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George Boleyn, the Villainous Victim

Portrayals in Twenty-First Century Historical Fiction

B.A Essay

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Abstract

George Boleyn has been portrayed in many historical novels, television shows and films. Even though most of these focus on his sister, Anne, George has had an important part in many of them. In the Showtime TV series *The Tudors* and Philippa Gregory's novel *The Other Boleyn Girl* he has been portrayed in a negative manner and his character shown to commit incest and rape, while the idea that he might have been a homosexual has been used to further defame his character. The notion that he might be homosexual comes from late 20th and early 21st century interpretations of the poem "Viscount Rocheford", written by George Cavendish in 1556-1558, by the historians Retha Warnicke and Alison Weir. While there is no viable proof in the historical record that George was a homosexual, contemporary authors of historical fiction have used the idea that he might have been so in their works of fiction. Because of Henry VIII's Buggery Act of 1533, homosexuals during the Tudor era were cast to the margins of society and it is therefore important to reintroduce these figures in an unbiased manner. Nevertheless, the way George is portrayed in *The Other Boleyn Girl* and *The Tudors* contributes to the marginalization and vilification of homosexuals in historical fiction. Since *The Other Boleyn Girl* focuses more on the challenges that the female characters have to overcome, George's life falls into the background and he becomes a secondary character. This is also the case in *The Tudors*, where the plots involving George revolve mostly around what George is doing to help Anne get the crown and keep it, as well as centering on his homosexual activity, which in turn does not get as much airtime as the heterosexual acts of others.

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I. Introduction

Historical fiction, according to György Lukács, is important so that we can “re-experience the social and human motives which led men to think, feel and act just as they did in historical reality” (Lukács 42). However, since history is written by the winners, people on the margins of society can lose their place in history. Historical fiction can be important in bringing marginalized groups back into history. Those who were marginalized or outcasts can differ throughout history, but can include women and homosexuals. Jerome De Groot writes in his book *The Historical Novel* that “[g]ay and lesbian historical fiction has regularly been interested in the creation of alternative histories or the reclaiming of marginalized narratives” and that historical fiction can be used “in order to challenge heteronormative models of historiography” (de Groot 150, 151). Novels are not the only way to make history come alive, as there are numerous films and television shows that follow the same pattern and introduce historical characters that might be unknown to the general population. For example, as pointed out by Ramona Wray, Showtime’s TV series *The Tudors* “illustrates, in exciting and compelling ways, the important role of television in a new making of the past” (17). Nonetheless, if people from the margins are brought into historical fiction in a negative way this can have adverse effects on how those who were marginalized are eventually viewed. During the Tudor era the “upheavals of the reformation allowed the women to emerge [...] and their] lives were beginning to change” (Fremantle). In addition, during the reign of Henry VIII, the Buggery Act, which made sex between men a criminal act, was passed. This resulted in the further casting of homosexuals into the margins of society, thereby underlining the importance of re-examining homosexuals in historical fiction and allowing them back into the narrative. This is significant because not only were they outcasts from society but were also punished if they got caught, making it impossible to make their mark on history. Negatively shedding light on the forgotten members of society can impact the modern reader and how they think of the historical character that has been brought back to life. This can be seen when looking at the negative portrayal of George Boleyn, Anne Boleyn’s brother, in historical fiction; this negative portrayal can be traced to George Cavendish’s poem “Viscount Rocheford” and a more current portrayal of him such as in *The Other Boleyn Girl* by Philippa Gregory and the first two seasons of *The Tudors*.

II. Homosexuality during the Tudor era and the fall of Anne Boleyn

Retha Warnicke writes in her article “Sexual Heresy at the Court of Henry VIII”, published in 1987, that during the Tudor age “individuals were not categorized as either homosexual or heterosexual, for those who could not control their passions were expected to move in a progression from adultery and fornication to buggery and incest” (250). Moreover, it is not possible to definitely say if a person during the Tudor era was a homosexual or not because these words were not used at the time. In the Tudor era the word “sodomy” was used although being a sodomite could mean several different things, some of “which could include copulation between Satan and humans and between Christians and infidels” (250). Therefore, it is almost impossible to determine who did what with whom and in what way since the words used for some sexual acts could have meant something completely different. Warnicke states that “in February 1534 a parliamentary statute declared buggery a felony” (250). After the Buggery Act was established there were only two men convicted during Henry’s time in power. Both were charged after George Boleyn’s execution in 1536. The first one, Walter Hungerford, was executed in July 1540. He was charged with “having relations with his male servants and with his daughter, and for producing witches’ magic to predict how long the king would live” (253). The second one, Nicholas Udall, was only imprisoned but he “confessed to committing buggery with two of his young male pupils” (253). Not only was anal intercourse forbidden under the Buggery Act but also bestiality, because during this time people believed that demons and witches existed in real life and that “demons and witches changed into the form of beasts and [... feared] that a union between humans and real animals might result in hybrid births” (250). In addition, since witches “also allegedly held orgies that were not specifically heterosexual or homosexual”, it appears there was no specific definition of homosexuality and that witches “encouraged acts of sodomy and incest” (249). Witchcraft is not often an important element in historical fiction about the Tudor era, though it is frequently referred to, due to the common belief in witchcraft in Tudor times. In Gregory’s novel *The Other Boleyn Girl*, this is referred to, as i.e. the siblings worry about a rumor that Anne has bewitched Henry. Witchcraft and other supernatural beliefs played a tremendous role in the life of people during the Tudor era. Historical novels and television series do not capture the intensity and the complex structure

of these beliefs since it might not translate to modern interpretations. Thus, the audience would not understand the implications without long passages of explaining the intricacy of people's superstitions during the Tudor period, which might slow down the historical novel or television series, and therefore make it less interesting for the average audience.

