



An Unchaste Life: Memoir of a Tudor Queen

Anne Cato

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Most people know of Henry VIII. The notorious King of England married annulled and/or had executed six wives. His obsessive search for the perfect woman (and the perfect heir) highlighted the Tudor era's preoccupation with the control of women and their sexuality. To tell the female perspective on this period Ann Cato's fictional memoir *An Unchaste Life* gets inside the head of wife number five Catherine Howard.

Competing influences shape the life of the ill-fated queen. As an ungoverned girl in the care of her step-grandmother Catherine becomes involved with men early on. Two characters—Tom Culpepper the rough country swain and Francis Dereham the poor but respectable courtier—pull her desires in different directions. When Catherine's uncle gets her a place as Anne of Cleves' (wife number four's) lady-in-waiting Catherine soon falls for Henry. She hopes that her marriage to him will restore the name of her family sullied by the execution of cousin Anne Boleyn (wife number two). But Catherine's titular "unchaste life" ruins her union and she dies executed at twenty-one.

Cato an Australian-born lawyer well-versed in economics and history has clearly done her research. Her depictions of historical personages are as lively and detailed as the paintings that she no doubt referred to. Furthermore she weaves her information into plot with unobtrusive skill. Thus the large clearly identified cast never exceeds one's grasp even though many characters share first names.

Cato's measured prose matches her regal subject. Here Catherine age fifteen watches mummings: "As they twirled and thumped the long colourful streamers attached to their shoulders created a whirlwind of dazzling lines and curves. The bells at their wrists ankles and knees were a merry ringing accompaniment to their vigorous movements. Already seduced by the gay commotion around me by the sweet cloying scents from the bellows and pomanders now I was overcome..." Cato evokes all sensations of Tudor life with immediacy.

At her best when portraying a lusty protagonist in conflict with a repressive society Cato sometimes stumbles in her characterization of that repression. For example at several points in the book male characters say that feminine desire is natural God-given and good. Given the general Tudor panic over women's sexual activity such a permissive attitude sounds a false note in an otherwise believable piece of historical fiction.

The ripeness of Cato's writing (and the distressingly frequent appearance of those clichés excited "loins") gives *An Unchaste Life* the melodrama of a romance but something more serious is at work here. With the fate of supposed witch Anne Boleyn hanging over her Catherine worries that her sexual desires may betoken evil in herself. As Cato demonstrates the Tudor patriarchy personified by the paternity-obsessed Henry VIII saw woman as dangerous scary creatures whose lust had to be controlled. By reimagining Catherine's life and feelings Cato gives us a stirring exploration of women sex and power that is just as pertinent today even though the subject died over 450 years ago.

ELIZABETH ALLEN (July 31, 2006)

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