulting in a blur between the lines of fact and fiction and we must ask ourselves whether historical dramas are over-reaching and warping Anne's true nature beyond recognition. The notion of undisputed fact is even tricky to ascertain in source material; Chapuys diary is a prime example of how historical record of Anne Boleyn is far from transparent. His assessment of Anne's character is long standing and has echoed he through various representations despite reliance on his perspective being weak on account for his

catholic bias against the uprising protestant 'concubine' Queen throughout historical analysis of Anne; in fact, nearly every academic resource researched for this essay draws on Chapuys material. Chapuys correspondence is a colourful and detailed insight into Anne Boleyn, which only heightens interest on an academic and theatrical level because it is one of the very few remaining contemporary accounts of Anne. However, even this profusely distributed source is problematic, not only on the grounds of bias, but historians such as Lauren Mackey even dispute the authorship of said letters claiming a case of mistaken identity between Chapuys and Pedro Ortiz, a passionate defender of Catherine of Aragon (Mackay, 2016) which devalues the works further.

In *The Other Boleyn Girl* (2008) Natalie Portman has correlated her ambition with wickedness, and admits through her own research she saw Anne as someone who was 'willing to sacrifice people she really loves for her own betterment' (Portman, 2008). Of course, this is just Portman's portrayal, and its arguable that her research wasn't in depth, but even so she reached the conclusion that Anne was a villain and a woman responsible for her downfall from somewhere.

Anne Boleyn has been on the character list for centuries when depicting history of the Tudor's and more specifically, Henry VIII. One of Anne's earlier portrayals in Shakespeare's *Henry VIII*, also known as *All That is True* envisage Anne in a stark contrast to Portman's in *The Other Boleyn Girl* (2008).

Anne 'by my troth and maidenhead, I would not be Queen' (Shakespeare: Act 2 scene 3 line 22-23), and she laments Queen Katherine's suffering at the hands of the King. Furthermore, the downfall of Katherine of Aragon was not attributed to Anne, the audience distaste is guided towards Wolsey. The 'pleased crowds' and acceptance of Anne to the public deviate from historical record, and the

bias of glorifying King James' bloodline defines the context in which Shakespeare was writing. The Jacobean nostalgia of the harmonious birth of Elizabeth I at the end is extended to Anne, as her mother resulting in the major events of her life becoming more impervious as they are brushed over and compressed, arguably for dramatic effect (Smith, 2012, p. 70) but also very likely to romanticise the courtship between Anne and Henry and censor negative events that may preclude any misgivings regarding Elizabeth's birth and reign. For example, it's apparent how blameless Anne is for the motion of events that follow her first interaction with King Henry, a stark contrast to Portman's modern Anne. Anne's image has therefore suffered great alteration over the years to arrive to how we view Anne in popular culture today.

Anne's character evolved through the years, remaining much consistent as a 'lady of distinguished breeding, beauty and modesty (Park: 1806, p. 38) until the nineteenth century, but fell victim to growing perceptions of the female sex as the *femme fatale* having a predilection towards immoral behaviour (Scott, 2005, p.66) as the twentieth century progressed. Silent films, where image and archetypes dominated the plot line favoured Anne as the virgin/love/innocent in *Anna Boleyn* (1920) and as the Golden Age for Hollywood ensued the archetypal characters for women as either the vixen or virgin heightened depicted Anne as the innocent in *The Private Life of Henry VIII* and lacks in appearance until a rise of second wave feminism and views on divorce became more tolerable. *Anne of a Thousand Days* (1968) told the story of the tragic heroine but bore fruit to Anne the feminist icon, her death being martyred and ends with her voice over proclaiming 'Elizabeth shall be a greater queen than any king of yours. She shall rule a greater England than you could ever have built. My Elizabeth shall be queen, and my blood well spent' (Anne of a Thousand Days). The strong

willed, tragic heroine archetype was born, and was revolutionised and dramatised to become a standard image for Anne Boleyn.

Hui argues that Anne's metamorphosis from the Protestant Princess to demonised enchantress was enhanced by the waning of the Victorian period (Hui:2018, p. 108). Hui is primarily concerned with Anne's fabricated classification as a witch but does propose points that are transferrable to how the silver screen has manipulated Anne's image, in the same way novelists in particular were eager to exploit the au courant aspects of Anne's bad character (Hui: 2018, p.18) Her classification as a witch was revisited since Sander's degradation in 1584 and this notion was visited repeatedly through novels, biographies, and academic works but finally cemented once Anne Boleyn hit the silver screen. An opportunity for Tudor glamour, soap dramatics and sexy scandal it seems filmmakers found it difficult to resist the sensationalised Anne Boleyn with her six fingers and incestual tendencies.