Since it has not been proven that George Boleyn was a homosexual, the cause of his demise seems more to do with the fact that his sister was the Queen. Retha Warnicke claims that Anne was accused of being a witch and that Henry VIII's councilors "claimed that she had bewitched him" (258) and that this was done because she gave birth to a monstrous fetus. It was important that none of the blame would be put on Henry and his abilities to conceive a male heir. According to George Bernard, however, "there is not a shred of evidence that the foetus [sic] was deformed" (Bernard 586). Furthermore, in his article published in 1991, Bernard claims that Anne might have had an incestuous relationship with her brother and that the evidence is in a poem that is written in French, where "the date of composition is given as 2 June 1536, just weeks after the events it describes" (Bernard 596). The poem is about a woman that gives evidence "that the Queen was sleeping with Mark, with her brother, and also with Henry Norris" (Bernard 597). Bernard writes that Anne was probably a "loose-living lady" (Bernard 609) and therefore puts the blame on Anne instead of what had previously been thought to be the reason for her demise, i.e. that Henry was just a weak king and needed to assert his power. Another historian, Eric Ives, does not agree with Bernard's article. Ives states that it would not have been enough for Anne to have been sleeping with other people since that would not have counted as treason. Moreover, the "only legal substance the indictments had was in the closing stories that the King's life had been jeopardized, that Anne had destroyed the loyalty of the men with gifts, and that together they had conspired to procure Henry's death" (Ives 654). Additionally, Ives states that to "achieve a wholly unchallenged third marriage, Henry had to eliminate Anne" (Ives 655). Interestingly, no woman "was charged with abetting Anne Boleyn" (Ives 653) which is odd since six years later, when Katherine Howard was beheaded, for similar charges as Anne, George Boleyn's widow, Jane, was also executed for her involvement. Overall, many different arguments on the reasons for Anne's execution have been presented and historians do not agree what the real reason was. As a result, the details behind the fall of Anne Boleyn

might not be relatable enough for modern readers, many of whom might not know enough history to understand the severity of all these different accusations. In comparison, the history of homophobia is a more current subject and treatments of this theme might therefore be more relevant and understandable to modern readers of historical fiction dealing with Henry VIII and his reign.

III. George Boleyn: Background

One of the most prominent figures of the Tudor era has to be Anne Boleyn. Her mark on history has influenced numerous historical novels, television shows and films. Many of these focus also on her younger brother, George Boleyn, who was executed two days before Anne. George was born in April 1504 at Blickling Hall in England. He is assumed to be the youngest of his siblings who survived beyond infancy, his sisters being Anne and Mary. George rose to power alongside Anne due to her influence with the King, Henry VIII. Late in 1524, George married Jane Parker but they did not have any children together. On one hand, George's personal life was not well documented and as a result there is not much that can be written about it that is based on facts; however, this has not stopped authors from fictionalizing George's personal life. On the other hand, there is reliable information about how George rose to power. Anne's relationship with Henry VIII "brought him royal favor, rapid preferment, lucrative offices – including Gentleman of the Privy Chamber (1528), Constable of Dover, Lord Warden of the Cinque Ports, and Master of the Buckhounds – and a career as a leading diplomat" (Weir 102). Included in those titles were several properties. In addition, George was diligent with the work he did for the royal family and attended many important meetings as well as going on several diplomatic excursions to France. In 1529 "he was preferred to the Privy Council" and "given the courtesy title Viscount Rochford" (Weir 102). Ultimately, those accomplishments did not help him since he was beheaded on the 17th of May in 1536 with four other men. The other men that were executed at the same time were Henry Norris, William Brereton, Sir Francis Weston, and Mark Smeaton, the latter two of whom have been linked with George in historical fiction as his lovers. The official charges against George Boleyn were incest and treason but, since his death, there have also been various rumors about his sexuality.

George Boleyn has been portrayed in numerous works of historical fiction, from novels such as *The Other Boleyn Girl* (2001), Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall* (2009) and its sequel *Bring Up The Bodies* (2012), to television shows, such as *The Tudors* (2007-2010), *The Six Wives of Henry VIII* (1970), and *Wolf Hall* (2015), and films such as *Anne of the Thousand Days* (1969), *Henry VIII* (2003) and *The Other Boleyn Girl* (2008), as well as plays, such as *Fallen In Love* (2011), and even an opera, Donizetti's *Anna Bolena* (1830). However, not all of those have been positive towards George's character. Clare Cherry writes in her blog post "The Vilification of George Boleyn" that, "as well as being guilty of incest with Anne Boleyn":

He has been a wife abuser and rapist, as well as a murderer (*The Tudors*).

He has been a smirking boorish fool who wouldn't stoop to having sex with an animal, and who was also a coward (*Wolf Hall* and *Bring Up The Bodies*).

He has been a vicious rapist and braggart (*The Crown/The Chalice*).

