ROYAL STUDIES JOURNAL

2021 VIII

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WINCHESTER UNIVERSITY PRESS

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Abstract: Despite holding an enduring place in the modern cultural imagination, the six wives of Henry VIII (r. 1509–1547) remain, in some respects, shadowy figures. This is especially true with regards to their births and childhoods. Controversy surrounds the dates of birth for Anne Boleyn, Jane Seymour, Katherine Howard, and Katherine Parr. Historians have debated extensively the most plausible years in which these four queens may have been born. This article offers a re-assessment of the dates of birth of these four English queens consort by drawing on a wide range of primary evidence, including chronicles, religious treatises, wills, ambassadors' reports, letters, and portraiture, analysed within the context of sixteenth-century attitudes to marriage, the life cycle, and sexuality. Its conclusions are also informed by an awareness of Henry VIII's profound concerns about the continuation of the Tudor dynasty, and how this affected his marital selections in 1527, 1536, 1540, and 1543.

Keywords: Anne Boleyn; Jane Seymour; Katherine Howard; Katherine Parr; Henry VIII; Tudors; queenship; dynasty

Despite holding an enduring place in the modern cultural imagination, the six consorts of Henry VIII (r. 1509–1547) remain, in some respects, shadowy figures. This is especially true with regards to their births and childhoods. Historians have debated extensively the years in which Henry's English consorts were born. By contrast, the birth dates of Henry's two foreign consorts—Katherine of Aragon and Anne of Cleves—have not generated debate amongst historians. It was not unusual for royal births, both in England and on the Continent, to be recorded because of these children's royal status, whereas the birth dates of the English gentry and nobility were not always preserved for posterity, making it understandable why historians are aware of when Katherine of Aragon, for example, was born, but not the birth dates of her four English successors. Katherine's biographers have agreed that she was born during the night of 15–16 December 1485 in Alcalá de Henares, Castile.[1] Traditionally, historians have determined that Anne of Cleves was born on 22 September 1515 in Dusseldorf, Duchy of Berg, as the second daughter of Duke John III of Cleves on the basis of the work of the Victorian historian Agnes

[1] For example: Agnes Strickland, *Lives of the Queens of England from the Norman Conquest*, 12 vols. (London: Henry Colburn, 1842), 4:74; Garrett Mattingly, *Catherine of Aragon* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1942), 15; and Giles Tremlett, *Catherine of Aragon: Henry's Spanish Queen* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 2010), 22–29.

Strickland, who published her twelve-volume *Lives of the Queens of England* in the 1840s.[2] Heather Darsie's recent biography of this Tudor queen consort, however, utilises contemporary German evidence to place Anne's birth date in June 1515, probably on the 28th of that month, which was incidentally the day on which her husband, Henry VIII, was born in 1491, rather than in September of 1515.[3] Darsie notes that while the German archives do not possess any documents pertaining to Anne's birth, the Chronicle of Johann Wassenberch, which covers the period 1492–1517, places her birth on 28 June 1515.[4] Since Anne's brother William was born on 28 July 1516, it is perhaps more likely that Anne was born in June, rather than September, since her mother needed to be churched after her birth, a religious ceremony that took place no later than forty days after the child's birth.[5]

While the contemporary evidence indicates that Anne was born in 1515, whether in June or September, the years in which the king's four English wives were born are unknown. Parish registers were only formally introduced in England in 1538, which stipulated that the registers of baptisms, marriages, and burials should be preserved, and it was only in 1540 that it became legally required for baptisms to be recorded. Prior to that date, these three religious services were only haphazardly recorded. It is also true that uncertainty surrounding the birth dates of premodern monarchs and consorts is not limited to the Tudor period. The evidence for the birth dates of consorts such as Elizabeth Wydeville, for example, is fragmentary, and this issue is not limited to the English royalty or aristocracy: Eleanor of Aquitaine, Eleanor of Provence, and Isabella of France are just three non-English queens consort of England whose birth dates remain unknown or for whom the evidence is contradictory. Perhaps, at least to an extent, whether or not a consort's birth date was recorded (or whether evidence of it survives), is a matter of luck or circumstance. National and regional context also played a role in whether births were recorded. Beat Kümin has noted that "the range of documentation for any one region reflects a great number of variables: patterns of literacy and education, familiarity with more advanced business practices, the relationship between oral and written culture, storage facilities, and losses caused by wars and revolutions—to name but a few."[6] Undoubtedly, the circumstances in which baptisms were recorded were influenced by a country's religious and

[2] For example: Retha M. Warnicke, *The Marrying of Anne of Cleves: Royal Protocol in Tudor England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 64; and Elizabeth Norton, *Anne of Cleves: Henry VIII's Discarded Bride* (Stroud: Amberley, 2009). Mary Saaler, in *Anne of Cleves: Fourth Wife of Henry VIII* (London: Rubicon Press, 1995), 13, also places Anne's birth in September 1515, but erroneously assigns it to the 20th of that month.
[3] Heather R. Darsie, *Anna, Duchess of Cleves: The King's "Beloved Sister"* (Stroud: Amberley, 2019), 17–20, 23.
[4] Darsie, *Anna, Duchess of Cleves*, 17.
[5] As noted by Valerie Schutte in an email to the author. Churching usually took place four weeks after the child's birth. See: Adrian Wilson, "The Ceremony of Childbirth and Its Interpretation," in *Women as Mothers in Pre-Industrial England: Essays in Memory of Dorothy McLaren*, ed. Valerie Fildes (Abingdon: Routledge, 1990), 81. The length of time between birth and churching varied; Anna of Denmark, for example, was churched on 3 August 1606 having given birth on 22 June.
[6] Beat Kümin, "The English Parish in a European Perspective," in *The Parish in English Life, 1400–1600*, ed. Katherine L. French, Gary G. Gibbs, and Beat A. Kümin (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), 16.

social climate. In early modern Italy, for example, Tridentine reform led to baptisms being registered through parochial records and "registering births had been more common pre-Trent than any other church recording, so this was easier to enforce."[7] In his study of the Holy Roman Empire, of which Cleves was a duchy within, Peter Wilson has drawn attention to the sophisticated and hierarchical nature of administration, in which parish registers were systematically maintained, "which in turn provided the secular authorities with more accurate population data."[8] Perhaps this sophisticated administrative structure might at least partly account for the extant evidence of Anne of Cleves' birth. Despite this context, however, as noted earlier, the month in which Anne was born in 1515 remains open to question.

In addition, English consorts—including Isabella of France (in 1312) and Anne Boleyn (in 1533)—often announced the arrival of heirs in letters addressed to the nation. These letters can serve as a form of evidence for determining the birth date of a royal child. This practice also occurred on the Continent: Isabella of Castile, mother of Katherine of Aragon, for example, dictated a letter in 1470 following the birth of her eldest daughter Isabella to the governor of Valencia announcing that "Our Lord has given us a princess."[9] This practice is, however, not relevant to the births of children of the nobility and gentry.

Historians have debated extensively the most plausible years in which Anne Boleyn, Jane Seymour, Katherine Howard, and Katherine Parr may have been born, but it is possible that this issue will remain unresolved. The fragmentary contemporary evidence provided by chronicles, religious treatises, wills, ambassadors' reports, letters, and portraiture, when analysed with regard to early modern attitudes to issues as disparate as marriage, youth and old age, and childbearing, can help to shed light on when Henry VIII's four English wives might have been born. Finally, it is perhaps worth thinking about the King's own preferences regarding age and how these may have dictated his choices of bride. The age that these women married Henry affected the period in which she would be able to produce viable heirs. Motherhood was a centrepiece of medieval and early modern queenship, and this was certainly true in the Tudor court. Determining when these four queens consort were born is important to our understanding of their lives and tenures as queen, for their perceived ages have affected how scholars and authors have conceptualised their personalities, their activities, and their actions. In this article, I suggest the most likely years in which these four queens were born, looking at each consort in turn, before summarising the evidence in a conclusion.

