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The Boleyns and the fall of Thomas Wolsey

David Loades

Thomas Wolsey had been Henry VIII's chief adviser and man of business since about 1513. He had persuaded the king to make peace with France in 1514 and had masterminded the international agreement four years later, which is known as the Treaty of London. He had also prepared the case against the Duke of Buckingham in 1521 which led to that nobleman's downfall and execution.[1] He was, however, always very careful to preserve Henry's honour, which meant exercising his formidable powers of persuasion on the king, and never presuming to act without authority. Nevertheless he was in the habit of interviewing ambassadors himself before passing them on to Henry, and this earned him the dubious title of 'alter rex', a description which he would have been the first to repudiate.[2] The secret of his success lay partly in his formidable work rate, partly in his sheer efficiency, and partly in the tact and skill with which he handled his erratic and tetchy master. He was, of course, hugely unpopular, but that did not matter as long as he retained the king's confidence. The events of the autumn of 1529 have to be seen against the background of Henry's struggle to annul his first marriage. Wolsey was committed to this annulment by his allegiance to the king, and the Boleyns by self interest. Eventually, Anne's influence with Henry turned out to be greater than the Cardinal's, and the failure of his intercessions in Rome proved fatal to him.

It was in 1525, when his power was ostensibly at its height, that the first small cloud appeared above the horizon of their relationship. The king was short of money, and two years earlier Wolsey had tried and failed to get a double subsidy out of parliament. This failure meant that Henry was unable to wage war against the French in 1524, in spite of his treaty obligations to the Emperor.[3] When Francis I was defeated and captured at the battle of Pavia in February 1525, he became doubly anxious to secure

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[1] P. J. Gwyn, *The King's Cardinal* (London 1990); D. Loades, *Cardinal Wolsey, c.1472-1530* (Oxford 2008) 17-21. On the fate of the Duke of Buckingham, see C. Rawcliffe, *The Staffords, Earls of Stafford and Dukes of Buckingham* (Cambridge 1978) 37-44; B. Harris, *Edward Stafford, Third Duke of Buckingham, 1478-1521* (Stanford, CA 1986).

[2] Loades, *Wolsey*, 7.

[3] J. J. Scarisbrick, *Henry VIII* (London 1968) 137-138; D. Loades, *Henry VIII* (Stroud 2011) 167-190.

his share of the loot and tried to circumvent parliament by means of an illegal subsidy, hopefully known as the Amicable Grant. Wolsey may have advised this, and certainly worked out the rates of assessment, but the decision to proceed came from the king.[4] When the potential taxpayers went on strike and refused to contribute, he affected astonishment, first reducing his demand and then abandoning the idea entirely. Wolsey accepted the blame for this debacle, and Henry seems to have convinced himself that the whole idea had been his minister's anyway. It was typical of the king not to take responsibility for schemes which went wrong, but in this case the result seems to have been the sowing of a seed of doubt in his mind as to the soundness of his Chancellor's judgement.[5] It was probably awareness of this chill in the atmosphere which caused Wolsey to present his splendid new palace of Hampton Court to the King later in the year, whereupon cordiality was apparently re-established.

With the Queen, however, the Cardinal's relations had never been cordial since he ousted her from her position as Henry's confidential adviser in about 1514. It was none of his business that their marriage was on the rocks by 1524, or that Henry's eye was roving. This was merely a fact to take account of when seeking an appointment with his majesty. Mary Boleyn, the king's current mistress, was a political lightweight, and although her father, Sir Thomas, was a trusted diplomat, his influence at court was no match for Wolsey's. However in 1526, probably in late February, Henry's games of courtly love caught up with him and he began a serious affair with Mary's sister Anne.[6] We do not know how rapidly this progressed, because the king's first letter to her, written in the autumn of 1526, could be merely a part of the conventional game. However, around Easter 1527 he seems to have suggested that she become his mistress though she declined his advances. In April, and not necessarily as a result, Henry began secret consultations with Wolsey about ending his marriage, and in the following month the Cardinal held a secret court to begin investigating his case.[7] It was important that Catherine did not find out about this, because Charles V, the Holy Roman Emperor, was her nephew and was only too likely to