He has been shown as virtually raping Mark Smeaton (*The Boleyn Wife*).

Cherry thinks that all this stems from Retha Warnicke's writing since she is the one that introduced the notion that George was homosexual. Cherry claims that "[t]he start of George being demonised in fiction seems to me to be innately homophobic when considering when he began to be demonised. This started almost simultaneously with the Warnicke theory, which is far too coincidental." The idea that just one historian can change the public image of a person that had been, at that time, dead for over four hundred and fifty years is astonishing but it is not surprising that contemporary historical authors decided to go with that theory since it gives George's character a different story line and could add deeper insight into his life. Sadly, instead of invigorating his character it has made him look worse.

The two men that have been considered to be George's lovers are Sir Francis Weston and Mark Smeaton. Those historians that do believe that George was homosexual disagree on who might have been his lover. The idea that Sir Francis was George's lover does not seem to be based on any historical facts. Sir Francis and George were apparently friends, but there is nothing that implies they were more than that. Sir Francis "was a talented lute player and first-class athlete" (Weir 105). Francis got married in May 1530 and his wife bore him a son in 1535, who was named Henry. Those who believe that George and Mark were lovers

think that the proof lies in a scribble in the “French version of the Latin work, ‘Les Lamentations de Mathelous’, a satirical poem on women and the miseries of marriage” (Warnicke 265), where George claimed that the book was his and later Mark did the same, implying that George gave Mark the book. Furthermore, Mark was a musician and George enjoyed music as well as writing poetry and therefore they might have enjoyed each other’s company. As with George’s sexual orientation, there are no documented instances that might prove or disprove what the nature of their relationship was in reality.

Many historians, such as Eric Ives and David Starkey, claim that no real evidence has been found that might disprove or prove what George’s sexual preference might have been. However, there are two historians that claim that he was homosexual, Retha Warnicke and Alison Weir. Warnicke first claimed that George Boleyn might have been a homosexual in 1987 in an article named “Sexual Heresy at the Court of Henry VIII” and then continued with her theory in her book *The Rise and Fall of Anne Boleyn: Family Politics at the Court of Henry VIII*, published in 1989. Twenty years later, Alison Weir published her book *The Lady in the Tower: The Fall of Anne Boleyn* where she states that George was not only a homosexual but also a rapist. She believes that the proof lies in the poem that George Cavendish wrote after George Boleyn’s death, “Viscount Rocheford”. Cavendish was a gentleman usher for Cardinal Thomas Wolsey from around 1522 until Wolsey’s death in 1530 (“Cavendish, George”). After Wolsey’s death Cavendish retired until his death in 1562. Furthermore, both Warnicke and Weir use the same part of the poem to support their argument that George was a homosexual:

My lyfe not chaste, my lyvyng bestyall;
 I forced wydows, maydens I did deflower.
 All was oon to me, I spared none at all,
 My appetite was all women to devour,
 My study was both day and hour,
 My onleafull lechery, how I might it fulfil,
 Sparyng no woman to have on hyr my wyll.
 (Cavendish 22).

Weir states that those lines also imply that George “omitted even to stop at rape” (Weir 102), while Warnicke asserts that since “Cavendish had him admit to lusting after 'all women' and to living 'bestyally', there was hardly any other sexual act to which he could confess except for masturbation or sodomy” (Warnicke 262). Furthermore, Weir writes that the final stanza of Cavendish’s poem “points at something far worse to contemporary eyes than the lechery to which Rochford, as personified in these verses, *had* openly confessed, or the crime of treasonable incest for which he would publicly be condemned” (Weir 103):

Alas! To declare my life in every effect,
 Shame restraynyth me the playnes to confess,
 Lest the abhomyntation wold all the world enfect:
 Yt is so vile, so detestable in words to expresse,
 For which by the lawe condempned I am doughtlesse,
 And for my desert, justly judged to be deade;
 Behold here my body, but I have lost my hed.
 (Cavendish 24)

The poem is much more negative towards George’s persona than towards the other men executed for having an affair with Anne, even though they were all being charged with similar crimes.

Moreover, Warnicke states that “Cavendish was no friend of the Boleyns, his hostility is not surprising, but even by this standard his fictional verses are extraordinary” (Warnicke 262). This hostility towards George Boleyn has continued in twenty-first century historical novels and films in which he appears, especially in *The Other Boleyn Girl* and *The Tudors*, where he is portrayed in a highly negative manner. Furthermore, Warnicke writes that one other “reason for suggesting Rochford had committed sodomy is that he was charged with incest, which was often associated with other unnatural acts” (Warnicke 264). Nevertheless, since many historians do not believe that George actually did commit incest, Warnicke’s statement is questionable to say the least, because no proof exists that anything untoward happened between the siblings. However, this has not stopped contemporary writers from depicting George Boleyn as a homosexual in their works and implying that he did have an incestuous relationship with his sister, Queen Anne.

