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**Revising Anne Boleyn: Why does the story of Anne Boleyn draw so many women writers across the threshold into the realm of imagination?**

**Abstract:**

For decades, the story of Anne Boleyn has inspired the novels of many women writers, including myself. Anne Boleyn's story has been described as 'a void' – the gap acting as the space to engage imagination. Whether she is cast in a negative or positive light, fictional works represent Anne Boleyn as a determined and intelligent woman, a woman who seized her voice in a time when women were expected to be silent. By seizing her voice, she also seized her tragic, yet – as a woman not erased by history – still triumphal destiny.

Why does the story of Anne Boleyn continue to ignite the imagination of women writers? How does revising Anne Boleyn's story offer a feminist standpoint relevant to women today? What does the story of Anne Boleyn tell us about our patriarchal world – past and present – and the master narratives in place controlling and destroying the lives of women?

**Biographical note:**

Wendy J. Dunn is an Australian writer who has been obsessed by Anne Boleyn and Tudor History since she was ten-years-old. She is the author of two Tudor novels: *Dear Heart*, *How Like You This?*, the winner of the 2003 Glyph Fiction Award and 2004 runner up in the Eric Hoffer Award for Commercial Fiction, and *The Light in the Labyrinth*, her first young adult novel.

Born in Melbourne, Australia, Wendy is married and the mother of three sons and one daughter—named after a certain Tudor queen, surprisingly, not Anne. Wendy tutors at Swinburne University in their Master of Arts (Writing) program. She gained her PhD (Writing) in 2014.

**Keywords:** Feminist Standpoint, *herstory*, empathy, Anne Boleyn

**REVISING ANNE BOLEYN.**

*Defiled is my name full sore  
Through cruel spite and false report,  
That I may say for evermore,  
Farewell, my joy! adieu comfort!  
For wrongfully ye judge of me  
Unto my fame a mortal wound,  
Say what ye list, it will not be,  
Ye seek for that can not be found*  
~ believed to be written by Anne Boleyn before her  
execution (Bailey-Kempling 1908).

*We shall not cease from exploration, and the end of all our  
exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the  
place for the first time* (Eliot 1943, p. 47).

For decades, the story of Anne Boleyn has inspired the novels of many women writers, including myself. Anne Boleyn's story has been described as 'a void' – the gap acting as the space to engage imagination. The tragic story of Henry VIII's second wife first ignited my imagination in childhood and embarked me on a lifelong journey to learn about her and her times. This journey has now resulted in two published novels. *Dear Heart, How Like You This?*, my first novel, imagined Anne's story through the point of view of a man who loved her, Sir Thomas Wyatt, the elder. *The Light in the Labyrinth*, my second novel, which targets the young adult reader, revisits Anne Boleyn in the months before her execution, telling the story through the eyes of her teenage niece, Kate Carey. This work was also my PhD artefact. Its story explores the lives of Tudor women through constructing a fictionalised version of history by the use of imagination; therefore, it falls into the category of historical fiction.

This paper explores why the story of Anne Boleyn continues to ignite the imagination of women writers. Through this discussion, directed largely to examining my own Anne Boleyn novels, I hope to show that the fictional revising of Anne Boleyn's story engages female authors with a feminist standpoint relevant to women today through the use of empathy.

Atwood (1998, p. 1516) argues: 'the past belongs to those who claim it, and are willing to explore it, and to infuse it with meaning for those alive today'. When fiction fills the gaps – the lacuna of women's stories – it is argued that this method opens up the possibility of constructing a narrative that speaks of truth to the reader (Banks & Andrew 2012).

A work of historical fiction involves a writer to first research the context of their period so to ignite their imagination. Research is also the means for writers to achieve believable fiction through soaking it into their unconsciousness for their imaginations to draw from. As Ursula Le Guin writes, "The stuff has to be transformed into oneself, it has to be composted before it can grow a story" (1989, p. 194). What facts did I need soaked into the compost of my unconsciousness to fill the silences or gaps in women's stories by use of my imagination?