During the medieval and early Tudor periods, kings of England customarily selected brides who were usually in their teens or early-to-mid-twenties. Henry VIII's father had wed the nineteen-year-old Elizabeth of York in January 1486, although his maternal grandfather Edward IV disregarded royal marital precedent in his decision to marry the twenty-seven year old widow Elizabeth Wydeville in 1464. Elizabeth Wydeville was arguably an exception to the

[7] Christopher F. Black, *Church, Religion and Society in Early Modern Italy* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 98.
[8] Peter H. Wilson, *The Holy Roman Empire, 1495–1806* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 35.
[9] Nancy Rubin, *Isabella of Castile: The First Renaissance Queen* (Lincoln: ASJA Press, 2004), 93.

rule: not only because she was a widow, but also by virtue of her age when she married the King, her second husband. Although Henry IV's consort (and second wife), Joan of Navarre, had been thirty-five when she married the King, her second husband in 1403, her two immediate successors—Katherine of Valois and Margaret of Anjou—were both teenagers at their weddings. Elizabeth Wydeville's successor Anne Neville was, like Elizabeth, twenty-seven when she was crowned queen of England, but she had married the future Richard III in 1472 at the age of sixteen. When Henry VIII married his fifth wife, Katherine Howard, in 1540, she was the youngest English queen consort in almost a century, since the marriage of Henry VI to the fifteen-year-old Margaret of Anjou in 1445.[10] Kings desired young brides because their most important duty was to produce several children, preferably sons, to secure the succession, and their youth was believed to suggest a lengthy period of time in which these heirs could be conceived and delivered. While neither Henry VII nor his son favoured prepubescent brides, as had several of the thirteenth- and fourteenth-century kings of England, it seems plausible to argue that their desire to father male heirs would have influenced their selection of brides who were believed, by virtue of both their youth and their fertility, to be likely to experience success in childbearing. Kings of England customarily selected foreign princesses as their consorts and, during the initial marital negotiations, their envoys were expected to assess the fertility of a prospective bride on their master's behalf. In 1539, Henry VIII informed the French ambassador that one of his reasons for electing to marry Anne of Cleves was because she was of a suitable age for childbearing.[11]

Any investigation into the birth dates of Henry VIII's English consorts should take into account the King's attitudes to sexuality and fertility, where they can be determined from the extant evidence. Perhaps, when choosing a bride, the King was influenced by the ages at which immediate female members of his family, including his mother and surviving sisters, contracted marriages, given that they all bore several children. Henry's mother delivered her first child, Arthur, in September 1486 when she was aged twenty. As noted earlier, Elizabeth of York was nineteen when selected by Henry VII as his wife in 1486, and her two daughters Margaret (queen consort of Scotland) and Mary (queen consort of France) were married for the first time at the ages of thirteen and eighteen, respectively. Only Katherine Howard was a teenager upon her marriage to Henry, but he may have been influenced not only by the customs of his female relatives but also by the processes of aristocratic marriage in the mid-sixteenth-century when selecting his spouses. Barbara Harris has shown that a significant majority of aristocratic brides in Yorkist and early Tudor England were aged between thirteen and sixteen when they married for the first time; however, these early marriages typically involved heiresses.[12] Possibly, the King's four English brides were aged slightly older at

[10] Conor Byrne, *Katherine Howard: Henry VIII's Slandered Queen* (Stroud: The History Press, 2019), 17.
[11] Warnicke, *The Marrying of Anne of Cleves*, 94.
[12] Barbara J. Harris, *English Aristocratic Women, 1450–1550: Marriage and Family, Property and Careers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 56.

marriage than the women studied in Harris's sample because none of them were aristocratic heiresses. The exception, of course, is Katherine Howard, who despite not being an heiress was in her teens when she became queen of England. Other evidence indicates that sixteenth-century English noblewomen tended to marry by the age of twenty.[13] Admittedly, it can be difficult to ascertain the King's preferences based on the extant evidence, but it is perhaps noteworthy, as later discussed in this article, that he expressed an interest in marrying the sixteen-year-old Christina of Milan in 1538 at a time when he only had one infant son to continue the Tudor dynasty. Ultimately, the woman who Henry VIII selected as his fourth consort, after the death of Jane Seymour, was aged twenty-four.

Other evidence for the King's preferences regarding age is somewhat contradictory: Chapuys reported in June 1536, in the wake of Anne Boleyn's execution, that Henry VIII had rejected the suggestion of a marriage to the sixteen-year-old Madeleine of Valois, daughter of François I;[14] perhaps, however, while Henry may have viewed her as "too young," it may rather have been Madeleine's "French bringing up" that caused the King to reject her as a bride as it reminded him of his disgraced second consort, who had resided during her adolescence at the French court, and in any case he had already elected to wed Jane Seymour as his third wife.[15] Further glimpses into the King's marital choices can be attained from the ceremonial of the Tudor court. Henry VIII utilised ceremony and ritual to demonstrate his profound concern—and hope—that his consorts would be divinely favoured by delivering male heirs to safeguard the continuation of the Tudor dynasty, at occasions including coronations and religious festivals. At Anne Boleyn's coronation in June 1533, for example, pageants expressed the hope that Heaven would "bless these nuptials, and make her [Anne] a fruitful mother of men-children," while verses made reference to St Anne bearing "the first founders of our holy Faith ... Not without thought, therefore, Queen Anne, do the citizens form this pageant in your honour. By her example, may you give us a race to maintain the Faith and the Throne."[16] Subsequently, when a queen learned of her pregnancy, thanksgiving services were held throughout the kingdom because her conception signified divine approval of the royal marriage and, by extension, indicated that the ruling dynasty was blessed by God. Such services occurred, for example, in spring 1537 when Jane Seymour learned that she was pregnant. In addition, Henry's first two consorts were honoured with coronations, which historians have conceptualised as being rites that reinforced a dynasty's legitimacy and highlighted the queen's "divinely ordained role."[17] Although coronations were not merely

[13] Retha M. Warnicke, *The Rise and Fall of Anne Boleyn: Family Politics at the Court of Henry VIII* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 35.
[14] *Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic, Henry VIII*, ed. J.S. Brewer, James Gairdner, and R.H. Brodie, 21 vols. (London: HMSO, 1862–1932), 10:1070. Hereafter *LP*.
[15] *LP*, 10:1070.
[16] F.J. Furnivall, ed., *Ballads from Manuscripts: Ballads on the Condition of England in Henry VIII's and Edward VI's Reign*, 2 vols. (London, 1868–1872), 1:374, 376.
[17] J.L. Laynesmith, *The Last Medieval Queens: English Queenship, 1445–1503* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004),

fertility rites, it is possible that in some circumstances kings elected to arrange them for their wives once they had conceived, as was the case, for example, with Elizabeth of York. In view of this context, it is perhaps significant that none of the king's last four consorts were crowned. In July 1536, shortly after Jane's marriage to Henry VIII, Chapuys reported that Jane's coronation (ultimately never to take place) had been delayed until after Michaelmas, "to see if she shall be with child; and, if not, and there is danger of her being barren, occasion may be found to take another."[18] Five years later, the French ambassador Marillac claimed that Henry intended to have his fifth consort, Katherine Howard, crowned at Whitsuntide if the rumour that she was pregnant proved to be true.[19]

Because he hoped for healthy progeny, it is likely that a major consideration for the King when selecting a bride was her age, as it may have been closely linked to contemporary perceptions of fertility. In early modern England, medical discourse continued to espouse the ancient humoral theory, in which the human body was believed to comprise four humours (blood, yellow bile, black bile, and phlegm) that were required to remain in balance in order for health to be maintained. Men's bodies were generally believed to be hotter and drier, while women's were thought to be colder and wetter.[20] As Mary Lindemann has explained, humoral theory underpinned contemporary beliefs about conception and gestation, in which both men and women were thought to produce seed and in which the female reproductive organs were conceptualised as internal versions of the male reproductive organs.[21] In this humoral model of medicine, contemporaries believed that barrenness was caused by too much, or too little, of the four qualities of heat, cold, wet, and dry; according to this model, barrenness could be caused by a dry womb that occurred at the same time as a woman's constitution became drier and colder as she aged, and thus she was no longer fruitful as she had "dried up" and lost the "vital heat" that had made her, in youth, "sexually vigorous."[22]

In her study of aristocratic women in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century England, Barbara Harris noted that most women produced at least four children, while many gave birth to five or more.[23] Lianne McTavish drew on demographic studies of early modern families to conclude that "the number of births markedly declined once a woman reached her mid-thirties."[24] While this may have been because couples limited their pregnancies, it is also likely

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[18] *LP*, 11:8.

