

## The Psychology of Henry VIII

By Philippa Gregory

Asking oneself about the psychology of a Tudor king is profoundly a-historical, it is like asking oneself as to their compliance with traffic signals – impose a concept on people who simply didn't think that way, having not yet invented the theory. But it is also irresistible. We – as modern western people – think that way, we are marinated in the theory, and to understand Henry for us, means that we cannot help but read him as a psychological being.

But we have to throw out some modern concepts. Henry was not delusional because he thought that God spoke to him directly: he was a man of his time. Our secular age has to understand that Henry believed himself to be appointed by God to be King, to be guided by God in his decisions, and to be prompted by God in his desires. To us his separation from Katherine of Aragon and his courtship of Anne Boleyn looks like a simple case of lust, and his claiming that he was already uneasy about his marriage, fearful that it had been against the law of God since Katherine was his brother's wife, a form of hypocrisy at worst, denial at best. But there is no doubt in my mind that Henry genuinely believed this – and the fact that it aligned with his desires merely sanctified his desires. It never made him question them.

His extreme disappointment in Anne Boleyn, in Anne of Cleves, and especially in Catherine Howard, came from his sense that the declared choice of God was not working out as God would have wished. Henry's cruelty to his erring or displeasing wives was, in his view, sanctified by divine judgement as well as his own chagrin.

Henry was not paranoid because he thought that people hated him. He was right to think that people hated him, especially as he grew older and the promise of his early years was not fulfilled. His court never travelled further north than York, his daughter Elizabeth, the apparently beloved Tudor, never got even as far as that. The country was not a settled stolid 'merrie England'; it was riven with faction, falling naturally under the rule of the great lords, prone to rebellion, and divided in religious practice. Henry's sense of insecurity was well founded.

Nor do I believe he was a hypochondriac – as historians generally suggest. Fear of infection, even terror of the plague, was a logical response to a danger which no-

one could be sure to avoid, which no-one fully understood and which was often incurable, often fatal. Henry's panicky dashes away from London during outbreaks of disease were sensible precautions for a man with no adult son and heir, and with a strong sense of self-preservation. His elaborate medicine cupboard was not surprising for an age that had to experiment with cures. The attendance of his physicians, all that one would expect of a king who was attended at every moment. That he was not a coward in personal life is indicated by his courage in jousting when he would enter the arena without announcement and take on all comers. The real danger he faced is shown by his two life-threatening injuries in the joust and his lifelong habit of hard riding.

But where we can apply the theories of psychology to Henry is perhaps in his childhood. He was a second son, born to a woman who had recovered from the difficult first years of her marriage when she was married to the conqueror of her country, and perhaps not to her first choice. Indeed the conception of her first son, Arthur may even have occurred before the wedding, and if so, would have emphasised the rights of the conquering Henry VII. His birthplace was chosen to be Winchester, the old capital of England. His name reflected the claim of the Tudors to be regarded as the old Kings of England, and their attempt to recruit the chivalric legends of Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table to legitimise their claim. Arthur was raised to be King of England, first Tudor heir, betrothed at the age of two years old to another new monarchy, married at 15 years old, and dead only six months later.

In contrast, his younger brother Henry was intended for the easy life of a career in the church, raised with far less expectations and discipline, educated to encourage his curiosity and love of the arts, indulged, sporty, and admired. Henry's golden childhood as the hero of the Tudor nursery came to an abrupt end with the death of Arthur in 1502 when Henry was not quite 11 years old. Arthur died of the sweating sickness, an incurable and new disease in England and Wales - the young prince may have taken note of the hazards of disease. At once, Henry's position changed dramatically, his parents' and the court view of him was transformed. Far from being the second son with a life devoted to being the understudy, Henry now was the one and only surviving Tudor son and heir. His education changed to become more suitable for a boy designed to rule a difficult kingdom, his life changed as he was expected to take on more ceremonial duties, and - perhaps worst of all for the young boy - he was banned from many of his sports since they were regarded as too dangerous for England's only heir. He was

not allowed to joust, and he was watched at night, his father even ordered him to sleep with him, in the same bedchamber.

Just one year later, in 1503, his sweet-tempered and loving mother died in childbirth and his father plunged into grief and deep depression, which was only moderated by eccentric plans for remarriage. The most unsuitable candidates were Juana of Spain – clearly insane with grief after the death of her obsessively loved husband, and Katherine of Aragon, the King's own widowed daughter-in-law. In the end it was Henry who was first ordered to be betrothed to Katherine and subsequently ordered to secretly set aside the betrothal, betraying his promise to her and condemning her to uncertainty and poverty. He must have felt that his life, previously so free and beloved, had suddenly become a cage in which he could choose nothing for himself, but had to try to be the man that his idealised brother would have been.

I think he tried very hard. On the death of his father he married his brother's widow and took his brother's throne. His youth showed itself in the explosion of joy and expense which followed as he discovered he was able to rule himself, and ignore the advice of his restrictive grandmother. And his immaturity showed itself in his reliance on Katherine of Aragon's advice and guidance. She was not to dominate him for very long. The rise of Cardinal Wolsey as an administrator and organiser meant that Henry could express a wish and Wolsey would see that it was done. Wolsey became the first of the many people who would feed the young King's ego and greed, and who maintained their places by never disagreeing with him.

