

# **Britain & Channel 5: Does Queen Anne Boleyn matter? “She was at the very centre of events at a critical turning-point in English history: the Protestant Reformation of 1529-1536”**

Wednesday 9 June 2021, by [FAULKNER Neil](#) (Date first published: 1 June 2021).

**With a new three-part Channel 5 historical drama showing this week, Marxist historian Neil Faulkner shares some thoughts on Henry VIII’s doomed second queen.**

*[Note: Anne Boleyn (1507?–1536) was the second wife of King Henry VIII of England and mother of Queen Elizabeth I. The events surrounding the annulment of Henry’s marriage to his first wife, Catherine of Aragon, and his marriage to Anne led him to break with the Roman Catholic Church and brought about the English Reformation. Anne had a miscarriage in 1534, and in January 1536 she gave birth to a stillborn male child. In 1536, Henry had her committed to the Tower of London and she was beheaded on May 19. On May 30 Henry married Jane Seymour.]*

## Contents

- [The Reformation](#)
- [A woman before her time](#)
- [Good Queen Bess](#)

Myths are good to think with. So the great social anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss taught us. History gets turned into myth all the time, and, in the case of English history, perhaps none more so than that of the Tudors; especially Anne Boleyn.

The A\*CR has not yet made it onto the preview invite lists of major broadcasters, so I write this without the advantage of having seen the show – but I certainly plan on watching. What I do know is that it is being billed as a ‘psychological thriller’, that it revolves around Boleyn’s destruction, and that black actor Jodie Turner-Smith is playing the lead.



*Anne Boleyn: Episode 3 CAST: Front to Back: Front to Back: Anne Boleyn (played by Jodie Turner-Smith) Madge Shelton (played by Thalissa Teixeira)*

That all sounds good. Boleyn, despite her elevated aristocratic social status, suffered because she was a woman, and casting a black actor in the role should underline for a modern audience that this is a story about oppression. As such, it can stand in its own right – as a mythologising of a Tudor story designed to talk about contemporary issues.

Still, worth knowing a bit of the background. Let me start by quoting Turner-Smith herself on the role. She says that Boleyn was ‘a woman before her time’.

*“Anne was trying to push culture forward – she was interested in art and science and she felt like religion should be a much more personal and private experience for people, which was different to what the Catholic Church was doing at the time. Our telling of the story really focuses on Anne’s desires in that context as a modern woman, and how who she was, how she thought, and what she was trying to do was really quite feminist.”*

jodie turner-smith

I think that is spot-on. Anne Boleyn was a highly educated and outspoken woman of advanced ideas. She was at the very centre of events at a critical turning-point in English history: the Protestant Reformation of 1529-1536 – in effect, the first phase of the English bourgeois revolution that would culminate in the English Civil War of the 1640s.

## **The Reformation**

The English Reformation broke the power of the Catholic Church. It established the supremacy of the English monarchical state. It led to the nationalisation of all church property. It created a new aristocracy of Tudor courtiers. It elevated ‘the middling sort’ and drove forwards the development of a more commercially-oriented society and a more open, critical, questioning culture.

Already, in the 1520s, following Luther’s launch of the Reformation in Germany in 1517, opinion was divided between advocates of ‘the old’ and ‘the new’ in religious matters. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, women and men discussed the world in a religious language. The adherents of the old were conservatives who believed in the medieval feudal order, in the rights of ancient property and inherited rank. The supporters of the new tended to be younger, of lower status, more business-oriented. The most stalwart for ‘reform’ were, pretty well everywhere, ‘the middling sort’ – in England, the yeomanry (rich peasant farmers) and the burghers (the townspeople).

Here’s how I described it in *The Radical History of the World*:

*“What made Luther’s message revolutionary was his rejection of priestly authority. Protestants – as they came to be called – were encouraged to read and interpret the Bible for themselves. According to Luther, salvation depended not on church attendance, obedience to the priest, or charitable donations, but on a personal relationship with God. That explains why a printing press could be found at the very centre of every religious storm. Medieval books were written in Latin, copied by hand in monasteries, and then stored in ecclesiastical libraries to be read only a cloistered few. Books contained ideas, and ideas could be subversive; they were not for general use.”*

Even the Bible – especially the Bible – could be subversive once it was out of the hands of monks and in the hands of the people. Fast forward to 1645 and you have an entire army – the New Model Army of the English Revolution – formed of men reading and debating scripture, deciding collectively the

meaning of God's word, and interpreting it to mean that they must tear down an ancien regime of monarch, bishop, and feudal prerogative.