[19] *LP*, 16:712.

[20] Jennifer Evans, *Aphrodisiacs, Fertility and Medicine in Early Modern England* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2014), 51–52.

[21] Mary Lindemann, *Medicine and Society in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 19–20.

[22] Sarah Toulalan, "'Age to Great, or to Little, Doeth Let Conception': Bodies, Sex and the Life Cycle, 1500–1750," in *The Routledge History of Sex and the Body 1500 to the Present*, ed. Sarah Toulalan and Kate Fisher (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), 287.

[23] Harris, *English Aristocratic Women*, 99.

[24] Lianne McTavish, "Reproduction, *c.* 1500–1750," in *The Routledge History of Sex and the Body 1500 to the Present*, ed.

that aristocratic and royal husbands, such as Henry VIII, would have been well aware that their wives' prime years for childbearing were in the immediate years after their marriage, and this belief was also affected by contemporary attitudes to ageing. Contemporary instruction manuals rarely referred to specific calendar age in discussions of old age, but evidence indicates that forty was considered to be the middle of life, although women began to be considered old as early as forty.[25] While women could marry legally at twelve years of age, this was not always common, and on average aristocratic women married at around the age of twenty. The primary goal of an aristocratic marriage, aside from its lucrative financial and political advantages, was childbearing, and both spouses would have been socialised to expect to become parents. In her study of infertility in early modern England, Daphna Oren-Magidor stated that "the centrality of childbearing to the early modern social order meant that the idea of failed reproduction was destabilizing."[26]

Henry's decision in the mid-1520s to seek a second wife arose from his belief that his lack of a surviving male heir constituted, to use Oren-Magidor's term, "failed reproduction," and his marital choices shed light on his dynastic hopes. In the spring of 1528, amidst negotiations to annul his marriage to Katherine of Aragon in order to marry Anne Boleyn, the King instructed his envoys in Rome to praise his intended bride's "apparent aptness to procreation of children," among her other qualities.[27] While it is generally agreed that the King was deeply in love with Anne, it is also true that his primary motivation for annulling his marriage to Katherine to wed Anne was in order to sire a legitimate male heir, and with this in mind, it is important to consider whether his intended bride was about twenty-seven in 1528 (as favoured by the majority of modern historians) or whether she was about twenty-one (as indicated by the works of Elizabethan writers). When selecting a second bride, the King was undoubtedly conscious of the fact that his first queen had conceived for the last time in 1518, aged thirty-two. As has been recognised, while she publicly proclaimed that Henry had been inspired by God to marry her, "it must never have been out of [Anne's] thoughts for long that the opportunity to marry the king had arisen only because the male children of his previous wife had died shortly after birth."[28]

Another reason that medieval and early modern kings favoured young brides was because of both the prevalence and the unexpected nature of death in premodern Europe. The stages of life were clearly recognised as distinct by contemporaries. In 1596, John More wrote in *A Lively Anatomie of Death*:

Sarah Toulalan and Kate Fisher (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), 354.

[25] Aki C.L. Beam, "'Should I as Yet Call You Old?' Testing the Boundaries of Female Old Age in Early Modern England," in *Growing Old in Early Modern Europe: Cultural Representations*, ed. Erin Campbell (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 106.

[26] Daphna Oren-Magidor, *Infertility in Early Modern England* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 2.

[27] *LP*, 4:3913.

[28] Warnicke, *Anne Boleyn*, 163.

> Our very years are limited, God hath measured out our months, the days of our lives are dated, how long we have to live. So that our first lesson (even at the beginning) that we have to learn is this, to think of our ending ... As youth succeedeth childhood, and age youth, so childhood, youth and age all have their end.[29]

Modern estimates suggest that, in 1551, life expectancy at birth was forty-two years of age.[30] The prevalence of disease in early modern England, coupled with inadequate medical knowledge, meant that death could occur suddenly and without warning. Alongside the dynastic turbulence of the preceding century, in which the houses of Lancaster and York had vied on the battlefield for the crown of England, it is understandable why Henry VIII was anxious about ensuring that, upon his death (which could occur at any time), he was succeeded peacefully as king by a legitimate male heir of his line. Prevailing attitudes to female succession meant that the possibility of Mary, the sole surviving child of his marriage to Katherine of Aragon, succeeding her father as monarch either never occurred to or was ruled out by the king because, if that possibility had been considered, then arguably the king would never have sought to annul his union with Katherine and marry Anne. In light of contemporary attitudes to ageing and death, which were influenced by both religious teachings and medical lore, it seems reasonable to suggest that once he had resolved to annul his union with Katherine, Henry VIII would favour a youthful bride, as his kingly predecessors had, to produce at least one, and ideally several, male heirs to ensure a peaceful succession on his death. It would have been important for the king's wife to be of an age to produce several healthy male children because, as the unexpected death of Prince Arthur in 1502 demonstrated, illness and death could strike at any time, meaning that a "spare" was essential should anything befall the heir to the throne.

Anne Boleyn

It was Henry VIII's desire to produce a healthy and legitimate male heir with a second consort that triggered the English Reformation. Historically speaking, more controversy has surrounded the birth date of Anne Boleyn than that of any of Henry VIII's other English consorts, as evidenced by the emergence of a contentious debate on the issue during the late twentieth-century between her primary biographers Eric Ives and Retha Warnicke. Two birth dates have traditionally been given by scholars: 1501 and 1507.[31] Until the late nineteenth

[29] John More, *A Lively Anatomie of Death* (London, 1596; *STC* 18073), sigs. B1r–B1v.
[30] Retha M. Warnicke, *Elizabeth of York and Her Six Daughters-in-Law: Fashioning Tudor Queenship* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 203.
[31] For proponents of the 1500–1501 birth date, see: Hugh Paget, "The Youth of Anne Boleyn," *Historical Research* 54, no. 130 (1981): 162–170; and Eric Ives, *The Life and Death of Anne Boleyn: 'The Most Happy'* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004). The majority of modern historians—including David Starkey, G.W. Bernard, Suzannah Lipscomb, and David Loades—have agreed with the conclusions reached by Paget and Ives regarding Anne's date of birth. For 1507, see: Warnicke, *Anne Boleyn*.

century, 1507 was widely accepted as the year in which Anne was born, perhaps at Hever Castle, whereas during the twentieth century, 1501 was increasingly viewed as the most plausible year for Anne's birth, a belief that persists today. Only one of her modern biographers (Warnicke) supports the 1507 birth date. Modern historians overwhelmingly support the 1501 birth date on the basis of Anne's arrival at the court of Margaret of Austria in the Low Countries in the summer of 1513, presumably to serve as the Archduchess's maiden of honour. Since maidens of honour were usually aged in their mid-teens when they were appointed to the household of a queen or female ruler, it has been conjectured that Anne was surely at least twelve or thirteen years old in 1513. It has been plausibly suggested, however, that Anne was not sent abroad in 1513 to serve Margaret of Austria as her maiden of honour, but rather to reside in the nursery alongside the royal children, on the basis that monarchs did not appoint tutors to provide their attendants with instruction in, for example, French; Anne's letter to her father in August 1514, however, explicitly refers to her lessons in learning the French language.[32] Surely, if Anne had been sent abroad for the purpose of serving Margaret as her maiden of honour, her fluency in the French language would have been attained prior to her departure in order to render her capable of undertaking her duties in this highly coveted role. Moreover, the notion that Anne may have initially resided in the royal nursery because of her youth is strengthened by the fact that the same nursery was inhabited at this time by another girl, Anne Brandon, daughter of Charles, Duke of Suffolk, who was born in 1506.[33] The Archduchess herself described Anne Boleyn in a letter to the girl's father as "so bright and so pleasant for her young age."[34] It is also true that, if born in 1507, Anne could have served Claude of France and, perhaps, Marguerite of Navarre in the capacity of maiden of honour prior to her return to England at the end of 1521 or early in 1522. Since they assumed that she served Margaret of Austria as a maiden of honour upon her arrival at the Archduchess's court in 1513, historians have argued that Anne could not have been born as late as 1507, but when her exact role is clarified there seems to be no good reason to question the later birth date, especially in view of evidence dating from her daughter's lifetime.