IV. George Boleyn in *The Other Boleyn Girl*

In the novel *The Other Boleyn Girl* by Philippa Gregory (2001), George Boleyn evolves through the novel from a seemingly normal man to an incestuous sexual deviant. The main focus and the narrator of the novel is Mary, who is “the other” Boleyn girl, and therefore other characters in the novel are seen from her perspective, which naturally might be a little biased. At first there are only rumors about George’s sexual preference. Early on in the novel Mary comments that “George had a bruise over one eye after a brawl in a tavern, and some running joke about a young page who had been besotted with George and had been sent home” (171). The rumors about George continue and later on he tells his sisters that his wife, Jane Parker, offered him to get a boy for him to have sex with since he seemingly did not want to have sex with her. The sisters are shocked but George confesses to them that at court there is a singer that is “[a] lad so sweet, pretty as a maid but with the wit of a man” (187). Anne is not happy about what George is saying since this is the second man whose name has been linked with George’s. Anne warns him that he could be “hanged for this” (188) and that what he is doing is “a cardinal sin” (188). Later, however, he finally confesses to his sisters that he is in love with Francis Weston but promises not to do anything about it since he knows it is forbidden. Nevertheless, Mary believes she has caught them doing something inappropriate later on when she sees Francis “straightening his doublet” (455) as she enters George’s room. Additionally, even though George is having sex with men he apparently knows a lot about having sex with women. In the novel, it is frequently mentioned how George has had sex with prostitutes from different countries and knows exactly what a girl can do to a man to satisfy him sexually. Mary also states that they had taught Anne seduction techniques that were “drawn from George’s time in the bath houses of Europe with French whores, Spanish madams, and English sluts” (584) and that “George knew a bath house for whores” (539). This contrast between the two worlds that George inhabits could give his character a depth that is missing from the novel by allowing him to come to terms with his sexuality and the struggles that might have followed because of the consequences that would occur if he got caught. Instead, however, it makes George look like he cannot control his sexual urges and that those urges are bad if they are not focused on females, which follows Retha Warnicke’s definition of how homosexuality was described

during the Tudor era. Additionally, throughout the novel there are hints that he is just bored with sex with females and therefore has started having sex with males. Gareth Russell writes in a blogpost for *The Creation of Anne Boleyn* that “Gregory effectively has George Boleyn choosing to be gay” and that “Gregory does not seem at all interested in presenting her gay characters in any way other than the most reductive of stereotypes”. This ultimately does not allow the characters to grow in any way since they are stuck in the stereotypical mold that Gregory has carved out for them. George does not grow as a character from the first time he is introduced until his final breath; he is portrayed simply a sexual deviant or sex addict, who would have sex with everything that crosses his path.

Shortly after the reader has been introduced to the idea that George might perhaps be homosexual, his character changes from being what one would assume a regular man into more of a sexual deviant. It starts slowly at first; at one point Anne is getting into bed and she lifts her nightdress and “George watched her naked feet with a connoisseur’s gaze” (198). At this moment their interaction feels innocent enough, like it is just a game between Anne and George. However, other things start happening between them that finally cross the line between innocence and incest. What the reader might notice at first is the repeated kisses that the siblings give to each other. At first the kisses seem innocent but they quickly gain sexual meaning. In the beginning of the novel these are simply a kiss on the cheek; however, later this becomes kissing on the mouth whilst the mouth is closed, and later on with open mouths. Finally, George and Anne have a very sexual encounter in front of a shocked Mary. George starts by gently kissing Anne “on the nose and then the lips” (392). Anne leads him on and tells him to “come here and I will be sweet to you” (392). Additionally, Mary describes how George

leaned forward and kissed her again. Her eyes closed and her lips smiled and then parted. I watched as he pressed closer, and his finger went to her bare shoulder and stroked her neck. I watched, quite fascinated and quite horrified, as his fingers went into her smooth dark hair and pulled her head back for his kiss (392).

This encounter is a turning point in the novel, and from this point onwards the relationship between George and Anne is different, while later the relationship between Anne and Henry starts to slowly crumble. Additionally, it is shortly after this encounter when Anne has her

first miscarriage. Mary's sentiments on George and Anne's relationship further develops from being unsure about its nature until finally believing that George and Anne have had sex so that Anne can become pregnant again. Moreover, George says to Mary that Anne "is a passionate whore" (398) and states that even though he is "her brother [he would] have her now," (398) hinting that he means having sex with her. Jane Parker, in a significant disclosure, confronts him and says that he does not "really like to kiss women at all unless they are [his] sister" (585), thus insinuating that he is both a homosexual and prefers an incestuous relationship over having a relationship with his wife.

Conversely, in a later encounter, when Anne is preparing to sleep with Henry VIII for the first time, George is invited into the room although she is almost fully naked, and he "recoiled at the sight of his sister, her dark hair tumbled over her naked breasts" (411). This can be interpreted in two ways. Firstly, that he does seem to have some sort of moral conscience even though this is not made apparent often in the story and, secondly, he does not actually have any interest in the female body and therefore recoils at the sight of it. In spite of these hints, when Anne desperately needs to get pregnant for the third time, Mary implies that Anne persuaded George to have sex with her. Mary states that "[she] knew with absolute certainty that his conscience was not clear, and [she] guessed that Anne had taken [George] as her companion on her journey to the gates of hell to conceive this child for England" (564). Later on, Mary hears George tell Anne that "whatever we have done, it was done for love" and Anne asks him "[e]ven when the outcome was monstrous?" (602). Anne and George embrace and Mary describes the look that Anne gives George as suggesting that he "was her beloved" (602). Additionally, as soon as Mary is told with what crimes George is charged she starts thinking back to the things that had happened:

My first thought was to cry out and deny it, but then I remembered Anne's absolute need for son, and her certainty that the king could not give her a healthy baby. I remembered her leaning back against George and telling him that the church could not be relied upon to rule what was and what was not sin. And him telling her that he could have been excommunicated ten times before breakfast – and she had laughed. I did not know what Anne might have done in her desperation. I did not

know what George might have dared in his recklessness. I turned my thoughts away from the two of them, as I had done before. (638-639)

While it is never absolutely stated in the novel that Anne and George did have intercourse it is hinted at enough for the reader to believe that it might have happened. This is not surprising since the novel is written from Mary's point of view and she is not completely certain that her siblings were having a sexual relationship, or she might just be in denial since she still deeply cares for her siblings.