[4] British Library Cotton Manuscripts Cleopatra (hereafter referred to as: BL. Cotton MS) F.VI, ff.366-368; G. W. Bernard, *War, Taxation and Rebellion in Early Tudor England* (Brighton 1986) 55-66.
[5] E. Hall, *Chronicle* (London 1809) 700-701.
[6] E. W. Ives, *The Life and Death of Anne Boleyn* (Oxford 2004) 90.
[7] Ives, *Life and Death*, 84.

oppose any annulment suit which Henry might bring to Rome. His relations with the King of England were in any case poor, and he would welcome such an opportunity to frustrate him. Realising that he was making no progress with his beloved, in the summer of 1527 Henry proposed marriage to Anne which she accepted.[8] It now became imperative to get rid of Catherine, and Henry's matrimonial problem became the first item on Wolsey's international agenda.

The king then made a mistake. Frustrated by his circumstances, he confronted Catherine with the news that they were not properly married, and never had been in spite of their eighteen years together. Her reaction was shock, rage and an immediate message to her nephew to alert him to her problem. He promptly assured her of his full support thus brought about the very situation which Wolsey had most feared: a head on confrontation with Habsburg power at the Curia.[9] A case which had always looked difficult to establish, now seemed to be well nigh impossible. He had, however, to preserve an optimistic face at home and to reassure Henry that he was the only man who could untie this Gordian knot. He needed to do this, because by the end of the summer there were distinct signs that the king was going behind his back in a way which would never have happened before Anne Boleyn appeared on the scene. At the end of May the Holy City had been sacked by a mutinous Imperial army, leaving the Pope imprisoned in Castel St. Angelo. This horrifying event gave Wolsey a much needed lifeline, because if he could only persuade the free Cardinals to set up an interim government for the church during Clement's imprisonment, with himself as a stand-in Pope, then the king's business could be successfully discharged and the real pope (and the Emperor) confronted with a fait accompli. In the summer of 1527 he set off for France with this agenda in mind, and intending to find out about the availability of a French princess to take Catherine's place when (and if) Henry's first marriage was annulled.[10] He must have known of Anne's existence, but he clearly did not know that the king had proposed marriage to her, or that she had accepted. It is also highly unlikely that he was a party to the King's odd request in August for the pope to grant a dispensation allowing him to marry any

[8] *Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic, of the Reign of Henry VIII* IV, J. S. Brewer ed. (London 1862-1910) no. 3325; H. Savage, *Love Letters of Henry VIII* (London 1949) 34-36.

[9] G. Mattingly, *Catherine of Aragon* (London 1963) 185-186.

[10] *Letters and Papers* IV, no. 3337; Scarisbrick*, Henry VIII*, 158.

woman within the first degree of affinity, when his first marriage should be declared void. This was the degree between Henry and Anne, arising out of his liaison with her sister, but although the bull was duly granted, nothing came of the request.[11] In the event, Wolsey returned from France with neither of his objectives accomplished, which further weakened his credibility. In October the imperial ambassador reported that the Duke of Norfolk, Viscount Rochford (Anne's father, who had been raised to the peerage in 1525) and their friends were in a plot to oust the Cardinal from power. The Imperial Ambassador Mendoza was of the opinion that Anne was particularly hostile to him because she was convinced that he was trying to sabotage Henry's plans. He also observed that Wolsey, once he was convinced that the king was in earnest about his intentions with regard to Anne, would turn around and support her, and that turned out to be more or less correct.[12] On the 1st November the Cardinal took part in a splendid ceremony whereby a French delegation invested Henry with the Order of St. Michael, and was clearly in high favour. Whatever schemes Norfolk and the Boleyns had been hatching had to be abandoned for the time being, while Anne turned her attention to securing Wolsey's support. The failure of the king's bid to secure a conditional dispensation merely added to her conviction that the Cardinal was the only man who could make the necessary progress in Rome.