Direct evidence for a 1507 birth date emerged during the Elizabethan era. William Camden, the Elizabethan historian and herald, researched and wrote a life of Anne's daughter, Elizabeth, in which, as Wyatt H. Herendeen notes, his "interpenetrating personal and professional lives were 'authored' by Elizabeth, while Burghley was his symbolic father."[35] Camden stated in his history that Anne was born in 1507 (using the Roman numerals MDVII).[36] Entreating Camden to commence the project in the late 1590s, William Cecil, Lord

[32] Warnicke, *Anne Boleyn*, 17.
[33] Warnicke, *Anne Boleyn*, 12.
[34] Warnicke, *Anne Boleyn*, 12.
[35] Wyatt H. Herendeen, "Camden, William (1551–1623)," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, doi:10.1093/ref:odnb/4431.
[36] William Camden, *Annales rerum Anglicarum, et Hibernicarum regnante Elizabetha, ad annum salutis 1589*. (Frankfurt am Main, 1616), 13.

Burghley, provided the historian with private papers as well as documents from the Queen's archives. This access, which included documents in Cotton's library, ensured that Camden enjoyed "a privileged perspective" on Elizabeth's reign, as Herendeen contends.[37] With the extensive range of resources available to him, it is questionable whether Elizabeth's biographer would have erred in documenting her mother's year of birth. Moreover, according to the memoirs of Jane Dormer, a favourite attendant of Mary I, Anne had not yet reached her twenty-ninth birthday when she was beheaded in 1536: an admission that supports a birth date of 1507, perhaps in the summer or autumn of that year.[38] It seems logical to deduce that Anne's stepdaughter would have been aware of the Queen's age, which Mary then imparted to her attendant. The seventeenth-century antiquarian John Weever, author of *Ancient Funerall Monuments*, reported that Anne Boleyn, born in 1507, was the elder daughter of Thomas and Elizabeth. He confirmed that Henry VIII had fallen in love with Anne when he was aged thirty-eight and she was twenty-two, thus dating Henry's attraction to her in 1529.[39] Gareth Russell has questioned why Henry, who was desirous of siring a male heir and believed that his lack of surviving sons indicated divine disapproval of his marriage to Katherine of Aragon, would have selected a twenty-six or twenty-seven year-old woman to be his second wife in 1527; moreover, the couple's marriage only occurred six years later in 1533, making her, according to the 1501 date, thirty-two years old.[40] As noted earlier in this article, the age at which a royal consort married and conceived affected her ability to produce viable heirs for longer periods of time. Surely the King would have favoured a younger bride, who could provide him with several sons if anything should befall the firstborn, and one might also question why the ambitious Thomas Boleyn would have been content for his daughter to reach the age of twenty-seven without having secured a marriage for her. From Anne's dismissal from court in 1523 on account of her ill-advised liaison with Henry Percy, later Earl of Northumberland, to the beginning of the King's interest in her in 1526–1527, there is no evidence that attempts were made to achieve a marriage for Anne. As this article argues, the marriages of Henry VIII provide evidence that the King's preference was for young women in their mid-twenties, as Katherine of Aragon, Jane Seymour, Anne of Cleves and—probably—Anne Boleyn were when he selected them as his brides. Only two of his wives stand out as special exceptions: Katherine Howard, who was certainly a teenager, and Katherine Parr, who was about thirty or thirty-one but had already been married twice before. The King was profoundly anxious in the late 1520s about having only a daughter (and potentially, but not realistically, his bastard son by Bessie Blount) to succeed him. This concern was understandable both in view of contemporary English attitudes to female succession alongside

[37] Herendeen, "Camden, William."
[38] Joseph Stevenson, ed., *The Life of Jane Dormer Duchess of Feria by Henry Clifford* (London, 1887), 80.
[39] John Weever, *Ancient Funeral Monuments* (London, 1631), 514, 799.
[40] Gareth Russell, "The Age of Anne Boleyn," http://garethrussellcidevant.blogspot.com/2010/04/age-of-anne-boleyn.html.

the political and dynastic bloodshed of the Wars of the Roses half a century earlier. Undoubtedly, his preference for a second consort would have been for a woman fertile and youthful enough to produce a healthy male heir to secure the Tudor succession. It is interesting, from this perspective, that Cardinal Wolsey had favoured Renee of France as the King's second consort in 1527, presumably aware of his master's preferences in a bride; born in 1510, she would have been seventeen years old that year.

Extant evidence from Anne's lifetime or shortly afterwards seems to support the later birth date. George Cavendish, biographer of Cardinal Wolsey, noted in his *The Life and Death of Cardinal Wolsey* (thought to have been written during the 1550s), that "this gentlewoman, Mistress Anne Boleyn, being very young, was sent into the realm of France."[41] The same author recorded that, in the light of the scandal of Henry Percy's liaison with Anne in 1523, the Cardinal upbraided Percy for his dalliance with "a foolish girl yonder in the court, I mean Anne Boleyn."[42] While historians have increasingly questioned the tradition that Anne Boleyn and Wolsey were implacable enemies during the years of the "King's Great Matter," it seems reasonable to assume that Cavendish's information about Anne would have been accurate in view of his intimacy to the Cardinal, who surely knew her well. William Forrest, who dated Anne's arrival at the English court to 1528, conceptualised her as "a fresche younge damoysell, that cowlde trippe and go."[43] Cardinal Reginald Pole, who publicly opposed the King's decision to annul his union with Katherine of Aragon in order to marry Anne, described Henry's new love as a "girl."[44] It is possible that Pole's description of Anne may have been intended to slight her by contrasting the frivolity of youth with the gravity and dignity of Katherine of Aragon, then aged in her forties. It is interesting that in the spring of 1536, at around the time that she first attracted public attention as the King's intended third consort, Jane Seymour was described as a "young lady" when, as this article suggests, she was probably then about twenty-seven years old.[45] Comparing this language to that utilised for Jane's predecessor, for Anne Boleyn to have been conceptualised as "a fresh young damsel" and a "girl" when she caught the King's eye, in about 1527–1528, suggests that she was probably significantly younger than twenty-seven. If she was born in 1507, as suggested by those writing during the reign of her daughter, then she would have been twenty or twenty-one when Henry fell in love with her, and the extant comments of observers from her lifetime or immediately afterwards referring to her youth and girlhood would appear to make greater sense than if she was born as early as 1501.