What is the purpose of *The Other Boleyn Girl* (2008) as a historical film? We associate film primarily with entertainment purposes, a linear pleasure seeking experience, when history is contributed as a chief principal it becomes a device to speak to the present time (Sorlin:1980, p.208) Does this mean it captures historical reality and how can we tell? Baudrillard suggests we have lost our ability to make sense of the distinction between reality and artifice (Hughes-Warrington: p.103). The reality of *The Other Boleyn Girl* (2008) is projected as a historical account that details the lesser known sister to the infamous Anne Boleyn but it's historical detailing, or lack thereof challenge it's authenticity as an expression of historical fact particularly concerning the character of Anne. Within the scope of

film, it's easy to refer to Anne as a character because she is a falsification, an impression, created and orchestrated by the director Justin Chadwick and the actress Natalie Portman. What we know of Anne Boleyn the historical *person* is limited, and so this leaves room for interpretation and makes her history and timeline malleable to the filmmaker. In the film, she is presented as a 'mean girl' (Boyd: 2014), a shrewd and cunning plotter who manipulates the king to abandon her sister and nephew in favour of mere 'hope' of a future with herself. Her manipulation of Henry is profoundly sexual, she encompasses the role of a seductress as she refuses his gifts and exhibitions herself to entice the King further without committing any real offence. For example, emphasising her bosom by leaning over and while exclaiming how she keeps things 'close to [my] heart'. Portman's sexualisation of Anne's body and motive alongside her sisterly betrayal goes beyond the femme fatale trope, and places Anne in a villainous light. While this makes for an entertaining watch, does it illustrate an accurate, or even respectful portrait of Anne Boleyn?



Anne Boleyn, the 'NPG' Portrait

The contextualisation of Anne throughout history is vital when interpreting her characterisation and implementing norms, values and historic events of the time the research is written as well as her

own. So far, it has seemed a simple notion to find the correlation between eras and the Anne they have produced from Jacobean Nostalgia in Shakespeare for the origin of Elizabeth's reign to the Christian views of the Victorian period which condemned Anne a witch. However, modern and post-modern historians have been in more disagreement over Anne than in previous years and consequently, discord in how to portray Anne in literature, film and historical record and this was exacerbated after the second world war. Her image rose with the popularity of moving picture during the latter half of the twentieth century coinciding with the rise in feminism, women's rights and the sexual freedom of the 1960's. Her status of a seductress takes on a new dimension; Victorian academics note her use of charm was to enact a bewitchment on Henry VIII, but now her charm is more sexual, it is a device that Anne exploits to manipulate the king. She was either a witch, or a temptress now she is a woman practising abstinence. This more complex subtext is further implicated with the said rise in women's rights, inclusive of education and employment success. In 2010. Townsend found that while women generally lagged behind in dominating fields such as history in an academic setting, since the 1980's there has been a rapid rise from 14% to 35% of women in the history faculties and a survey found two thirds of public historians were now women (Townsend, 2010). Therefore, it is reasonable to deduce that disagreement over who Anne was, has heightened in post-modern history research due to an increase in feminist perspective. It can be argued that this feminisation detracts from history, but how far can it go before we lose sight of fact to incorporate theory, and in parallel to this, fiction.

David Starkey and Alison Weir interpret her as 'shrewd' with a desire for advancement and keen self-interest (Weir:1991, p.150) whereas more recent research by some historians cast a more

sympathetic light over Anne, and go as far to hail her a victim of negative propaganda that's paints her in a singularly one-dimensional bad light (Nolan: 2019,p.9). The fact that there is so little unbiased contemporary written primary evidence to attest to Anne's character, artistic licence is applied routinely to fill the gaps we do not know. Here, she's typecast the bad to Mary's good in their fabricated rivalry and she's the villain of the story with few scenes to entice her a sympathy vote, by the time we reach her execution you can't help feel a vindication in her death. Chadwick admitted that he 'didn't get too bogged down in history (Chadwick:2008) when directing, in fact he deviates from history repeatedly to create melo-drama even of events that do have historic record such as her trial and execution. Master Cromwell reads out her indictment to include offences such as 'being seduced by the devil', supporting Henry's outburst scorning her a 'cursed evil witch'. Witch motifs were subtly trickled throughout the cinematography, her green dress, reading the fortunes of male courtiers and incriminating dialogue from Queen Katherine of Aragon that accuses Anne of 'bewitchment'. No specific evidence during her time alive indicates she was seriously suspected as one, disapproval of Anne was chiefly about her supposed sexual immorality and those engaged in popular fiction were chiefly responsible Anne's new alter ego 'Anne the witch' (Hui: 2018, p.98).