I shall answer this question through discussing my construction of Kate Carey, the main character in *The Light in the Labyrinth*, my young adult novel. Kate is a fictional reconstruction of a real person from history. Very little is known of her early years, thus the construction of her character presented a gap for my imagination to engage with through writing. Emily Sutherland asserts, 'In writing a historical character in fiction, we start with known facts, which provide a spring form for the imagination to fill the many gaps' (2007 p. 10). What facts did I *know* as a writer to start constructing my fictional Kate? Firstly, she was of royal blood and thus highly positioned in the hierarchy of her Tudor world. Secondly, Kate lived in a time when women lives were very controlled and disempowered by their patriarchal world (Ward 2013). Gail Paster deepened my understanding that the Tudor female voice exemplified incontinence and a leaky, 'oozing'-grotesque body. This leaky vessel made clear women's inferiority – their leakiness bespeaking instability, their inability to control themselves and remain chaste,

as well as their inability to bridle their tongues (Paster 1993). Tudor women were also educated about their inferiority and sinful natures (Fantazzi & Vives 2000). Their inferiority was narrated as a constant refrain, even by fathers who loved their daughters, as is showed in this letter by Sir Thomas More to his pregnant daughter, Margaret Roper:

In your letter you speak of your approaching confinement.  
We pray most earnestly that all may go happily and successfully  
with you. May God and our Blessed Lady grant you happily and  
safely a little one like to his mother in everything except sex. Yet  
let it by all means be a girl, if only she will make up for the  
inferiority of her sex by her zeal to imitate her mother's virtue and  
learning (Reynolds 1960, np.).

My research also brought home to me that women's voices were, more often than not, couched and constrained in a manner that reflected back their prescribed role in their society (Heale 1995, p. 297). During her long reign, Elizabeth I, the intelligent and gifted daughter of the intelligent and gifted Anne Boleyn, apologised for her femaleness and referred to herself as a male ruler on countless occasions. Her famous Armada speech is one such example:

I know I have the body of a weak, feeble woman; but I have the  
heart and stomach of a king, and of a king of England too  
(Elizabeth I 2000, p. 326).

One of Elizabeth's poems also speaks poignantly of being constrained by societal expectations:

I grieve and dare not show my discontent,  
I love and yet am forced to seem to hate,  
I do, yet dare not say I ever meant,  
I seem stark mute but inwardly do prate.

I am and not, I freeze and yet am burned,  
Since from myself another self I turned  
(Elizabeth I 2000, pp. 302-303).

Thus, I had to deeply and emphatically understand facts important to my Tudor world to be able to successfully construct through empathy and imagination my Tudor people.

The popularity of the Tudors was re-fuelled by the publication of *The Other Boleyn Girl* by Phillipa Gregory in 2001 (Gardner cited by Higginbotham, 2014). Since that time, many female writers have been drawn to explore the lives of Henry VIII's six wives. Anne Boleyn's story continues to be one of the most explored by female novelists. Miriam Elizabeth Burstein researched the popularity of Anne Boleyn's story (2007) through drawing from forty-five Anne Boleyn novels and short stories. The bulk of these works were published from 1950 and fall into the romance genre. Despite this categorisation, Anne Boleyn's story breaks the usual requirements of a romance: that is, a happy ending (Parv 2004, pp. 136-139).

Burstein's study (2007) also underlines that Anne Boleyn's fictionalized story does not follow the usual genre conventions for a romance. She also sees Anne Boleyn's popularity with female fiction writers as providing evidence of 'the continuing failure of romance novelists to hammer her story into acceptable narrative form' (Burstein 2007, p.2) and thus also demonstrating how romance both succeeds and fails to tell the Anne Boleyn story. I posit the reason women writers continually engage with Anne Boleyn's story is because her story offers them a vital subject valid to their standpoints as women. Interwoven with this is the fact that 'women's reality is historically and contemporaneously one of oppression' (Arnold 2008 p.7). Therefore, not only are female writers reclaiming women's stories through revising history, they are also writing through a female standpoint that maps out master narratives of oppression through the telling of these female stories. This *herstory* approach (Arnold 2008; Banks & Andrew 2012; Johansson 1976; Sochen 1974) approach is argued as having important effects on historical scholarship through providing evidence of the importance of women's history (Scott, cited by Kon-yu 2010). As Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn assert, by writing

fiction about the lives of historical women, women are not only reclaiming stories left on the margins of history but also seizing the means of narrative empowerment (Heilmann & Llewellyn 2004).