### A woman before her time

Anne Boleyn was just the kind of book-reading, independent-minded, all-too-confident woman the reactionaries of her age feared might be unleashed by the Protestant whirlwind. Because translations of religious books were still banned in England, she had them imported from France (she was completely fluent in French). She protected and patronised Protestant preachers. She promoted two of the greatest figures of the English Reformation, Thomas Cranmer and Hugh Latimer.



*Anne Boleyn by unknown artist, painting, 1570*

She came to power in an internal coup. The conservatives were led by Cardinal Wolsey, Henry VIII's first minister. But Queen Catherine of Aragon – a devout Spanish Catholic – had failed to produce a male heir. The King fell in love with the young, attractive, vivacious Anne Boleyn. She refused sex without marriage. That gave the King two good reasons for wanting a divorce, but Wolsey failed to persuade the Pope to grant one.

Wolsey was overthrown. Thomas Cromwell replaced him. The reformers became dominant in Court and on the Privy Council. Parliament was summoned in 1529 and commenced a sustained attack on the Church. This culminated in 1533 with the severing of all links between Rome and the English Church. Henry divorced Catherine and married Anne.

The coup had been orchestrated by Thomas Cromwell. It was sanctified by Thomas Cranmer, the new Archbishop of Canterbury, who declared the new marriage valid on 28 May 1533. Three days later, Anne was crowned Queen. The 'Dissolution of the Monasteries' – the nationalisation of Church property – would begin in 1536.

By then, however, Boleyn was dead. As a powerful woman and a leading reformer, she had numerous enemies. Henry VIII was a promiscuous patriarch. At first attracted by Anne's assertive character, he soon reacted against it. In some accounts, the affair lasted a mere hundred days after its first consummation.

Cromwell was induced to stitch up a trial for treason – on the basis of alleged adultery – and Boleyn went to the block on 19 May 1536. Henry married Jane Seymour, a cipher for the conservatives, her main quality being that she knew her place and had no ideas of her own.

## Good Queen Bess

There was a legacy. Henry was succeeded in 1547 by his only son, the sickly Edward VI, who had been brought up a strict Protestant. When he died in 1553, the succession passed to Henry's older daughter Mary. The child of Catharine of Aragon and a dour priest-ridden Catholic, she unleashed a counter-revolutionary terror. Cranmer, Latimer, and 300 other Protestants were burned at the stake in Bloody Mary's five-year reign.

When she died in 1558, the succession passed to the child of Anne Boleyn. Born on 7 September 1533, she was very much her mother's child. A powerful woman in a man's world, a convinced Protestant, a staunch defender of the new England created by the Reformation, she would stand ready with her army at Tilbury to meet the mailed fist of counter-revolution in 1588 – though the army was not needed, for the English fleet smashed the Spanish Armada in the Channel.

Rich irony here: her father had wanted a son to succeed him because women were too 'weak' to rule; her mother, denounced as a 'seductress' and a 'witch', had been murdered by a cabal of conservative patriarchs. Yet Elizabeth I was a pivotal figure in English history, becoming the embodiment of the spirit of the rising bourgeois revolution.

Catholic Spain produced the Inquisition. Protestant England produced William Shakespeare. This difference is bound up with the tragedy of Anne Boleyn. She has become a myth, but the real woman is part of a big story about the creation of the modern world in an epoch of storm and strife.

**Neil Faulkner**

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**P.S.**

- A\*CR . 01 Jun 2021:

- <https://anticapitalistresistance.org/does-anne-boleyn-matter/>

- Neil Faulkner is the joint author of *Creeping Fascism: what it is and how to fight it* and *System Crash: an activist guide to making revolution*.