During the first part of 1528, while futile missions came and went to Rome pleading the king's cause and Clement, newly released from captivity, assessed his options, Anne was studiously polite to Wolsey. He returned the compliment, sending her fish for Lent from his famous ponds and enquiring solicitously about her health when she was indisposed in June.[13] When she was recovering from the dreaded sweat in July he sent her a 'rich and goodly' present and she responded with fulsome professions of respect and affection. She declared herself 'most bound of all creatures, next to the king's grace to love and serve your grace.'[14] Of course, she may have been

[11] *State Papers of Henry VIII* VII (London 1830-52) 3. See also J. Gairdner, 'New light on the Divorce of Henry VIII', *English Historical Review* 11 (1896); M. Perry, *Sisters to the King* (London 1998) 238-239.

[12] *Calendar of State Papers, Spanish, 1527-9* (London 1866-1954) 432-433; G. Cavendish, *The Life and Death of Cardinal Wolsey* (London 1959) 12.

[13] *Letters and Papers* IV, no. 4335; Ives, *Life and Death*, 111-112.

[14] BL. Cotton MS, Otho C.X, f.220; G. Burnet, *History of the Reformation* (Oxford 1865) 104.

dissembling, but then so might he, keeping a relationship alive in the hope of a favourable outcome to the king's suit. During the summer, the omens seemed favourable, and Clement at last agreed to send a Legatine Commission to England to hear and determine the case. Lorenzo Campeggio, the Cardinal Protector of England was named to serve on this commission with Wolsey, and it seemed that an end was in sight. However Campeggio made haste slowly (he was afflicted with gout), and a month after his arrival in October nothing had happened. Anne became suspicious, convinced that the Legate was avoiding her. Henry again became exasperated and Wolsey's optimism drained away.[15] The King sent Anne's cousin, Francis Bryan, to Rome with a virtual ultimatum, threatening to withdraw his allegiance altogether if a satisfactory solution was not found. At the same time the Boleyns and their friends in the council began to press for a great petition from all the elite of England demanding a favourable answer in the national interest – by which they meant a chance to resolve the issue of the succession. This was not aimed specifically against Wolsey, but would have had the effect of bypassing him and his Legatine commission, thus discrediting him in the king's eyes.[16] Nevertheless for the time being the anti-Wolsey coalition made no progress, because Henry, for all his frustration, was not yet ready to be persuaded. Throughout the spring of 1529 the king and the Cardinal worked in apparent harmony to put pressure on Clement, but Anne, with her own sources of information in Italy, became increasingly convinced that all such efforts would be futile, and was highly sceptical both of the petition and of the Legatine Court. Wolsey, she was convinced, was at best a dupe.[17]

The court eventually opened on the 18th June, and quickly became immersed in procedural details. Wolsey then made a mistake. He was aware that peace negotiations between the French and the Emperor were in hand at Cambrai, but he did not take them very seriously and allowed the King to send Sir Thomas More and Cuthbert Tunstall to represent England's interests, while he concentrated on his Legatine mission. By late July he had realised his error and petitioned the King to be allowed to attend the conference. This was refused and England's interests were virtually ignored

[15] Ives, *Life and Death*, 113-114.
[16] *State Papers, Spanish,* 861.
[17] *State Papers* I, 330; Idem, VII, 167, 170. Bryan's letters are particularly illuminating.

when the peace was signed on the 3rd August.[18] Henry was not pleased. Moreover, Wolsey's effort to join the negotiations at that late stage could also be represented as meaning that he did not take the court trying the king's case with sufficient seriousness. When Campeggio, following his secret instructions, adjourned that court at the end of July without reaching a decision, the Cardinal's enemies decided that the time had come to strike. Lord Darcy, who was not a member of the Boleyn group but had his own reasons for hating the Cardinal, moved first, proposing a plan for the immediate arrest of Wolsey and his agents, and a thorough investigation of their administration.[19] At the same time, Norfolk and the Boleyns drew up a document listing thirty four charges against the Chancellor, which they presented to the king before he departed on his summer progress on the 4th August. As George Cavendish, Wolsey's Gentleman Usher wrote years later:

> When the nobles and prelates perceived that the king's favour was from the Cardinal sore minished, every man of the king's council began to lay to him such offences as they knew by him, and all their accusations were written in a book…[20]

However, for the time being nothing happened, because the king clearly could not make up his mind. The progress went on for over five weeks, and during that time Wolsey remained in charge of affairs as usual. However the failure of the Legatine court had wrought one important change. Anne Boleyn had decided that the Cardinal was a broken reed and that his papal allegiance was actually an obstacle in the way of securing an annulment. Some kind of unilateral action by the king now seemed increasingly necessary, but Henry remained to be persuaded. Anne's professions of goodwill came to an end, and she began to make use of her unique access to the king to bring about Wolsey's downfall.[21] In the event, however, her efforts were less effective than the Cardinal's own mistakes, because he misread Henry's state of mind during August. The king was worried that the Peace of Cambrai had deprived him of the one piece of leverage which he had against the Emperor, namely the threat of hostilities, and had weakened

[18] *Letters and Papers* IV, nos. 5710, 5744. *Calendar of State Papers,* 189, 195; Scarisbrick, *Henry VIII,* 232-233.
[19] *Letters and Papers* IV, no. 5749.
[20] Cavendish, *Life and Death of Cardinal Wolsey*, 94-95.
[21] *Calendar of State Papers, 1529-30*, 195.

his alliance with France. When a series of meetings with Du Bellay, the French ambassador, failed to produce a text of the treaty he became increasingly suspicious, both of the French and of Wolsey. A detailed examination of the text, when he at last secured a copy, convinced him that he had been wrong to doubt the French – but not Wolsey. On the 1st September Du Bellay reported that Norfolk, Suffolk and Rochford were in high favour, and that the Cardinal was on his way out.[22] This was trifle premature, because Wolsey knew that the way to redeem himself was through a personal interview, and a battle royal developed between himself and Anne as she strove to prevent that from happening. The charges of pride and vainglory levied in the 'book' were assiduously revived, and on the 12th September he was instructed to write to the king setting out the topics which he wished to discuss. This was unprecedented, and the letter, sent in name of the council, probably reflects the delicate balance in the king's mind. Wolsey's response does not survive, but the interview when it came did not correspond to any expectations. Some accounts of what happened were embroidered by contemporaries anxious to show Anne's malice, but most observers noted nothing unusual.[23] The two men were closeted together for several hours, as had often happened before, and Rochford, Tuke and Gardiner, the latter two allegedly deserters from the Cardinal's sinking ship, showed 'as much observance and humility to my Lord's Grace as ever I saw them do'.[24] So if the writing was on the wall, these well-placed observers had not noticed it. Anne did not succeed in preventing Wolsey from arguing his case in person to the king, and she was the only person in a position to do so.

Nevertheless his celebrated plausibility did not work on this occasion and within two weeks Henry had yielded to the persuasions of his enemies. His change of mind cannot be traced to any single event and is not on record, but it is reasonable to suppose that the combined effects of Anne's arguments and the persistent efforts of the Cardinal's enemies in council eventually convinced him that his Chancellor had a case (or several cases) to answer. On the 9th October he was dramatically charged in King's Bench with a breach of the statute of Praemunire,[25] and a week later was deprived

[22] R. Scheurer, *Correspondence du Cardinal Jean du Bellay* I (Paris 1969) 24.
[23] Ives, *Life and Death*, 122-123.
[24] H. Ellis, *Original Letters Illustrative of English History* I (London 1824-46) i, 307-310.
[25] The statute of Praemunire (1393) made it an offence to exercise ecclesiastical jurisdiction without the king's consent.