The story of Anne Boleyn as used in fiction presents a powerful example of this reclaiming in action. Let's return to Burstein's argument that Anne Boleyn's story is a "void" (2007, p 3) – the gap that ignites imagination. I posit that the power of these gaps to incite imagination is something Paula Hamilton (cited in Nelson, 2007) failed to consider when she described filling the gaps in historical record as engaging in 'the 'deficit' model of history' (np). This 'deficit' model is also framed as a naturalised theory of history where historical research presents the possibility of truth, in which the limits of history create the space where story is possible through filling the blanks (Nelson 2007).

This brings us to the experience of Margaret Atwood. Reflecting about the time when she wrote *Alias Grace* (1996), Atwood comments 'when there was a solid fact, I could not alter it ... but in the parts left unexplained - the gaps left unfilled – I was free to invent' (Atwood 1998, p.1515). I share Atwood's philosophy regarding the crafting of my own historical fiction. It is a writing technique common to many historical writers – and, I feel, especially relevant to re-writing of women's stories into history. With silence locking away women's stories for centuries, gaps can only be filled through the power of imagination, through invention (Atwood 1998). By doing so, women's stories are reclaimed as revisionist text that is vital to the creation of empathy.

Writing my Anne Boleyn novels engaged me in empathy and led me to revise her in a sympathetic light. However, many novels about Anne Boleyn revise her with all the attributes of the conventional bitch and the typical monster woman (Gilbert & Gubar 1980). I believe we cannot ignore what is actually underpinning these kinds of narratives. Simone de Beauvoir (2011 p. 302) asserts '[w]omen do not set themselves up as Subject and hence have erected no virile myth in which their projects are reflected...they still dream through the dreams of men'. De Beauvoir also theorises that the female monster signifies 'all of man's ambivalent feelings about his own inability to control his own

physical existence, his own birth systems, his own birth and death. As the *Other*, woman comes to represent the contingency of life, a life that is made to be destroyed' (de Beauvoir 2011, p. 34). These arguments point to the bitch revision of Anne Boleyn as a construction of patriarchal narratives – the type of narrative that our world must strive to rewrite.

Susan Ostrov Weisser's (1994) study of the bitch figure in Harlequin novels strengthens this argument. Weisser explicates the bitch figure as an important master narrative for women. As revealed in many Anne Boleyn novels, the bitch has the ability to evoke chameleon-like disguises; nevertheless the bitch always remains the bitch. Weisser (1994, p.272) insightfully remarks, 'the excess of emotion and power left out of real women by the repressive and limiting constraints of being feminine in relation to the male and to the public world finds its way into an inhuman and distorted version of womanhood that is the heroine's hated other, i.e.; the Bitch'. Weisser also underlines another consideration: whether the triangle of the hero, the heroine and the bitch creates a situation that results in a cultural contradiction about a woman's forceful self though division into good and bad, that is, the good and bad woman. She sees the bitch figure as 'a kind of dumping ground for anxiety and discomfort in gender roles' (Weisser 1994, p. 274). Weisser's study also exposes the oppression that underpins this form of master narrative. Women are influenced into believing that the good woman – whose attributes are determined by patriarchal society – is the only way to be a true woman. Burstein (2007) argues that Anne Boleyn novels suggest that the construction of the bitch-figure confronted the reality of surviving the Tudor court culture, when the bitch had more chance of enduring than the innocent.

Burstein (2007) reminds us of that there has always been prejudice against the woman who refuses silence. Anne provides evidence of this, but the added complication of her life involved her in a time that saw the virtuous woman as a silent woman (Hannay 1985). Her rejection of silence combatted not only her gender, but also underlined her failure to bear her husband his son. Her female gender stripped her of real power to dictate her own destiny – and stripped her of the right to a voice and to control her own

story. The determination of Anne Boleyn to own her voice and story not only underlines her lack of power, but also became an act of self-destruction (Burstein 2007). If we return to Weisser's study of the bitch in romances, she almost seems to be referring to many Anne Boleyn novels when she says, 'the bitch seems to get away with murder, sexually or romantically speaking – until she herself is murdered by being expunged from the plot at the novel's end' (1994, p 279).

Mantel's *Wolf Hall* (2009) provides a vital example of a novel revising Anne Boleyn as the bitch. Cromwell reveals to the reader a woman who is not only a bitch, but also a shrew. Ambitious, unkind, destructive and humourless, Anne Boleyn apparently possesses no redeeming qualities at all. Her very appearance is witch-like, a woman of 'black looks' (Mantel 2009, p. 201). Mantel descriptions of Anne illuminate Cromwell's dislike and distrust of her, as can be noted from the following passages from the novel:

Sheba makes Anne look bad: sallow and sharp. She stands by the window, her fingers tugging and ripping at a sprig of rosemary. When she sees him, she drops it, and her hands dip back into her trailing sleeves (Mantel 2009, 164).