This corruption by kingship is perhaps the second most influential feature in our understanding of Henry's inner life. Having been born and raised as the second son, at the age of only 17, he suddenly became one of the most important men in the world, praised as the 'handsomest prince in Christendom', regarded as one of the bravest sportsmen, and acknowledged by the Pope as Defender of the Faith. The court fed his vanity and sense of his self-importance, his father's treasury meant that he was the richest man in England, his power, limited only by tradition, was almost absolute. When Anne Boleyn came into his life she persuaded him also that he could rule the church as well as the state in England, and he had no equal or rival.

His ordering of the death of Anne Boleyn, when a deal had been struck for her divorce and exile, is the first sign of his deep need for this sense of utter supremacy. The show-trial of Anne, her brother, and their friends, exposed a clique who did not find Henry all-powerful, who even spoke of his physical impotence. Whether or not he believed the extravagant claims of Anne's witchcraft and adultery, he knew that she spoke of him without awe, she discussed his failings, and perhaps that was as bad as the string of lovers that was alleged.

Anne died, and Jane replaced her as Henry shrank from a realistic view of himself, and demanded that there should be no contradiction to his view of himself as the eternally golden, eternally young, potent Prince. The revulsion he felt on seeing Anne of Cleves seems to me to be most likely as the denial of his fear that she was repelled by him. After all, he was 48 years old at the time of their wedding, and she was young enough to be his daughter at 25. He appeared to her in disguise, but she did not know that the courtly game was to act as if this older, lame, foul-smelling man, was the handsomest man in the room. His declaration that she was smelly, fat, and no virgin, is perhaps a clear example of Tudor transference. Indeed there was one fat, smelly, sexually experienced person in that unconsummated marriage; but it was not the beautiful young woman of the Holbein portrait.

Anne survived Henry's disappointment by agreeing to divorce on his generous terms and by promising – perhaps the most crucial element – that she would not complain of him to the outside world. His image of himself would be left intact, and indeed beautifully reinforced by the flattery of the adoration of a much younger, pretty woman. New research now suggests that Catherine Howard was only 15 years old when her family arranged her marriage to Henry, now nearly 50 years old. His psychological health after his marriage to this girl showed itself in a burst of energy and high spirits which burned out after a few months as he sank into depression, and ill health. His ulcerated leg flared up and Henry believed, as did his advisors, that if the wound closed the poisons would mount to his brain and kill him. With only one young son, and a kingdom in uproar over his religious reforms he must have been in terror of death for himself, for his line, and for his country. His fat-rich diet and meats was piling weight on, he was suffering from terrible constipation and flatulence. He may also have been suffering from Cushing's syndrome which brings symptoms of obesity, muscle weakness, bone thinness, and mood swings, irritability or even paranoia.

It was this Henry, perhaps no longer in control of his own temperament as his blood sugar levels rose and plunged with his disease, who sentenced Catherine Howard to death for infidelity; but it was his advisors, her confessor, and her family, who allowed the sentence to go forward without demur, even urged it on. If we want to diagnose Henry as insane, at the end of his life, we have to allow for the fact that nobody referred to him, even in private letters, as anything more than moody and unreliable. To our eyes, perhaps he is a mad tyrant; but in the eyes of his subjects he was merely the all-powerful, sometimes bad-tempered king following his whims, as kings will do.

It was this Henry, struggling with the collapse of his body which had brought him so much pride and pleasure, that next married an older woman who was in love with another man. Kateryn Parr survived Henry's decision to arrest her for heresy and treason only by one of the King's rapid changes of mood, so that her arresting guard found her walking in the garden arm-in-arm with him. He died at the age of 55, an average age for a wealthy man of his time. Typically of Henry's court, no one at his court had the courage to tell him he was dying, nor present<sup>i</sup> him with a priest to administer the last rites. Typically of Henry, his last words were to say that he would like to see Archbishop Cranmer, but he would first take a little sleep and then 'advise upon, on the matter.' He never completely woke from the sleep. He never had to face the reality of his own death.

Of course, Henry's treatment of those nearest and sometimes dearest to him is not psychologically healthy in modern terms. He ordered the killing of two wives, he cruelly abandoned one, he was absent when one died, he divorced another and probably only his death prevented the arrest of the last. He condemned one loyal advisor to death (Wolsey) and executed another (Cromwell) for almost no offence. But he died, confident in forgiveness for his sins, remarking that they were not as bad as they might have been: 'the mercy of Christ is able to pardon me all my sins; yes, though they were greater than they may be'

He certainly managed to avoid confronting some aspects of reality. But, so too did his court and some of his country. If he was mad in his belief that God spoke to him personally and intervened in his life, then so too was every believer of the time. If he was mad in thinking that infidelity amounted to treason, punishable by death, then so too was Archbishop Cranmer, the author of the intellectually rigorous and beautiful *Book of Common Prayer*, who advised Henry to proceed with the execution of both Anne Boleyn and Catherine Howard. So too was the

Howard family, who found their girls 'guilty', so too was the court. Henry's set of beliefs and values were shared by his court, he was not mad in the sense that he was out of step with his society. He is out of step with our views, of course, but as another Tudor thinker was to remark, that was the past: "another country."

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