



***The Afterlife of Anne Boleyn:  
Representations of Anne Boleyn in  
Fiction and on the Screen***

**By Stephanie Russo**

Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020

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*The Afterlife of Anne Boleyn: Representations of Anne Boleyn in Fiction and on the Screen*. By Stephanie Russo. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020. ISBN 978-3-030-58613-3. xii + 320pp. €93.08.



Stephanie Russo's book is a good follow up to Susan Bordo's study, *The Creation of Anne Boleyn* (2013), which also aimed to understand better the way Queen Anne Boleyn has been, until today, a favoured material for works of historical fiction and historical fact alike. However, whilst Bordo is a sociologist, it is the literature specialist's point of view that Russo offers us. The author is an associate professor in the literature department at the Macquarie University in Sydney, Australia. Her work includes the study of historical fiction, as well as early modern and eighteenth-century women's writing. She has published works about famous feminine figures such as the novelist Jane Austen and the philosopher Mary Wollstonecraft, but what is interesting for this publication is that she has also written numerous articles about the representation of Anne Boleyn, and that of the Tudor consorts in general, one of the latest of which studies their representation in the 2017 musical *Six* (2021). Thus she analyses different representations of Anne Boleyn throughout this book with a new eye; from a new angle, so to speak.

Her task in this book is to give a comprehensive inventory of the works of fiction featuring the character of Anne Boleyn. She addresses the subject chronologically and justifies this choice by the influence each work has had on the next, stating that "any other organisation of the material would be incoherent" (7). The structure seems thus quite sensible in that it is connected to the author's writing style; it allows the book to flow comfortably.

The book was published in 2020, but it seems that the author gathered her research material prior to 2017, since it doesn't look at the musical *Six* by Toby Marlowe and Lucy Moss, which is only mentioned in the conclusion (293–295). The latest Channel 5 miniseries *Anne Boleyn*, first released in June 2021, isn't a part of Russo's corpus either, for obvious reasons. The author has chosen not to include a biography of Anne Boleyn which could be considered surprising. Russo justifies this by explaining that most of what we know of her is still open to debate today, apart from a few affixed markers such as her coronation, the birth of her daughter, and her execution. For her, "The real Anne Boleyn remains lost to history" (2). Thus Russo emphasizes that her interest lays with the myth rather than historical facts. It is regrettable that she doesn't choose to give us some of the usual events

that historians do agree on, such as Anne's time spent in the Low Countries and in France.

To gather a reasonable body of work, Russo has chosen to focus on two formats: first, the written works, including sixteenth-century poetry and later novels as well as self-published books, but excluding fanfictions; and second, from the 20th century onward, audiovisual works. She has also decided to study only Anglophone productions. In doing so, she allows herself to carry out an exhaustive examination of the fictional representations of Anne Boleyn through the centuries. However, the drawback of this choice is that it does seem rather self-centered, completely ignoring the numerous French and Italian works, while not mentioning the various musical pieces dedicated to or inspired by Anne. It disregards, for example, the 1830 opera *Anna Bolena*, by Donizetti, quite unique in its kind, and which would have added an interesting perspective to such a study. Furthermore, this attempt at exhaustivity provokes surprising choices; the corpus includes some plays in which Anne Boleyn is only an inspiration for one of the characters, or merely part of their situation, such as Elizabeth Cary's *The Tragedy of Mariam* (1613). Nevertheless, Russo doesn't fail to mention highly important foreign works, e.g. *The Novels of Elizabeth* by Madame d'Aulnoy (1680), which had a significant influence on similar English works of the time. The author also justifies her focus on English-only oeuvres by asserting that she intends to study "Anne's role in the collective memory of the Anglophone world" (7).

Thus, we could summarize the book's argument via two points. The first one is that the representation of England can be seen through the representation of Anne Boleyn, and the way English people reflect upon their own history. Through the seventeenth century, for example, Russo studies the appearance of three Tudor queens in the Shakespearean theatre (*Henry VIII*, 1613). According to her, it reflects the contemporary political situation. She describes James I as the heir of three sonless queens, Catherine of Aragon (whose status as a foreigner is linked to Anne of Denmark, James I's consort), Anne Boleyn, and Elizabeth I (59). It is also a time of deep religious uncertainty (57), which could be reminiscent of Anne Boleyn's time as Henry VIII's wife. Another example can be found in *The True Secret History of King Henry the Eighth*, by John Somers (1702). Somers was a whig lawyer, during the period that the party suspected a Catholic plot. Russo demonstrates how this suspicion appears in Somers' depiction of Catherine of Aragon and Anne Boleyn, with the former a liar about her virginity, and the latter a pious and innocent queen (84).

The second point is that Anne Boleyn is a good representative of the power of women, especially when that power derives (or is supposed to derive) from their sexuality. Russo offers valid points to support this claim, through use of Tyler's 1884 play, *Anne Boleyn*:

*A Tragedy in Six Acts*. In it, the diligent Catherine of Aragon is opposed to a lazy Anne Boleyn, the two acting as symbols of good and bad women. She also looks at the influence of *Gone With The Wind*'s Scarlett O'Hara (1939) over literature in general, and Anne Boleyn's representations in particular.

Among the references Russo favors, we can see the works of previous specialists, such as Miriam Elizabeth Burstein, on the fictional afterlife of Anne Boleyn (2007), or the aforementioned work of Susan Bordo on the representation of Anne Boleyn (2013). All in all, Russo offers in this publication an exhaustive study of the matter, allowing us to follow her perspective by giving for each chapter comprehensive references of the source material. It is, in my view, a very valuable contribution to literature in the discipline.

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