Two days later he is alone with Anne; she is tucked into a window embrasure, eyes closed, basking like a cat in a scarce shaft of winter sun. She stretches out her hand to him, hardly knowing who he is; any man will do? He takes her fingertips. Her black eyes snap open. It's like a shop when the shutters are taken down; good morning, Master Cromwell, what can we sell each other today? (Mantel 2009, p. 352).

The latter scene demonstrates the lust of the bitch for material gain, which points to this scene as constructed through capitalist/ patriarchal ideology (Weisser 1994). The subtext of Anne's well-fed, cat-like contentment also speaks to Burstein's contention that while the king's bedding of a woman may give her access to his power, this power was



dependent on his desire. Her value was part and parcel of this desire; without it, she was just another used and discarded woman (Burstein 2007).

Reading *Wolf Hall*, I wondered how any reader, especially those with little knowledge of what history tells us about Anne Boleyn, could understand Henry VIII's attraction to her. It is clear that *Wolf Hall* constructs the stereotypical bad woman of no virtue, a woman deserving of her bad end through her selfish, heartless behaviour.

Another very important and influential novel is Philippa Gregory's *The Other Boleyn Girl* (2001). Gregory – despite saying she believes that Anne was innocent of the charges resulting in her execution (Gregory 2003) – shapes a seemingly cold, very calculating Anne Boleyn. Gregory's Anne Boleyn often behaves with all the traits of a bitch, as well as forever hissing and striking out like a snake. This novel is narrated through the voice of Mary Boleyn, Anne Boleyn's sister and passive rival. Mary persuades the reader of Anne Boleyn's frantic desperation to become pregnant, and therefore remain queen, and leaves the impression that she sleeps with their brother George to achieve this. Once again, here is an example from the novel of Anne Boleyn, the Bitch in action:

“Well hear this,” she hissed in my ear. “Hear this Mary. I am playing my own game and I don't want you interrupting. Nobody will know anything until I am ready to tell them, and then they will know everything too late.”

“You're going to make him love you?”

Abruptly she released me and I gripped my elbow and arm where the bones ached.

“I'm going to make him marry me,” she said flatly. “And if you so much as breathe a word to anyone, then I will kill you” (Gregory 2003 p. 123).

My first novel, *Dear Heart, How Like You This?* (2002) revises Anne Boleyn in a far more sympathetic light. Narrating the story of Anne Boleyn through the voice of Sir Thomas Wyatt, the poet, one important subtext of the story ponders about the nature of

love; another even more vital subtext engages with gender inequality. Brazilian scholar Flávia Andrade explicates this further by discussing the construction of my text through the standpoint of gender. She reminds us that *Dear Heart, How Like You This?* is written through the perspective of a man who narrates the story of Anne Boleyn; thus, the text constructs a story of a Tudor male making sense of a Tudor woman and her actions in what may be seen as a parody of a phallogocentric society (Andrade 2013). Andrade is correct in identifying the purpose of Wyatt's relationships with women in my novel. Not only were they constructed through my understanding of the context of this period, but they also served to demonstrate the oppression experienced by Tudor women, from physical violence to fates determined by men (Andrade 2013, p.246) <sup>i</sup>.

Andrade appreciates my efforts to challenge the bitch narrative for the Anne Boleyn story through constructing a strong, independent, thoughtful female who also is a fallible human being who makes mistakes. My fictional Anne Boleyn also seizes control of her body, for a short time, when she decides to lose her virginity to Thomas Wyatt because he has loved her all her life, rather than to the King who seeks to possess her. My novel, and others imagining a love affair between Anne Boleyn and Wyatt, not only depict a doomed passion, but also offer to Anne Boleyn a sexual power of choice she is denied in her relationship with Henry VIII (Burstein 2007). Thus, the text of *Dear Heart, How Like You This?* constructs a Tudor woman through the perspective of a Tudor man, but it is also a representation that goes against the traditional canon (Andrade 2013, p.237) <sup>ii</sup>.