of the Great Seal.[26] According to Cavendish his enemies had prepared an attack in parliament, but dropped it in favour of the Praemunire charge, presumably on the grounds that that offered a more secure outcome. Substantively the accusations were ridiculous, because they involved exercising ecclesiastical jurisdiction without the king's consent, whereas Wolsey owed both his Cardinal's hat and his Legateship to Henry's intercessions. However, there was the little matter of the Abbey of Wilton, where in 1528 he had, somewhat carelessly, promoted the prioress to the vacant seat of abbess, apparently in ignorance of the king's prohibition.[27] That had been a simple misunderstanding, but could be used against him in this context. Wolsey knew his master well enough not to fight. He pleaded guilty to the charges and was deprived of his property. He was consequently down, but not quite out. For the first few weeks after his fall he remained at Esher, borrowing money to keep himself going while the king plundered his possessions. He blamed these depredations (rightly it would seem) on the Boleyn party in the Council and protested that they should 'put no more into his (Henry's) head than would stand with a good conscience'; a protest which had not the slightest effect.[28] The king's own behaviour appears strangely inconsistent, because in spite of the plunder, which included the temporalities of the see of Winchester and the abbey of St. Albans, he more than once sent to the cardinal a ring as a token of continued favour, and even persuaded Anne to do the same. In February 1530 he permitted Wolsey to move from Esher to Richmond without informing his council and in April gave him leave to retire to his diocese of York, which he had never seen. This may have been the king's idea of a favour, or it may have been that the Duke of Norfolk was anxious to have him out of the way. In either case Henry gave him £1000 towards his removal costs.[29]

By that time Wolsey had embarked on a dangerous course. He decided to mobilise his European contacts in an effort to recover the king's favour and apparently entered into a secret negotiation with Clement VII intending to end the impasse over Henry's Great Matter. Given the suspicion he was under, it was inevitable that there were spies in his

[26] *Calendars of State Papers,* 276-277; Ives, *Life and Death*, 125.
[27] M. D. Knowles, 'The Matter of Wilton in 1528', *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research* 31 (1958) 92-96.
[28] Cavendish, *The Life and Death of Cardinal Wolsey,* 117 et seq; Scarisbrick, *Henry VIII*, 238.
[29] Cavendish, *The Life and Death of Cardinal Wolsey,* 132; Scarisbrick, *Henry VIII*, 239.

household, and his messages (or some of them) were intercepted. They were not very explicit, but in spite of their good intentions, had been issued without the king's consent. This revelation finally tipped Henry's mind in favour of his enemies. His Praemunire had been pardoned, but now the former chancellor was charged with High Treason and arrested on the 4th November.[30] He had, it would seem, entered into 'sinister practices […] to the court of Rome for reducing him to his former estates and dignity'. He began a slow and painful journey south, but his arrest had apparently sapped his will to live. He became increasingly ill and on the 29th November, having reached Leicester Abbey, he died, not without a suspicion of self-poisoning.

Although he succeeded in depriving his enemies of the satisfaction of seeing him tried and executed, his death represented nevertheless a final victory for the Boleyn faction and its allies. Thereafter the coalition fell apart, because it had been held together solely by opposition to, and hatred of, Wolsey. The Duke of Norfolk, who was its nominal leader, continued for the time being to support the pretensions of his niece, who had to wait another two years for the fulfilment of her ambitions. Her influence over the king was now unchallenged and the advancement of her family continued with the creation of her father as Earl of Wiltshire in December and the consequent elevation of her brother to the honorary title of Viscount Rochford. 'Over all' as one diplomat observed, 'is Mademoiselle Anne'.[31] Lord Darcy and the Duke of Suffolk, however, abandoned the coalition, both being sympathetic to Catherine and her daughter. The Duke was strongly influenced in that direction by his wife, Mary, who was the king's sister and enjoyed a charmed life in her choice of loyalties. However she died in the summer of 1533, and the Duke repaired his personal relations with Henry. He never became reconciled to Anne, and his influence in council was diminished in consequence. The Boleyns and their adherents became dominant, but their ascendancy lasted only as long as the Queen's. In 1536 she fell victim to just such a campaign as she had waged against Wolsey and the family's apparent power was destroyed. It had lasted only as long as the king would have it so.[32]

[30] *Letters and Papers* IV, no. 6720; Gwyn, *The King's Cardinal.*
[31] *Letters and Papers* IV, iii, no. 6019.
[32] Ives, *Life and Death*, 338-356.