Theories about Anne's birthdate undoubtedly influence perceptions of crucial stages and events in her life, including the nature of her childhood and adolescence, her relationship

[41] George Cavendish, *The Life and Death of Cardinal Wolsey* (New York: Houghton Mifflin and Company, 1905), 29.
[42] Cavendish, *Life and Death of Cardinal Wolsey*, 30.
[43] W.D. Macray, ed., *The History of Grisild the Second: A Narrative, in Verse, of the Divorce of Queen Katharine of Arragon. Written by William Forrest, Sometime Chaplain to Queen Mary I* (London, 1875), 53.
[44] Joseph Dwyer, trans., *Pole's Defense of the Unity of the Church* (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1965), 185–186.
[45] See, for instance, the dispatches of Chapuys in *LP*, 10:495, 601.

with Henry, and perhaps most significantly, the reasons for her downfall in 1536. If the Queen was aged thirty-five that year, it is possible that the King, who had married Anne chiefly in order to sire a legitimate male heir, was experiencing increasing anxiety about his lack of sons by his "thin" and "old" second wife and favoured the younger Jane Seymour as his third consort.[46] Jane also came from a large family, which probably signalled to the besotted King that she would be likely to prove a fertile bride who could provide him with healthy children. Historians have attached varying degrees of significance to Anne's final miscarriage in January 1536, with the majority of scholars downplaying its role in her downfall but with some, such as Warnicke, arguing that it was the major reason for her execution only four months later.[47] From this perspective, and in the context of this article, it is interesting that historians have not explored the degree to which Anne's age may have been a factor in her downfall. If Anne was born as early as 1501, it is reasonable to speculate that, at the age of thirty-five, her husband may well have given up hope of fathering a male child by her after her miscarriage in the winter of 1536. This is not to suggest, necessarily, that the King would have elected to have his wife executed on charges of adultery and treason because her age made it unlikely that she would deliver a healthy son. However, if Anne was born in 1507, as the extant evidence indicates, then it might be thought unlikely that the King would have completely given up hope in 1536 as to fathering a son by his second wife. As noted at the beginning of this article, Katherine of Aragon had conceived for the final time at the age of thirty-two, whereas in early 1536, Anne had probably not yet reached her twenty-ninth birthday. If born in 1507, then it is likely that the Queen's age formed less of a factor in her downfall—especially since the King's intended consort, Jane, would have been only about two years younger than her mistress if the most likely birth date of 1509 is accepted.

Historians who support the 1501 birth date have often cited as evidence *The Life and Raigne of King Henry the Eight* by Edward, Lord Herbert of Cherbury, and published in 1649. Herbert noted that "But, at last, being come hither [to England], and, about the twentieth year of her age, received into our Queens service."[48] However, although Anne participated in the Chateau Vert pageant of March 1522 upon her return from France, there is no evidence that she was actually appointed that year to the household of Katherine of Aragon. The first evidence for her residence in the Queen's household occurs in the spring of 1527, when observers noted that she danced with the King while presumably serving Katherine.[49] As is well known, Henry decided to marry Anne that year and by the following year, her status as

[46] The comment comes from Chapuys. See: Pascual de Gayangos, ed., *Calendar of State Papers, Spain, Volume 5 Part 2, 1536-1538* (London, 1888), 55. It is possible, as has been suggested, that the ambassador's description of Anne reflected the physical strain she had endured on account of her final miscarriage. It is problematic to utilise Chapuys' comment about her physical appearance as evidence for Anne's age given that, at her execution, eyewitnesses described her "fearful beauty" and noted that "Never had the Queen looked so beautiful."
[47] Warnicke, *Anne Boleyn*, 191–234.
[48] Edward Herbert, *The Life and Raigne of King Henry the Eight* (London, 1649), 257.
[49] Warnicke, *Anne Boleyn*, 56.

queen-in-waiting was public knowledge both at home and abroad. In view of the evidence concerning Anne dancing with the King, it is possible, when referring to Anne's appointment to Katherine's household, that Herbert was actually referring to 1527, rather than 1522, again suggesting a birth date of about 1507. Historians who favour the earlier year have also drawn attention to the letter of Anne's father Thomas, Earl of Wiltshire, to Thomas Cromwell in July 1536, two months after his daughter's execution, which informed Cromwell that "when I married I had only 50*l.* a year to live on for me and my wife as long as my father lived, and yet she brought me every year a child."[50] Since the date of Thomas's marriage to Elizabeth Howard is unknown, it is problematic to utilise this as evidence for Anne's date of birth, and it is also unclear whether the comment "every year" is to be taken literally to mean live births; in an age of high infant mortality, it is entirely possible that miscarriages, stillbirths, and deaths in childhood could well have been included in Thomas's statement, alongside the deliveries of his three surviving children.

Jane Seymour

In May 1536, the Imperial ambassador Eustace Chapuys recorded that Jane Seymour "is over 25 years old," suggesting that she was born no later than 1511.[51] His proximity to the Queen and his partisanship of her cause during Anne Boleyn's downfall would seem to suggest that Chapuys would have possessed accurate information about Jane's age. Alison Weir and Elizabeth Norton both stated in their biographies of Jane that she was born in about 1508, since twenty-nine women apparently rode in her funeral procession in 1537, one for each year of her age. However, neither author provided a contemporary source for this assertion.[52] Retha Warnicke noted that the women involved in Jane's funeral services placed thirty-seven palls on her effigy at St George's Chapel, Windsor, perhaps to represent the year in which she died rather than her actual age at death.[53] It is also possible that those who supervised the arrangements for Jane's funeral, who drew on the precedents of Elizabeth of York's funeral in 1503, were unaware that the thirty-seven palls that featured in Elizabeth's funeral represented her age at death (she died on her thirty-seventh birthday).[54] Chapuys' statement, although vague, indicates that Jane was older than twenty-five when Henry VIII selected her as his third consort in the spring of 1536, suggesting that she was then perhaps twenty-six or twenty-seven. This would mean a birth date of 1509–1510. If she had, for example, been thirty years of age in 1536, then one might reasonably have expected the Imperial ambassador to have described her as "30 years old." Moreover, if twenty-nine women did ride in Jane's funeral procession in 1537 (an assertion not necessarily supported by the contemporary evidence),

[50] *LP*, 11:17.
[51] *LP*, 10:901.
[52] Alison Weir, *The Six Wives of Henry VIII* (London: Vintage, 1991), 288; Elizabeth Norton, *Jane Seymour: Henry VIII's True Love* (Stroud: Amberley, 2009), 11.
[53] Warnicke, *Elizabeth of York*, 213.
[54] Warnicke, *Elizabeth of York*, 213.

then it is possible that the number of women represented the Queen's future age at her next birthday, as also occurred with the Maundy services (see below): suggesting that she was twenty-eight in 1537 and therefore born in about 1509. A miniature by the artist Nicholas Hilliard dating to *c.*1600, in the ownership of the Royal Collection Trust, and presented to Charles I, features an inscription in gold: "Ano Dni.1536. Aetatis Suae 27." [55] The contemporary practice was to refer to one's age with regard to one's future birthday, rather than one's present age. Therefore, if Jane was in her twenty-seventh year in 1536, then she must have been born in 1509–1510. This pictorial evidence makes sense in light of Chapuys' report in the spring of 1536. Compared with the considerable—if contradictory—evidence for the dates of birth of Anne Boleyn and Katherine Howard, the evidence for Jane Seymour's age is more scarce, but the report of Chapuys and the evidence of the portrait miniature seemingly point to a plausible year for her birth, thus establishing that she was twenty-six or twenty-seven in spring 1536 and about twenty-eight when she died in October 1537. The lack of information about Jane's age is exacerbated by uncertainty as to when she first arrived at court; traditionally she is thought to have served in the household of Katherine of Aragon before being transferred to the service of Anne Boleyn, but if and when remains unclear because Jane first attracted public attention only in early 1536, a handful of months before her royal marriage.[56]

If Anne Boleyn was born in 1507, and was thus about twenty when the King fell in love with her, and taking into account the age of Katherine Howard (see below) when she married Henry VIII in 1540, it is uncertain why Henry selected Jane Seymour as his third consort in the spring of 1536. This is especially questionable since, at about twenty-seven years old, Jane was somewhat old, by the standards of her day, to still be unmarried, given that her contemporaries of the noble and gentry classes tended to marry, on average, at about the age of twenty. By contrast, her younger sister Elizabeth (later the daughter-in-law of Thomas Cromwell) had married for the first time in 1530 when she was a teenager. It is possible that Jane had been betrothed to William Dormer some years prior to Henry VIII's courtship of her but, for whatever reason, the match had not taken place. In view of Henry's confidence in Katherine Howard's fertility, by virtue of the number of siblings that she had (as well as her youth), it is probable that the King was attracted to Jane because he was aware that the fruitfulness of her parents' marriage (which had resulted in ten children, six of whom reached

[55] Details of the miniature can be found at the Royal Collection Trust's website: https://www.rct.uk/collection/search#/9/collection/420014/jane-seymour-1509-1537.