Even though Mary believes what George and Anne might have done is wrong and does not like that George is a homosexual she still shows sympathy towards them. When Anne has another miscarriage and Mary describes how monstrous the fetus is, she describes how “it was George who gave a small strangled exclamation in his throat and felt for the back of a chair to support him” (593). Finally, George is shown to display some guilt in the matter but this is too late since Mary’s opinion of George has somewhat changed dramatically throughout the novel and therefore the narrative as well. Nonetheless, Mary’s narrative demonstrates that even though she does not like what George was doing with his life she still loves him as her brother and never really believed that he would be executed. Throughout the novel it is clearly shown that Mary loves her brother and because of that it is strange how negative the novel is towards him. Nonetheless, even though George is being portrayed negatively it does not mean that he is not a significant character in the novel. The fact that he is portrayed as a homosexual adds to his significance since in “the woman’s historical novel the homosexual is frequently a sympathetic figure, often even a figure for identification where the openings for female agency are limited” (Wallace 107). This can be seen in *The Other Boleyn Girl* since it is George who knows women that might help Anne when she has the miscarriages and he also knows the odd tips and tricks that the sisters need to satisfy the King. Finally, when George has been executed, Mary admits that she “had not thought to lose George” (657) and she is deeply saddened that this has happened. Mary’s bond with her brother also indicates how strong the bond between Anne and George was and how close the siblings were.

Even though it is debatable, there has not been any real proof that George had a sexual relationship with his sister Anne. The fact that Gregory adds this element into the

story really shows George in a negative light. It makes his execution become something that has to happen since he is guilty, instead of focusing on the idea that the whole ordeal materialized because he was a victim of false rumors, which might have occurred because of homophobia, or simply because he was the brother of a fallen Queen. Instead of focusing on what might have been good about George, Gregory focuses on all the things that might have been morally wrong and emphasizes rumors that very likely have no basis in reality, i.e. the incest. Francis Weston, George's supposed lover in the novel, does not evolve as a character since he is just mentioned in passing. The fact that he has a wife and a child is never mentioned. Additionally, Gregory has stated that she wrote the novel with a feminist agenda in mind and that Mary is the "feminist heroine" of the novel (Bordo 220); this might explain why she wanted some of the males in the novel to look bad in comparison to their female counterparts. Ingibjörg Ágústsdóttir writes that "Gregory depicts women who have to make great sacrifices in order to have a chance of breaking through the glass ceiling of patriarchal authority" and that she "challenges traditional historiographic versions of events" (139). Gregory's aim with the novel was therefore not to "challenge heteronormative models of historiography" (de Groot 151) but to challenge the patriarchal authority which George was a part of, which includes questioning what kind of character George was and therefore highlighting what might have been his flaws. In the end, it is Mary that ultimately emerges as the good person by forgiving her brother and sister for the horrible things that they have done and by weeping when they die. This follows the pattern in the novel where Mary is the heroine of the novel and thus has to stand out in comparison to the other characters. By making George and Anne even worse than they might have been makes Mary an even better person in comparison for forgiving them. Furthermore, Gregory states in her "Author's Note" that she used Warnicke's book *The Rise and Fall of Anne Boleyn* as a source for her novel. She calls Warnicke's arguments "original and provocative" (663) and she writes in the "Q&A" section at the back of the novel that she felt it was important to include the homosexual aspect because it was "homosexuality that George apologizes for on the scaffold" (668). According to Warnicke, George "confessed that he deserved to die 'for more and worse shame and dishonour than hath ever been heard of before' but refused to detail his sins" (Warnicke 264). Additionally, Warnicke argues that "the fact that he refused to

specify his crimes lends itself to the speculation that he had participated in homosexual acts” (Warnicke 264). However, this does not fully explain why Gregory wrote George as a negative stereotype of a homosexual man. Gregory writes that even though nobody knows if Anne and George did have sex she believes that if Anne had to find “someone to father a child,” then “George would have been the obvious choice” (668).

The Other Boleyn Girl is not Gregory’s first novel that includes an incestuous relationship. In her novel *Wideacre*, published in 1987, the main female character in the novel, Beatrice Lacey, has an incestuous relationship with her brother Harry, eventually giving birth to two children, Richard and Julia, who are fathered by him. In the second novel of the trilogy, *The Favorite Child* (1989), Richard and Julia have a daughter together. Diana Wallace states that even though Gregory “includes the explicit sex scenes typical of the erotic history, [she] refuses to valorise the female suffering in the same way” (191). This can be seen in *The Other Boleyn Girl* when, for example, Mary is preparing her body to have sex with Henry shortly after she has given birth, in a very descriptive passage. Anne is helping Mary stuff “a small piece of wadding” (208) up her vagina and Anne “thrust the stuff up inside me and then pushed again. I let out a hoarse gasp of pain” (209). Gregory’s writing includes these passages of realism that are frequently not included in other novels and they give her novels even more of a feminist agenda because Gregory does show the pain that females have had to go through in history.