What is most obvious to any with interest in Tudor history, is the savage absence of Anne's place in the reformation. Chadwick incorporates the break from Rome mostly to accommodate the explanation for the annulment of Henry's marriage to Katherine of Aragon and the place the blame on to Anne. The film implies that Anne's succession to wife was her idea, a devious plot for power and materialism. In the scene where Henry delightfully informs Anne the Queen is to be banished to a nunnery, Anne's horror is displayed in a shot over the king's shoulder and she is dismayed at the

thought of being 'a Queen but in name'. She puts the annulment to Henry, during a display of affection reminding the spectator that Anne achieves what she wants by seduction and she basically forces Henry to proceed. When in fact, she denied Henry to avoid being a concubine. Even contemporaries who *did not* support the annulment did not chastise Anne such as Reginald Pole, he described Anne as a modest woman, who sought to escape the fate of her sister which the king responded to mutually, even unhesitatingly (Bernard: 2007, p.5). Pole is actually penalising the king's choice, not condemning Anne as a bewitching force. This is a prime example of how the filmmaker revisions history blurring the lines between fact and fiction with disregard for the reality and under the guise of a historical film, a spectator consumes this image without scrutiny and deems it history. When James Hurst address critics for his own Tudor interpretation *The Tudors*, he places the blame for the Anne Boleyn stereotype on the audience. They couldn't get out of the stereotypes that had been handed down to them and that's what they were seeing, it didn't matter what they were actually seeing. They (the audience) had already decided that Anne Boleyn was this Other Woman, this manipulative bitch'. (Hirst: 2011, p.214). From a director's point of view, this must be a challenge when portraying Anne, but are pre-conceptions the chicken or the egg? An audience's pre-conception of a sensationalised history would surely originate from popular media? The anxiety surrounding transgressions in *The Other Boleyn Girl*(2008) is justified says Bordo, as we no longer have much assurance that viewers or readers can differentiate fact and fiction (Bordo:2014, p.214) which is definitely plausible given the variety of Anne Boleyn portrayals in film and literature.

In 2009, David Starkey gave an inflammatory interview ahead of his new Channel 4 series lamenting the 'bizarre' feminisation of history:

“One of the great problems has been that Henry, in a sense, has been absorbed by his wives. Which is bizarre. But it’s what you expect from feminised history, the fact that so many of the writers who write about this are women and so much of their audience is a female audience. Unhappy marriages are big box office.” (Starkey: 2009)

The interview was widely criticised especially by female historians, Lucy Worsley accused him of being a misogynist, (The Guardian). Helen Antrobus mocked his outburst, attributing him to feeling offended by women in history because his branch of patriarchal, dominating history is of no interest to anyone anymore (Antrobus: 2018). However, it can’t be denied Starkey’s point has an element of truth, indeed the history has been altered, perspective has changed and focus on the women has sharpened toward the latter half of the twentieth century *but for all the wrong reasons*. Starkey attributes the fact that their stories are being retold by women as proof that history is being feminised and narrative deviates away from politics and religion, which, as already discussed has indeed happened in *The Other Boleyn Girl* (2008). Starkey targets female readership, and female authors as the catalysts in reducing history to soap operas (Antrobus:2018) and while this is a vast sexist generalisation, it’s impossible to ignore that even depictions directed by men such as *The Other Boleyn Girl* (2008) expose Anne as a sexualised villain which Rebecca Star Brown attributes to how us as an audience are more interested in the love story and tragedy of Anne Boleyn’s marriage, but less so in the reality of the concurrent dissolution of the monasteries (Brown:2018). It is inevitable for cinema to use artistic licence as seen in other adaptations of Anne’s life such as *Anne of a Thousand Days* (1968) with her meeting with Henry in the Tower, her ‘Elizabeth’ speech that would never have happened or has been alluded to. These events would surely never have happened but

they are incorporated to enhance our spectatorship and understanding of Anne Boleyn. It's difficult to see past Anne as the cunning plotter in the final cut, however an earlier edition of the script includes many scenes which elaborate more of Anne and her vulnerable side and along with her sister she is described as 'vulnerable, young'(IMSDb)

Costume is imperative to conjuring of Anne; as afore mentioned, Anne left no memorabilia or letters, therefore she is perceived entirely by her external properties. We have faith that we have a very good idea of what Anne looked like; indeed common tropes of dark hair, dark eyes and her 'B' necklace are repeatedly included in film casting and novel descriptions. However, even her most recognisable portraits particularly the commonly circulated 'NPG' portrait *Anne Boleyn(16th century)* are not contemporary and widely believed to be a copy of an original. Although even this can be disputed due to Henry's determination to wipe his slate clean, destroying all portraits of Anne that he could find following her death (Bordo: 2014, p.30) therefore feeding more fuel to pin point the enigma of who was Anne Boleyn and what did she look like? When discussing portraits, Bordo describes how they often bore the mark of "symbolic iconising" the transition or belief that person's character into visual imagery (Bordo:2014, p.30), while films aren't portraits, the visual imagery, specifically character costumes, are an expression of how as an audience we are to perceive that character of Anne.