[56] The chronicler Charles Wriothesley described Jane as "first a wayting gentlewoman to Queene Katherin, and after to Anne Bolleine, late Queene, also." William Douglas Hamilton, ed., *A Chronicle of England During the Reigns of the Tudors, from A.D. 1485 to 1559. By Charles Wriothesley, Windsor Herald*, 2 vols. (London, 1875), 1:43. Warnicke, however, notes that there was no such office in the queen's household as "a wayting gentlewoman" and suggests that, while Jane may have served in Katherine's household, she would have been too old in the mid-1530s to have attended Anne as a maiden of honour. Warnicke concludes that Jane may have joined Anne's household prior to her marriage to Henry VIII, sometime between 1528 and 1532. Warnicke, *Elizabeth of York*, 27.

adulthood) signalled the likelihood of their eldest daughter, Jane, bearing healthy male children. Perhaps, then, in the case of Jane Seymour, the fertility of her family was a greater concern for the King than his intended consort's age, which would appear to make sense in light of Henry's dynastic hopes.

Katherine Howard

Even by the standards of Henry's courtship practices, his wooing of, and marriage to, his fifth consort Katherine Howard took place remarkably swiftly: she had been at court for no more than five months when the King's pursuit of her first attracted public attention. The youngest of the King's consorts, Henry almost certainly favoured Katherine as his fifth wife because the fertility of her Howard relatives indicated the likelihood of her bearing heirs to secure the Tudor succession. Her youth also would have made this hope seem likely to become a reality. How important Katherine's age was as a factor in Henry's selection of her as his bride remains uncertain, for it was reported that the "King's Highness did cast a fantasy to Catherine Howard the first time that ever his Grace saw her."[57] Certainly, as with Anne Boleyn and Jane Seymour, Katherine would have been well aware that Henry had married her with the goal of producing heirs to ensure the continuation of the Tudor dynasty. Contemporary observers at court, who were interested in the issue of whether or not the Queen was believed to be pregnant, keenly reported on rumours of pregnancy during Katherine's queenship, and perhaps significantly, in the wake of her downfall in 1541, it was reported by the French ambassador that Henry wished to set his wife aside "because physicians say she cannot bear children."[58] Interestingly, as long ago as 1514, it had been rumoured in Europe that the Henry "meant to repudiate his present wife [Katherine of Aragon] ... because he is unable to have children by her."[59] This continuity across the tenures of Henry VIII's consorts demonstrates the extent to which their fortunes in childbearing affected their personal and political security as queen.

Two dates of birth have traditionally been suggested for Katherine Howard: circa 1521 and 1525. The former date was widely accepted until the late twentieth century, making Katherine nineteen when she married Henry VIII in the summer of 1540 and twenty-one when she was executed in 1542. This date was based on two pieces of evidence: firstly, a portrait, formerly thought to be of Katherine, created by Hans Holbein in *c.*1535–1540. Three versions of the portrait are extant, but there is no evidence for the sitter's identification with Katherine: the most likely candidate is thought to be Elizabeth Cromwell, sister of Jane Seymour, whose husband's family owned the portrait.[60] Alison Weir, in 1991, was the first

[57] TNA SP 1/168, fol. 60; *LP*, 16:1409.
[58] *LP*, 16:1332.
[59] *Calendar of State Papers Relating To English Affairs in the Archives of Venice, Volume 2, 1509–1519*, ed. Rawdon Brown (London, 1867), 479.
[60] For this argument, see: Teri Fitzgerald and Diarmaid MacCulloch, "Gregory Cromwell: Two Portrait Miniatures

writer to suggest a later birth date of 1525 for Katherine, a date subsequently accepted by historians including Joanna Denny and Josephine Wilkinson.[61] As Warnicke suggests, perhaps historians have, by and large, traditionally been reluctant to accept that Katherine may have been only fifteen or so when she married the forty-nine-year-old King in 1540,[62] but aristocratic or royal marriages with great differences in age between the spouses were not uncommon. Henry's sister Mary, for example, wed the King of France in 1514 when she was eighteen and he was fifty-two, and Mary's second husband Charles, Duke of Suffolk, married for the fourth time to Katherine Willoughby in 1533 when he was forty-nine and she was fourteen. Henry himself expressed an interest in marrying the sixteen-year-old Christina of Milan in 1538, after the death of Jane Seymour, when he was aged forty-seven. The second piece of evidence for the 1521 birth date lies in the French ambassador's report to François I of France, made on 7 December 1541 in the midst of Katherine's downfall, that the English queen had been "violated [by Francis Dereham] ... at the age of 13 until 18."[63] Since Katherine's relations with Dereham had ceased in 1539, the year in which she was appointed to the household of Anne of Cleves, it has been conjectured that she was born in about 1521. However, the ambassador made several mistakes with regard to other royal women's ages, for he claimed that Anne of Cleves was thirty in 1540 (she was twenty-four) and suggested that Margaret, Countess of Salisbury was "above" eighty at her execution in 1541 (she was sixty-seven).[64] Aside from the ambassador's untrustworthiness, the depositions pertaining to Katherine's downfall that document the events that took place within the household of the Dowager Duchess of Norfolk demonstrate that her liaison with Dereham lasted less than a year, rather than the five claimed by Marillac, and it is also possible that the ambassador believed that her violation commenced at thirteen because that was almost certainly her age when her relations with Henry Manox, her music master, took place in 1536. Unaware of her involvement with Manox, Marillac drew upon reports of the Queen's corruption at the age of thirteen and attached them to his knowledge of her premarital affair with Dereham.[65]

Other, more reliable contemporary evidence suggests that Katherine Howard was not born before 1523, and may have been born as late as 1525.[66] Richard Hilles described her in

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by Hans Holbein the Younger," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 67, no. 3 (2016): 587–601.

[61] Weir, *Six Wives*; Joanna Denny, *Katherine Howard: A Tudor Conspiracy* (London: Piatkus, 2005); Josephine Wilkinson, *Katherine Howard: The Tragic Story of Henry VIII's Fifth Queen* (London: John Murray, 2016).

[62] Retha M. Warnicke, "Reshaping Tudor Biography: Anne Boleyn and Anne of Cleves," in *Writing Biography: Historians and Their Craft*, ed. Lloyd E. Ambrosius (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), 59.

[63] *LP*, 16:1426.

[64] *LP*, 15:22; *LP*, 16:868. Marillac was not the only ambassador to commit errors in his assessment of age. The Imperial ambassador Eustace Chapuys, in his report of the Countess' execution, speculated that she had been "then nearly ninety years old" at her death: *Calendar of State Papers, Spain, Volume 6 Part 1, 1538-1542*, ed. Pascual de Gayangos (London, 1890), 166. See also: Hazel Pierce, "The Life, Career and Political Significance of Margaret Pole, countess of Salisbury 1473–1541" (PhD thesis, Bangor University, 1997), 315.

[65] Retha M. Warnicke, *Wicked Women of Tudor England: Queens, Aristocrats, Commoners* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 48.

[66] I explore this issue in detail in my book *Katherine Howard: Henry VIII's Slandered Queen*.

1541 as a "young girl," and the unknown author of *The Chronicle of King Henry VIII of England* (the so-called *Spanish Chronicle*), thought to have been written during the 1550s, stated that Katherine was about fifteen when she met the king in 1539–1540.[67] I have argued elsewhere that a portrait dating to *c.*1540–1545, currently housed in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and depicting a young woman in her seventeenth year, may be a likeness of Katherine painted after her royal marriage.[68] Her step-grandfather's will of June 1523 did not refer to Katherine, but the updated version in 1527 did mention her.[69] This may, of course, be purely coincidental, but taken together with the other evidence, it suggests a birth year of 1523–1525. Moreover, Katherine's lover Francis Dereham, with whom she had a relationship in 1538–1539, made reference to her suffering from the greensickness, a malady thought to afflict young women aged between twelve and fourteen.[70] Finally, when Katherine was appointed as a maiden of honour to the household of Henry's fourth consort, Anne of Cleves, in the autumn of 1539, she was joined by other young women including Katherine Carey, daughter of Mary Boleyn (born in 1524), and Mary, daughter of the disgraced Henry Norris (born in 1526). This appointment suggests that all three women were close in age, and if Katherine had been born as early as 1521, surely an attempt would have been made to place her in the household of her cousin Anne Boleyn or in that of her successor Jane Seymour. There is no evidence that such an attempt was made.