The novel was turned into a film with the same name that was released in 2008. In the film *George Boleyn* (Jim Sturgess) has an even smaller part than in the novel. Here Anne (Natalie Portman) and George do not have an incestuous relationship but they do speak about it even though George cannot go through with it. In comparison to the novel, George is much kinder than his sisters and does not seem to have the same sexual urges as he has in the novel since Francis Weston (Andrew Garfield) was cut out of the film. George’s portrayal in the film is more sympathetic than that of his counterpart in the novel since the film does not focus on his negative aspects as much as in the novel. Furthermore, the feminist hero of the film is the Boleyn siblings’ mother, Elizabeth Boleyn (Kristin Scott Thomas), and not Mary (Scarlett Johansson), which makes the narrative of the film completely different. Elizabeth opposes the patriarchal system and fights for her daughter's dignity. She goes against her

husband and at one point she states to him that “our daughters are being traded like cattle for the advancement of men,” Mary voices similar sentiments in the novel. Additionally, in the film *Henry VIII* (Eric Bana) rapes Anne and this takes away the only power that she has, her virginity, something that, again, does not occur in the novel. Although the film has the same name and mostly the same plot as the novel, the two differ in the fundamental aspects that makes the novel stand out; i.e. the relationship between the siblings and the portrayal of George’s character.

V. George Boleyn in *The Tudors*

George continues to be portrayed in a negative light in Showtime’s television series *The Tudors* (2007-2010). In *The Tudors*, like in *The Other Boleyn Girl*, George’s character starts out having sex with multiple women and then later with men. Basil Glynn points out that “[d]espite the presence of several gay characters, homosexual sex is never shown in *The Tudors*” (Glynn 166). This seems quite odd, since the show does focus very much on sex, but despite this it seems to be “a drama unwilling to show gay sex” (Glynn 167). This seems all the stranger since Showtime had a television show that ran from 2000 to 2005 that focused on the lives of homosexuals and did show sex scenes between men, namely the series *Queer as Folk*. Not only are there several straight sex scenes in *The Tudors* but there is also a scene where Henry VIII (Jonathan Rhys Meyers) is furiously masturbating whilst being aided, in a non-sexual manner, by his male servant (1.10), which during the Tudor era was as much sin as sodomy. Furthermore, George and Jane’s wedding night is not portrayed in a very pleasant manner since George expresses “his desire for the musician Mark Smeaton (David Alpay) by assaulting his own wife” (Glynn 166). Therefore, instead of showing a sex scene between two men the series’ writers have chosen to show a homosexual man assaulting a woman. Guillermo Avila-Saavedra states that this follows a pattern that is visible in other television series that include homosexual characters since “[m]ost of the erotic connotations of homosexuality have been eliminated” (8) He goes on to say that “[g]ay male characters in particular are only welcomed in mainstream mass media as long as they do not infer any sexual desires and practices” (8). This is something that is highly visible in *The Tudors*, where almost everyone else is shown having sex except for homosexuals.

George and Mark are not the only homosexual couple in the series since in season one there is a clandestine relationship between William Compton and Thomas Tallis. However, after William agonizingly dies from the sweating sickness (1.7), Thomas marries a woman who is one of the twin girls that George had previously slept with. In *The Tudors* there are “clearly defined ‘good’ and ‘bad’ masculinities’ on display” (Glynn 166), the good being heterosexual and the bad being homosexual. This can be seen in William’s excruciating death which “is depicted in graphic detail” (Glynn 167) in comparison to his love affair with Thomas Tallis, which is only “expressed through a single, brief candlelit kiss (1.5)” (Glynn 166). In comparison, the relationship between “the athletic and heterosexual Henry and his rugged best friend Charles” (Glynn 167) is interesting since they are able to “act out their heterosexual fantasy lives with ungay abandon” (Glynn 167). Henry and Charles are shown to go out riding, hunting and throwing lavish parties. Additionally, Henry and Charles represent the “good” or positive type of masculinity, as they are vigorous, healthy and frequently have sex with beautiful and willing women. Since George is shown to rape his wife he cannot represent the idea of “good” masculinity.

In the first season of *The Tudors*, George Boleyn (Padraic Delaney) is portrayed as an ambitious young man who enjoys the company of others and has several female love interests but nonetheless deeply cares for his sister Anne. He is introduced in episode four, “His Majesty, The King”, where he teases Anne about the letters she has received from the King. Thereby, his character is established as his sister’s confidant and friend. In episode six, “True Love”, as he introduces himself to twin girls, he tells them that they “don’t know me now, but one day you will” and that he is “a builder of fortunes” (1.6). Demonstrating that he thinks highly of himself. However, historically this would be correct because at this time George was rising fast in the royal world. Later he happily finds both the girls naked in his bed at the same time. The first season has George fulfill all the requirements for the “good” type of masculinity as defined by Glynn. He drinks, flirts, and has sex with multiple willing women. Furthermore, in episode seven, “Message to the Emperor”, Anne falls ill with the sweating sickness, at which George is first devastated and then relieved when Anne survives. This demonstrates that even though he is ambitious for power he still cares deeply about his sister. Throughout the first season, George is seemingly like every other man at

the court. He is not shown to be a part of any underground movement to get to power nor shown to plan any murders. He is simply enjoying life as a successful young man. Overall, the first season does not only portray George as a heterosexual, he is also portrayed as being a decent man, despite his ambitions.