We know from history she was incredibly fashionable as she is described as being dressed in marvellous taste and devised new modes which were copied by all the fashionable ladies at court

(Weir: 1991, p.151). Her fashion sense was dually noted in the screenplay for *The Other Boleyn Girl* (2008), a superlative notion for her return to court from her 'exile' (IMSDB) in France. Costume Designer Sandy Powell, described the task of dressing Anne as 'difficult' (Powell:2008) as she endeavoured to remain faithful to Tudor fashion while making it appeal to the modern eye (Powell:2008). Powell manipulates fashion to become a language for the viewer, an illustration of her character development as she designs costumes to express Anne's character, her relationships with other characters and contribute to her historical narrative.

Arguably one of her more memorable scenes, her return to court, shows Anne in a graphic, green dress that sets her far apart, like a foreigner, from the complicated tapestry patterns of the palace and other characters. Green contributes to the historical narrative as a colour commonly associated with Anne Boleyn due to the song 'Green Sleeves' a sixteenth century folk song about a woman rejecting a man as a lover that was widely believed to be a song dedicated to Anne Boleyn by Henry VIII. It has since been proved unlikely due to the Italian composition (Roberts:2020) , but the iconography remains. It is also seen in the background of the 'NPG' portrait, and as a colour most commonly attributed with envy, it seems appropriate that Anne, the ambitious yet 'eclipsed' (IMSDB) self proclaimed as 'the other Boleyn girl' would have a green and jewel toned wardrobe in this movie. The tones fluctuate with her mood and status, beginning with a faded, patterned green that suggest subtle envy but that Anne has not yet established herself as a man character as the tapestry patterns of her skirt blend the younger Anne with the mise-en-scene. Burton argues that the narrative of *The Other Boleyn Girl* (2008) is driven by its costume (Burton:2013) indeed the costumes determine and define character with Mary and Anne. Costume for Mary is to conceal, even her

bedclothes are heavy and layered whereas Anne's clothing is to reveal with protruding breasts in fitted bodices and exposed hair. Their material and fabric are props to their femininity as the narrative drives Anne and Mary to encircle Henry desperate for his attention and succeed in seducing him. It's manipulated to define 'the other' as they mirror the Boleyn sisters' costumes in shape and style yet as they enter their rivalry, Anne outshines Mary in colour whereas in the opening scene, Mary's wedding dress outperforms Anne as Mary is deemed more prolific in status. Anne is initially seen frequently with just a hood, and no veil implying her status as a virginal maid, a norm for unwed women and girls in the Tudor period. This then changes once she is back from France when she is 'much changed' (IMSDb) and demonstrates her matured wit to the court with the king as an audience.



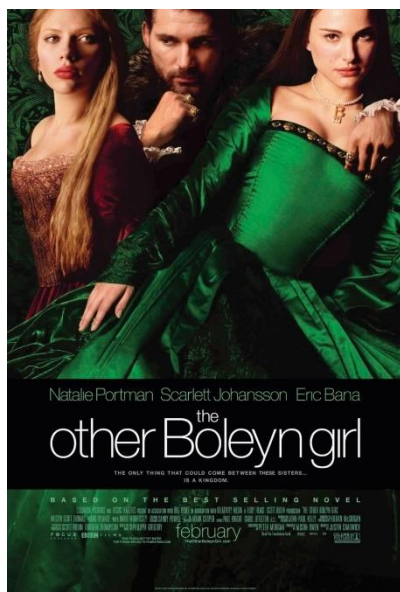
Natalie Portman Anne Boleyn
In *The Other Boleyn Girl*



Natalie Portman (Anne Boleyn) and Scarlett Johansson
(Mary Boleyn) in *The Other Boleyn Girl*