As Warnicke noted, historians have traditionally been reluctant to acknowledge that Henry's fifth queen may have been aged, at most, fifteen to seventeen when she married him in 1540. However, because a birth year of 1523–1525 has gradually gained acceptance amongst historians, this has contributed to a more sympathetic perception of Katherine, both as an individual and with regard to her tenure as queen. It is interesting that the traditional birth date of 1521 led to more negative interpretations of her actions. Lacey Baldwin Smith, the Queen's leading biographer during the twentieth-century, concluded "that Catherine knew exactly what she was doing is undeniable," based on his belief that she was in her mid-to-late teens when involved with Manox and Dereham (alongside his theory that she did commit adultery with Culpeper).[71] Similarly, Alison Plowden suggested that Katherine "possessed all the instincts of a natural tart who knew exactly what she was doing ... having discovered the delights of sex, [she] saw no reason to settle for the first man who'd bedded her."[72] By contrast, proponents of the 1525 birth date, such as Denny and Wilkinson, have usually characterised her as an

[67] Hastings Robinson, ed., *Original Letters Relative to the English Reformation, Written during the Reigns of King Henry VIII., King Edward VI., and Queen Mary: Chiefly from the Archives of Zurich* (Cambridge, 1846), 205; Martin A. Sharp Hume, trans., *Chronicle of King Henry VIII. of England. Being a Contemporary Record of Some of the Principal Events of the Reigns of Henry VIII. and Edward VI.* (London, 1889), 75.
[68] Byrne, *Katherine Howard*, 114–115.
[69] Byrne, *Katherine Howard*, 192n27.
[70] Wilkinson, *Katherine Howard*, 45.
[71] Lacey Baldwin Smith, *A Tudor Tragedy: The Life and Times of Catherine Howard* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1961), 54.
[72] Alison Plowden, *Tudor Women: Queens and Commoners* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 2002), 96.

exploited victim of both her ambitious family and of predatory males within the household of the Dowager Duchess of Norfolk.[73] Historians have debated whether child abuse was a recognised concept in early modern England. It is problematic to refer to Katherine as a victim of child abuse, in view of the modern connotations of the term. There was not an age of consent in early modern England that "align[ed] neatly with contemporary ideas about the boundaries of childhood."[74] Denny is probably the only modern historian to explicitly conceptualise Katherine as a victim of child abuse, but as I argue elsewhere, one does not need to interpret her as such to suggest that she was coerced by Manox and Dereham. Almost certainly, both men viewed a liaison with Katherine, who was a member of one of the leading noble English families with close ties to the Tudor dynasty, as an inviting means of obtaining political and material rewards, and Dereham's boasts at court in 1541 that he would be sure to marry the Queen after the death of Henry VIII may well have been predicated on a desire to benefit from Katherine's lucrative status as dowager queen. It is also possible, in view of the King's serious illness in the spring of 1541 that was feared to result in his imminent demise, that Thomas Culpeper was also attracted to the possibility of seducing, and possibly marrying, a wealthy dowager queen. Aged between fourteen and sixteen when appointed to the household of Anne of Cleves in the autumn of 1539, the nature of Katherine's upbringing and education may have been suitable, or at least satisfactory, if she had married a gentleman or knight, but it was inadequate for the queen consort of England, while her youth and inexperience—having only served Anne for at most five months when the King selected her as his intended consort in the spring of 1540—rendered her unable to successfully navigate court politics, in contrast to Anne Boleyn and Jane Seymour, who had both served at court (in Anne's case, both abroad and in England) for several years prior to their royal marriages. This awareness of context has usually been absent in the more condemnatory analyses of her life.

Katherine Parr

Henry VIII's sixth consort, Katherine Parr, is traditionally believed to have been born in 1512, perhaps in the summer of that year. The Queen's biographer Susan James arrived at this date because in the summer of 1523, Katherine's mother, Maud, was involved in arranging a marriage for her daughter; since girls could legally marry at twelve, James speculated that that was Katherine's age at her next birthday.[75] Warnicke, however, has drawn attention to the Maundy service of April 1544, which occurred during Katherine's second year as queen. This festival, which took place during Easter, featured thirty-one women in 1544, while that involving Elizabeth of York in 1502, when she was aged thirty-six, actually featured thirty-

[73] Denny, *Katherine Howard*; Wilkinson, *Katherine Howard*.
[74] Sarah Toulalan, "Child Victims of Rape and Sexual Assault: Compromised Chastity, Marginalized Lives?," in *The Place of the Social Margins, 1350–1750*, ed. Andrew Spicer and Jane L. Stevens Crawshaw (New York: Routledge, 2017), 181.
[75] Susan James, *Kateryn Parr: The Making of a Queen* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999), 14.

seven women. This seems to suggest that the number of poor women present during the service depended on the queen's age at her next birthday. If thirty-one poor women were involved in the Maundy service of 1544, this would indicate that Katherine was born sometime after April of 1513.[76] A birth date of 1513 would suggest that Katherine was ten in the summer of 1523 when her mother attempted to arrange a marriage for her in the next year or so, which does not seem implausible given the possibility of an aristocratic girl marrying at twelve. Legally, girls could marry at twelve years of age, but few did so outside of the aristocracy. A portrait miniature of the Queen, identified as Katherine Parr in the eighteenth-century and housed in the Strawberry Hill Collection of Horace Walpole, identifies the sitter as being in her thirty-second year and is thought to date to *c.*1544.[77] This, again, suggests a birth date of about 1513. Alternatively, the birth date of 1513 is made problematic by the suggestion that Katherine's only brother, William, was born on 14 August 1513.[78] Susan James countered Warnicke's argument by proposing the bill relating to the Maundy service of 1544 was misinterpreted by Dakota Lee Hamilton, who produced a thesis in 1992 on the subject of Katherine's household as queen, and indicated that a letter written by Katherine's mother in July 1523 stated that her daughter had not yet attained the age of twelve. Finally, James noted that the Queen's burial record of 5 September 1548, the day on which she died at Sudeley Castle in Gloucestershire, acknowledged that she had passed her thirty-sixth birthday, thus indicating a birth of July or August 1512.[79]

Henry's selection of Katherine as his sixth consort in the spring of 1543 is interesting, because as a woman aged thirty or thirty-one, it may have been thought unlikely that the King believed that she would produce healthy male heirs. Doubting that Anne Boleyn was born as early as 1501, Warnicke queried why the Imperial ambassador Chapuys would have observed in 1534 that the King's second consort was "in a state of health and of an age to have many more children," if she were then thirty-three or thirty-four years old.[80] Countering this evidence, however, Henry VIII's last will and testament of 1546 stipulated that, should Prince Edward die without fathering heirs of his own, the crown would pass to "the heirs of our body lawfully begotten of the body of our entirely beloved wife Queen Kateryn [Parr]."[81] If the King, at least outwardly, hoped that his sixth marriage might still produce offspring a few weeks prior to his death, when his wife was then aged thirty-three or thirty-four, then it is reasonable to suggest that his attitude towards siring sons three years earlier, at their wedding, would have been even more optimistic. The Act of Succession of 1544, which restored the King's bastardised daughters to the line of succession, stated that Henry had "taken to his wife