All of this changes in the second season. One of the main relationships George is shown to have in *The Tudors* is with the musician Mark Smeaton. In the first episode of the second season, “Everything is Beautiful”, Mark is introduced to the court and to Anne as the court musician. Later in the series Mark flirts with George and says that while Anne is beautiful she is “not as beautiful as her brother” (2.3) and walks away. George does not say anything but is shown to lick and bite his lip in a similar manner as when he saw the naked twins in his bed in the first season, thus indicating that he is lusting after Mark. George and Mark’s relationship then continues to develop in the fourth episode of season two, “The Act of Succession”, where George listens to half-naked Mark play on his violin; as George leans in for a kiss the scene is cut and instead the viewer sees Henry VIII passionately kissing Lady Eleanor Luke (Andrea Lowe) in bed. That scene demonstrates two different but ultimately similar things. Firstly, Henry is betraying Anne by sleeping with Lady Eleanor and secondly, George is doing the exact same thing by risking everything to be with Mark since it would be a death sentence, for George and Mark, and utter humiliation for Anne. This is the only time the viewer sees Mark and George about to be intimate. However, Mark and George are frequently shown to be joking with each other in public and those moments show the viewer a different side of George where he seems to be sincerer, especially since George does not benefit from his relationship with Mark, seeing that George is of a much higher rank than Mark. It could, therefore, be assumed that in this context George loves Mark, which is something he has not shown towards other characters in the series, except for his sisters. Interestingly, the viewer does not get to see much of their relationship and therefore that side of George’s character is not developed much further. Nonetheless, as Glynn suggests, both Mark Smeaton and George “serve the narrative function of offering Anne sensitive, non-threatening male support” (167). This can be seen at first by the bond that Anne and George have, where she tells him everything about her relationship with Henry and later when she is miscarrying and leans on George for comfort. Mark is shown to be

there to help her laugh and dance. He is mostly seen playing his violin and at one point even teaches Anne to play.

The other relationship George is shown to have in the second season is with Lady Jane Parker (Joanne King). Not a lot of their courtship is shown but in the sixth episode of the season, "The Definition of Love", George marries Jane. However, even during the marriage ceremony George is seen talking to Mark and joking with him, much to the dismay of his father. Lady Jane is shown as not wanting to marry George and is forced down the aisle by her father. Their marriage does not seem to be based on love but more as a contract between the two families. Furthermore, during the wedding party Mark is shown to laugh when George talks to his wife about having married her. Thus, George and Mark are made to look like they are insensitive characters since they laugh at Jane and make her feel uncomfortable during what should be an amazing day for her. At last, during their wedding night, "George acts out his desire for Smeaton through brutally anally raping his wife, a deeply unpleasant, but at least heterosexual act, shown at some length" (Glynn 167). Here George has ultimately transformed from the "good" masculinity category over to that of "bad" masculinity, as defined by Glynn. This is especially evident as Jane is not willing to have sex with George. George is never shown to care for his wife, and he remarks a couple of times that he has to be careful around her and that she is suspicious of his behavior. Later, in the eighth episode called "Lady in Waiting," he is shown to yell at Jane when she confronts him about his late night whereabouts. Jane tells George that it is even worse that he is not in her bed because of a woman but because it is for another man. George does not deny it and Jane calls him disgusting and tells him "it is a sin against God, it is a sin against nature" (2.9). George then throws her violently on the bed and leaves. Ultimately this leads to Jane telling Cromwell during an interrogation that she believes that George has committed incest, as her revenge on George for being a homosexual. Furthermore, George is no longer portrayed as charming when drunk but rather as a mean drunk, which can be seen when he is confronting his wife. Therefore, the character of George has been completely transformed from being a heterosexual ambitious man that has girls swoon over him to being homosexual and a rapist.

Throughout the second season, as George's homosexuality is brought to light, his character can no longer be considered to be morally upright. In the first episode of the second season, he is shown to be part of the plot to poison Bishop John Fisher; they fail to kill the Bishop but four other men die. Later in the episode, he watches as the cook who poisoned the Bishop's soup is boiled alive. George does not show much emotion as the cook begs for mercy and screams in pain. George's father, Thomas Boleyn, is shown to be more dominant than George and is shown to be the ringleader of the plot. Nevertheless, George's persona has changed dramatically from the first season. He is no longer a womanizer and a charmer but is shown as both ruthless and as a homosexual. Furthermore, George is shown to follow Anne's order to eliminate any female competition for Henry VIII. This can be seen when Anne realizes that Henry VIII is having sex with Lady Eleanor and commands George to take care of things, which he does. George sets up Lady Eleanor, pretending that she has stolen the royal jewels, and George blackmails her and gives her no choice but to leave. Here he is again shown as being ruthless and he does not seem to feel bad about what might happen to Lady Eleanor. This further establishes his "bad" masculinity since he is following other people's orders without asking questions. Therefore, in season one when he is only portrayed as a womanizer, his conscience is still quite clean in comparison to how he is depicted in the second season when he is in a homosexual relationship but does horrible things to other people.