Historical Anne is renowned for introducing the French hood to English court, the smaller frame was lighter than the gable hood favoured by the Spanish Queen; the film shows Anne dressed in her hood before her departure, her sister Mary also donning a hood to match distinguishing the two from the rest of the court as they reveal more of their hair and face, an aspect favoured by the designer Powell as she utilised the hoods as a prop in the frame as she believed it forced the viewer

to concentrate on what the actor was saying (Powell:2008) which is vital when accentuating the plot. Anne's costume inspires that vital connection with Anne the historical *character*, but does it provoke a connection with her as a historical *figure*? Do her costumes imply the fanatical more so than true historical narrative? It could be argued that while the costumes are integral with setting the scene within the frame, it fails to contribute to history and its identity. Applying Starkey's theory that history is becoming 'feminised', and neglecting pinnacle events in favour of popular interpretations, the spectatorship of the film falters. In accordance, Cook suggests that film costume is concerned with decorative excess that deviates from the historical narrative and neglects the curational history (Cook: 1996, 69). Camera shots pan the dresses, as an audience we follow the women by the hems of their dresses as they navigate us through the story contributing to the voyeuristic theme of the film in an intimate, feminine display. The display of costume can also be found in the film poster, Natalie Portman as Anne Boleyn at the forefront, with her graphic, green dress positioned across the lap of the king, dominating the scene almost rejecting the notion of there ever being another Boleyn girl, Anne is the main character here.



Film poster for *The Other Boleyn Girl* (2008)
(IMDB)

The aspect of voyeurism is embedded throughout the film through varied soft focus shots that are strategically placed to integrate the spectators into the film's temporal space. Many key moments and conversations in the film are captured using doorways and windows. Doorways suggest potential to move from one place to another, to enter or exit, to anticipate change and Chadwick positions the most relevant conversations in these doorways to demonstrate progress and direction in the plot. Commonly referenced as a means of connecting the interior and exterior, Chadwick uses doors to further represent a larger symbolic threshold that the characters cross making doors a prop to shape cinematic time. For instance, a conversation that takes place over a doorstep in Anne's lodgings between Anne and the king signifies Anne has approached the next level of her 'seduction' of Henry. When he approaches her initially, it is to vex her refusal of his gifts. Through a closed door, we switch between frames of mid shots like a tennis match, stressing the match in wit between the two. 'If you wish to please me sir, send [Mary] the gifts you send me' (IMSDB) echoes the Anne history books describe as she avoids the king's courtship, but alas, Natalie Portman opens the door, and the lighting falls on her face symbolising her dark side and fortunes change, she sets king in pursuit of hope to obtain her by creating sexual tension. Close ups reveal a closer proximity, and the diegetic sound of heavy breathing. As Anne's plot thickens, the next stage in her plan is

uttered in whispers in a shadowed doorway as she laments the king is still 'loyal to the Queen above all others'(IMSDB) as she refused to 'give herself'(IMSDB) to the king.

Again, historical Annes abstinence is reimagined in a manner that implies motive over virtue, an ambition seen as 'downright delusional'(Nolan:2018, p.74) according to modern historian Nolan. The implications of a common girl aspiring to marry a king when even an earl was seen as too above her station were simply bizarre. However, virtue doesn't create spectacle, and spectacle is what



guarantees sales and
this could clarify why
there are such
profound differences
from the earlier

script to the film. Chadwick

Hughes-Warrington makes a point that all historical films combine elements that work to convince viewers of the verisimilitude of a represented past with those that clearly signal its artifice' (Hughes-Warrington: 2007, p.74), and with this in mind it would also be wise to insist that maybe there is an

element of responsibility to a viewer to discern for themselves what is historically accurate. But Rosenstone puts emphasis on a filmmaker historian as a director who encourages interest in history but acknowledges that history films even when we know they are fanciful, affect how we see the past (Rosenstone: 2006) and suggest a middle ground when assessing a historical film by analysing details close up, then backing away to appreciate the film for what it is. Applying this to *The Other Boleyn Girl* (2008) would allow major details that contradict history to blur out of focus, and what we are left with is an entertaining spectacle that provides entertainment and informs of us of a woman who was executed by her husband in a bid to make something of herself. While this method of interpreting history would not be agreeable to all, it is certainly an opportunity to engage an audience with the Tudor history. Indeed, not all depictions of Anne are faithful to true events, it would be unfair to single out *The Other Boleyn Girl* (2008) as the only outcry for poor accuracy, but what seems particularly offensive is its origin as Gregory's work. She defends her choices as having 'historical accuracy' and when challenged during an interview at a premier, she defends her narrative choices with: 'This book has been out in the world for three or four years now its had about 4 billion readers, I know its historically accurate, if it wasn't I would have heard more about it by now. I think people will need to accept the film will take more historical liberties than the book'.

(Gregory:Youtube)

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