I constructed Tom Wyatt not only as a man who loved Anne Boleyn, but also through my knowledge of the Tudor period. Whilst Tom recognized Anne Boleyn as a woman who stood apart from other Tudor women, he was often bemused by Anne's attempts to drive her own life, her identity and destiny. Thus, despite telling it through a male perspective, *Dear Heart, How Like You This?* is a story constructed through a feminist standpoint. In a more general sense, Burstein deepens the discussion about how Anne Boleyn novels such as mine are often played out. Gender roles determine the destiny of both Anne Boleyn and Henry VIII – 'the would-be woman of power silenced and shattered; the man in charge decaying into sexual self-parody – both figures are trapped by dramatic irony'

(Burstein 2007, p 16).

Andrade's study of my novel also demonstrates the error of claiming the historical novel as a conservative vehicle (Nelson 2007). Rather, it demonstrates how 'everyday language is not neutral; it bears within it the presuppositions and cultural assumptions of a whole tradition' (Lechte 2007, p. 109) and enables the reader to become the author of the text (Barthes 1977). As Barthes writes, 'The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from innumerable centres of culture' (1977, p. 146).

Lukacs (1983, p. 19) discusses a perceived feature of the failed historical novel; that is, the work simply puts costumes on modern characters and does not strive to faithfully mirror a particular epoch of history. In my historical fiction, I strive to achieve what Lukacs describes as a representation of realism through the art of the novel (Lukacs 1983, p. 19; Kundera 2003). I seek to avoid crafting a story like that found in *The Favor of Kings* (1912), which embodies Anne not through the context of her own period, but as an aware feminist who sees herself positioned to change the world (Burstein 2007). Thus, my writing navigates a tight path that strives for verisimilitude as well as engaging the reader of today.

By situating my work within Anne Boleyn novels I arrived at a deeper appreciation of why I and other women writers are so drawn to her story. The story of Anne Boleyn engages women writers in an imaginative reconstruction of the Tudor period – a time when women were educated about their inferiority, sinful natures and that a virtuous woman was a silent woman. I believe this results in an empathetic engagement with feminist standpoint (past and present) and an understanding that the story of Anne Boleyn not only demonstrates a story of a woman who resisted these narratives, but offers inspiration for the empowerment of our own lives.

Byatt seems to be referring to women writers when she says, 'I think the fact we have in some sense been forbidden to think about history is one reason why so many novelists have taken to it' (cited by Heilmann & Llewellyn 2004, p. 137). Women writers are not

only re-writing women's stories into history and giving voice to the silences, but also reclaiming their own stories through empathetic understanding of *the Other*. It is through this understanding that women deepen their awareness of the existing master narratives in place that must be rewritten for a more equal world.

'[O]nly women are said to be able to read and correctly understand other women' (Weisser 1994, pp. 269-70). Atwood (1998, p. 1504) reminds us '[t]he closer the fiction is to us as readers, the more we recognize and claim it as individual rather than collective'. With Anne Boleyn as an example of a narrative provided by feminist standpoint, all this perhaps helps to explain why women are so drawn to the story of Anne Boleyn – both as writers and readers.

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### Endnotes:

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<sup>i</sup> I sincerely thank Dr Andrade for her help in translating these following passages:

...Tomas, ao apresentar sua versão dos fatos e relatar os diversos relacionamentos que teve com mulheres (Anne, Elizabeth, Lucrecia, Ângela), explicita a opressão da mulher no sistema patriarcal. O poeta é um homem que narra o pensamento e o comportamento dos homens em relação às mulheres. E, assim, o texto torna visíveis diversas situações de violência vividas pelas mulheres no passado e no presente: estupros, espancamentos, exploração sexual, assassinatos (Andrade 2013, p. 246)

<sup>ii</sup> Quanto a Anne, Tomas se esforça por narrá-la a partir de um padrão de representação tradicional da figura feminina. Contudo, alguns caracteres, sentimentos e atitudes da heroína, mencionadas pelo narrador, tais como, a indomabilidade, a independência, os desejos de vingança e a entrega sexual sem amor, revelam a falácia dessa representação. A repetição com diferença do discurso literário patriarcal, observada no texto de Dunn, revela um distanciamento crítico em relação a esses discursos. E constitui um questionamento das práticas discursivas-representacionais da figura feminina dentro do cânone literário tradicional, do qual o poeta faz parte, sendo um dos fundadores da literatura de língua inglesa. (Andrade 2013, p. 237)