[76] Warnicke, *Elizabeth of York*, 102.
[77] The portrait can be viewed online at https://www.katherinethequeen.com/.
[78] This birth is suggested by several Parr biographers, including James, *Kateryn Parr*, 14.
[79] Susan James, *Catherine Parr: Henry VIII's Last Love* (Stroud: The History Press, 2008), 303n15.
[80] Warnicke, *Wicked Women*, 28.
[81] Quoted in Suzannah Lipscomb, *The King is Dead: The Last Will and Testament of Henry VIII* (London: Head of Zeus, 2015), 116.

the most virtuous and gracious Lady Katherine, now queen of England ... by whom as yet His Majesty hath none issue, but may have full well when it shall please God."[82] The Act also recognised the possibility of "any lawful heirs and issues hereafter of his own body begotten by any other his lawful wife." The evidence of legislation and the King's last will and testament appears to suggest that, as with his other consorts, Henry's marriage to Katherine Parr was predicated on dynastic hope. In view of this, it is probably incorrect to suggest that Henry VIII's primary motivation for wedding Katherine in 1543 was companionship—as traditionally suggested by earlier historians, who incorrectly conceptualised the King's sixth wife in the role of a nurse—rather than with a hope to producing sons. The sparseness of extant evidence for their courtship in the months prior to their marriage—in contrast with that pertaining to Anne Boleyn, Jane Seymour, and, to a lesser extent, Katherine Howard—does mean that it is difficult to evaluate why Henry chose to marry the twice-widowed Katherine Parr, then in her early thirties. This decision might also be thought inexplicable in light of contemporary attitudes to ageing, when some believed that a person reached old age in one's fortieth year. Moreover, few historians have investigated the reproductive history of Katherine Parr, in direct contrast to the attention given to the pregnancies of Katherine of Aragon and Anne Boleyn (perhaps understandably, given how the context of Reformation politics affected the marital circumstances of these two consorts); for example, it remains uncertain whether Henry's sixth consort ever conceived during their four-year marriage. This remains speculation, but after the scandal and tragedy of the Katherine Howard marriage, Henry may have consciously sought a sixth wife who was in every way different from his fifth—including in her age.

Conclusion

On 13 February 1542, the very day of Katherine Howard's execution, the French ambassador reported to François I that "It is not yet said who will be Queen; but the common voice is that this King will not be long without a wife, for the great desire he has to have further issue."[83] This revealing comment sheds light on the Tudor King's primary motivation for his choice of bride alongside the reasons for why he ended unsatisfactory marriages. When analysing the albeit fragmentary documentation concerning the birth dates of Henry VIII's English-born consorts, it is possible to arrive at realistic conclusions based on contemporary attitudes to fertility, childbearing, and marriage, alongside an awareness of the sixteenth-century mortality rate. Religious and ceremonial occasions at the Tudor court utilised intricate ritual to illuminate the royal consort's duty to produce healthy male heirs to ensure the continuation of the ruling dynasty, and foreign ambassadors keenly observed the queen consort for signs that she might be pregnant. The evidence for the dates of birth of Anne Boleyn and Katherine Howard is

[82] "Third Succession Act, 1543," in *Tudor Constitutional Documents, A.D. 1485–1603*, ed. J.R. Tanner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1930), 399.
[83] *LP*, 17:100.

contradictory, whereas the surviving documentation for the dates of birth of Jane Seymour and Katherine Parr is scarce. Controversy surrounds the dates of birth of these four consorts because of the fragmentary evidence and because of the nature of contemporary record keeping practices, with parish registers only formally introduced in England in 1538, stipulating that the registers of baptisms, marriages, and burials should be preserved. It is also possible that contemporaries, when providing biographical information about these women, were unaware of their ages, and may have resorted to guesswork based on gossip, hearsay, or unreliable reports, and would also have relied on the statements of others for their information. This context might explain why, for example, the anonymous Spanish chronicler and the French ambassador reached different conclusions about the age of Katherine Howard.

The wide range of evidence analysed in this article demonstrates that, of the four English consorts, the least controversy concerns Katherine Parr's year of birth, whereas the most controversy relates, perhaps unsurprisingly, to Anne Boleyn. It is likely, as argued in this article, that the two executed consorts of Henry VIII were younger than most historians believe, with probable birth dates of 1507 for Anne and between 1523 and 1525 for Katherine. Jane Seymour was seemingly born in about 1509, while Katherine Parr was likely born in 1512 but may have been born one year later (1513) than the date traditionally assigned to her. In selecting his consorts, Henry VIII sought brides whom he believed would be likely to produce heirs to ensure the continuation of the Tudor dynasty. This article has suggested, utilising the extant evidence, that the English consorts were of the following ages when married to Henry: twenty-six (Anne Boleyn); twenty-seven (Jane Seymour); fifteen to seventeen (Katherine Howard); and thirty or thirty-one (Katherine Parr). Katherine of Aragon was twenty-three and Anne of Cleves twenty-four when they married Henry VIII in 1509 and 1540 respectively. Marriages to English gentlewomen did not offer the lucrative diplomatic and financial advantages of a foreign marital alliance, meaning that fertility was surely a major motivating factor behind Henry's choice of an English consort. Anxious to produce a healthy male heir in view of contemporary ambivalence, if not hostility, to female succession alongside the dynastic bloodshed of the fifteenth-century, the Tudor King selected wives aged in their early or mid-twenties in 1527 and 1536 (Anne Boleyn and Jane Seymour), and favoured consorts from large families because it signalled their own fertility (Anne Boleyn, Jane Seymour, and Katherine Howard). By 1540, aged forty-nine and plagued by ill-health, Henry's decision to marry a teenager surely represented an even greater level of anxiety about the English succession compared with his concerns in the previous two decades. Henry's increasing concerns about the Tudor succession, in light of the failed marriage to Anne of Cleves, the infancy of Prince Edward, and the dynastic threats of the "Exeter Conspiracy" during the late 1530s, explain his selection of a teenager as his fifth consort in 1540. From this perspective, it remains inexplicable why Henry selected as his final consort a woman aged in her early thirties, but of the King's six consorts—and four English wives—Katherine Parr surely must be regarded as something of an anomaly with regard to her age at marriage.

Investigating the birth dates of Henry VIII's English consorts is important because it sheds light on the Tudor King's attitudes to marriage, childbearing, and sexuality and, in illuminating sixteenth-century perceptions of the relationship between age and fertility, provides a welcome context for the processes of royal matchmaking at Henry VIII's court that is usually absent from popular biographies of the King and his wives.[84] It is also significant because it offers the opportunity to re-evaluate and re-assess these six royal women and, in doing so, move away from the stereotypes and misconceptions that have overshadowed their lives in the popular imagination (and, in some cases, in academic analysis). This issue is perhaps most pertinent to Katherine Howard because, in establishing firstly that she was a teenager when she married the King in 1540 and secondly that she was the youngest queen of England in a century, it is possible to achieve a more nuanced perception of her life that treats her actions prior to her marriage and her behaviour as queen sensitively rather than judgementally. Finally, re-assessing the birth dates of the King's English consorts is necessary because errors continue to be present in modern accounts of their lives in light of misconceptions surrounding court customs as well as sixteenth-century attitudes to marriage. These women continue to remain, in some respects, shadowy figures and this issue can be understood in light of the broader issue of ambiguity concerning the birth dates of other queens consort of England, alongside, in some cases, the uncertainty surrounding the births and childhoods of European consorts. In part, as noted above, whether or not there is extant evidence for a consort's date of birth is perhaps a matter of luck. A lack of evidence, or neglecting to examine sources in their fullest social and cultural context, means that these women's lives will continue to remain fragmentary and insufficiently understood. Queenship scholars are aware that further archival and historical research should be undertaken in order to shed light on what has proven to be a shadowy and poorly documented historiographical tradition. It is hoped that this article has at least partly contributed to doing so.

[84] Royal matchmaking at the courts of Henry VII and Henry VIII has recently been explored in: Retha M. Warnicke, "Tudor Consorts: The Politics of Matchmaking, 1483–1543," in, *Queens Matter in Early Modern Studies*, ed. Anna Riehl Bertolet (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 103–123.