

***The Other Boleyn Girl* (Justin Chadwick 2008)**

Joanne Hall

This sumptuous-looking film tells the story of two sisters, Mary (Scarlett Johansson) and Anne Boleyn (Natalie Portman), and their respective, though overlapping, relationships with England's King Henry VIII (Eric Bana). The first, a love affair born out of forced concubinage, the second, an overly manipulated mismatch fuelled by ambition and political intrigue. Thus, the narrative is pared down to a rivalry between two sisters, at the expense of examining how these relationships shaped a nation. Peter Morgan's screenplay is adapted from the novel of the same name by bestselling author, Philippa Gregory, and the aforementioned simplifying approach is arguably a feature of the adaption process; however, the film's tendency to compress time, events, and even people, occasionally leads to moments which, at worst, do not make sense, and, at best, create the impression of carelessness on the behalf of story and continuity supervisors.

Yet, *Boleyn Girl* is notable for its transatlantic affiliations: it is based on a text by a best-selling UK author re-telling a period of British history beloved of the historical novelist, while being unashamedly a US studio production showcasing the dramatic prowess of American starlets. Indeed, the performances of both Portman and Johansson are to be praised. Johansson provides her usual ponderously thoughtful turn, which, in this context, appears as dullness next to Portman's brittleness. Thus, the sisters' respective lack of artifice and shining vivacity are successfully portrayed and contrasted. However, individual performances achieve greater impact than the collective effort that the film represents. Though it is clearly a member of that exciting subgenre known as the "bodice ripper," it does not capitalise fully on the sources and subject matters available to it, and, as a result, is merely adequate, rather than outstanding.

The most interesting and problematic elements of the piece reside in its representation of the central love triangle. Though Anne willingly enters into a courtship with Henry, the relationship descends into acrimony and sexual violence before the marriage, suggesting that her "spell" is broken. In spite of her family's objections, Anne pursues Henry and appears to choose to begin the relationship. However, her feelings seem to be born out of her desire for revenge

and her need to chastise her sister. This is implicitly contrasted with Mary's relationship with Henry, which, though entered into unwillingly, is represented as loving. Mary's objections to her forced concubinage are brushed away when Henry reveals he empathises with her feelings of being overshadowed by an older sibling. Thus, in an alarmingly simplistic and unproblematised manner, elements of familial coercion and royal decree are forgotten, love blossoms and sexual interaction is framed as consensual. The representation of romantic love and freewill, not the feuding sisters, becomes the central tension of *Boleyn Girl*. However, this is a conflict that the film both creates and struggles to represent in its full complexity. Indeed, this missed opportunity embodies *Boleyn Girl's* privileging of style at the expense of substance.