As with *The Other Boleyn Girl*, George's character seems to deserve to be executed in *The Tudors*. During his interrogation in the episode "The Act of Treason" George is seen crying as he swears that he is innocent of the crimes that Cromwell is accusing him of, but to no avail. After the vilification of George throughout the second season the viewer might not feel that much sympathy for him. During the execution scene the focus is more on Anne's feelings of misery over her brother's beheading than on George himself as he stands in front of the booing crowd and tries to say his last words that no one is listening to. Additionally, the whole scene makes it look like Anne is the only one grieving for her brother, as even their father, who is kept captive close by, does not seem to care that much. Anne's grief could be interpreted in two ways; on one hand, she may be grieving for her brother, and on the other hand, she may have finally realized that she will die also and thus is grieving for

herself as well as for George. Overall, the whole execution scene feels like George does deserve to be punished for his sins and for his behavior towards his wife and others at the court, especially since he was part of plots to murder other people.

VI. *The Other Boleyn Girl* vs *The Tudors*

Both *The Other Boleyn Girl* and *The Tudors* have several things in common with regards to how George is portrayed. For example, in both of these fictional representations George is a homosexual. Nonetheless, *The Other Boleyn Girl* and *The Tudors* do not agree on who was his lover. In *The Tudors* George's lover is Mark Smeaton, the musician, while it is Sir Francis Weston in *The Other Boleyn Girl*. Having Mark be his lover instead of Francis might be more historically accurate since they did exchange the previously mentioned book. Both the novel and the television series do portray George as being heterosexual at first and then preferring male company over female. Avila-Saavedra states that in television shows that include homosexual characters "[h]omosexual images are presented in a way acceptable for heterosexual audience by reinforcing traditional values like family, monogamy and stability" (8). However, this is done in neither *The Tudors* nor *The Other Boleyn Girl*, and since George does not comply with those traditional values he is instead penalized for his sexuality by portraying him as morally corrupt.

Both the television series and the novel imply that George and Anne had an incestuous relationship, although *The Other Boleyn Girl* does focus more on this aspect of their relationship. Ultimately, both *The Other Boleyn Girl* and *The Tudors* portray George's character negatively by making him do things to others that are morally wrong. In addition to the element of incest, *The Tudors* does present George as an accomplice in a murder plot whereas in *The Other Boleyn Girl* he has substantial knowledge of the seedy underbelly of the world outside the court.

The Tudors and *The Other Boleyn Girl* have several instances of historical inaccuracies that has influenced readers and viewers. Susan Bordo states that:

We no longer have much assurance that viewers or readers will be able to distinguish between fact and fiction, so special anxiety about the transgressions of *The Tudors* or *The Other Boleyn Girl* is 'justified' by virtue of a cultural milieu in which the

created image (whether computer-generated visuals or concocted narratives) is consumed, without scrutiny, as ‘reality’ (213-214).

Therefore, by portraying George in a negative manner the public opinion of him might change and be negative as well even though these negative aspects of his character might be historically inaccurate.

VII. Conclusion

Both Philippa Gregory’s *The Other Boleyn Girl* and the first two seasons of Showtime’s *The Tudors* portray George Boleyn in a mostly negative light. There might be several historical reasons why George was executed with his sister, Anne. Historians have argued about different motives, everything from George being guilty of having an incestuous relationship with his sister to the idea that Henry needed to establish himself as a strong king. Since the word “homosexual” did not exist in the Tudor era, it is hard to know the sexual orientation of men and women during that time. During Henry VIII’s reign the Buggery Act of 1533 was established which made sexual conduct between men illegal. George Boleyn rose to power because of Anne’s relationship with the King and was made the Gentleman of the Privy Chamber in 1528. George has been portrayed in numerous works of fiction that have turned negative after Retha Warnicke’s wrote that he might have been homosexual. After Warnicke’s article and subsequent book, Alison Weir wrote that she agreed with Warnicke’s findings. The source that Retha Warnicke and Alison Weir use to demonstrate that George Boleyn was homosexual is the poem “Viscount Rocheford” that was written by George Cavendish between the years 1556 to 1558. There is no substantial proof that George was homosexual, even though they interpret the poem to mean that George was. Since Philippa Gregory used Retha Warnicke’s work as the foundation for her novel, *The Other Boleyn Girl*, she includes many of Warnicke’s ideas and portrays George as homosexual. Gregory also writes that Anne and George might have had an incestuous relationship which lead to a miscarriage. Therefore, portraying his character in a mostly negative light. Gregory does so to implement the feminist viewpoint of the novel. George’s character in *The Tudors* follows a similar pattern. He is also portrayed as a homosexual but the relationship between him and Anne is not as sexualized as in the novel. However, in *The Tudors* he is horrible to his wife, Jane, and is an accomplice to a murder. In *The Tudors*, the love affair between Mark Smeaton

and George is not fully shown since the scene cuts to something else when they were about to kiss. This has impact on how the modern audience might interpret George's character since he is not shown to have any empathy. Additionally, the modern viewer or reader might not know about what is historically incorrect about the television series or the novel and they might believe what was shown to them, and therefore George's reputation is damaged.

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