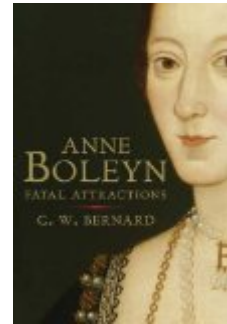


G. W. Bernard. *Anne Boleyn: Fatal Attractions*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010. ix + 237 pp. \$30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-16245-5.

Reviewed by Jeri L. McIntosh (University of Tennessee)

Published on H-Albion (September, 2011)

Commissioned by Margaret McGlynn



Anne Boleyn: The Daughter of Debate

Around 1568, Elizabeth I composed a poem, “The Doubt of Future Foes,” concerning Mary Stewart, in which she referred to the Scottish queen as “the daughter of debate.” The soubriquet could equally well be applied to Elizabeth I’s mother, Anne Boleyn. Anne was Henry VIII’s second wife. For nearly seven years, Anne was a queen-consort in waiting while Henry sought help from the Roman Catholic Church to extricate himself from his first marriage to Katherine of Aragon. Eventually, Henry gave up, separated the English church from the Roman Catholic one (the first iteration of the English Reformation) and in early 1533 married a pregnant Anne Boleyn. After she gave birth to Elizabeth in September, Anne had two miscarriages. In 1536, Henry ordered Anne’s arrest on charges of treason and adultery. Seven men were also arrested on suspicion they were her lovers. Five were tried (including her own brother) and one confessed his guilt (possibly under torture). All those tried, including the queen, were found guilty and executed. A wildly controversial figure in her own time, she has continued to attract defenders and opponents in popular depictions from novels, movies, and television series. One would suppose that her continuing representation in the academy amongst professional historians would be tame in comparison to these mainstream portrayals intended to entertain and titillate. However, G. W. Bernard’s *Anne Boleyn: Fatal Attractions* is anything but tame. Televised wrestling matches are tea parties at the vicarage compared to the take-no-prisoners prose of Bernard’s *Anne Boleyn*.

This is more of a consideration of Henry VIII’s second queen than a regular biography. Bernard’s aim here is to correct what he perceives as problems with how Anne Boleyn has been presented in popular venues like Web sites and in academic books that have cross-over appeal to non-specialists. He is taking special aim at Eric Ives’s magisterial *Anne Boleyn* (1986; revised and reissued as *The Life and Death of Anne Boleyn*, 2004) and David Starkey’s *Six Wives of Henry VIII* (2003).[1] In service of his goal of correcting the errors of previous historians, Bernard presents the reader not with what Anne Boleyn was but what she was not: she was not an early Protestant “evangelical”; she was not the one who withheld sex before marriage in her relationship with Henry VIII; and she was not innocent of the charges of adultery that led to her trial and execution at the age of thirty-five. Anne Boleyn here is a rather passive figure, always deferring to Henry VIII except when she becomes “defiant” (p. 187) by sleeping with other men after her marriage to Henry in retribution for him taking mistresses.

Like those who bought and read Ives’s *Anne Boleyn* and Starkey’s *Six Wives*, the intended audience for this book is both non-specialists and fellow academic laborers in the field of Tudor England. It is not classroom-friendly at either the undergraduate or graduate level. It is both historiographically dense and light on current trends of inflecting political history with insights drawn from cultural or gender studies. There are several instances where Bernard directly addresses the reader to shed light on how professional historians do (or should

do) their work or to unburden himself of a lecture warning against the historical inaccuracies of popular representations. This reviewer sympathizes. Upon viewing *Elizabeth: The Movie* (1998), I wondered about the possibility of setting up a legal defense fund for historical characters. Bernard takes the opportunity afforded by the book to correct what he perceives as a rush to judgement made by historians like Ives and Starkey that have colored popular representations of Anne Boleyn.

Bernard argues that the sources do not support the widely accepted and disseminated idea that Anne Boleyn was an “evangelical” or proto-protestant (p. 121). Coming from so accomplished and eminent a historian as Bernard, known for his work on the Tudor nobility and also on the English Reformation, this is a serious allegation.[2] His citations, notes, and bibliography all testify to his indefatigable and exhaustive range as researcher. Moreover, he is scrupulously fair to the reader. Whenever he challenges a consensus interpretation (which he does frequently), he first lays out his evidence before the reader, follows that with the consensus (or wrong interpretation as he sees it), and then presents his own reading of the sources. The reader is thus well provided with the material to form an independent judgement. Yet, this laudable method can backfire. After considering all the evidence presented by Bernard to show that Anne Boleyn was not an “evangelical” and that she played no significant role as a patron of reformers or a champion of vernacular translation of the Bible, this reviewer was unable to escape the opposite conclusion: that this evidence clearly showed that she was firmly in the reformist camp and an important patron of evangelicals.

At one point in another discussion, Bernard admonishes the reader to remember that people are complex and “all too often behave in ways that go against ideals that they have themselves upheld” (p. 186). This undoubted truism has bedeviled attempts to pigeon-hole the religious belief of mid sixteenth-century people in England as “Catholic,” “Lutheran,” or “Puritan,” giving rise to more equivocal terms like “evangelical,” “conformist,” and “Henrician catholic” as more reflective of the highly personal nature of an individual’s faith.[3] For example, Elizabeth I was a committed Protestant yet she opposed clerical marriage, supported a clerical hierarchy, and preferred ornate ceremonies during religious service.[4] Her mother was similarly inconsistent, as Eric Ives recognized long ago.[5] Anne Boleyn supported vernacular translation of the Bible and the royal supremacy, yet also valued the sacraments and the mass.

The point where Bernard stresses the complexity of individuals is where he tries to make sense of Anne Boleyn’s fall and execution by offering the argument that the queen was guilty of adultery. Bernard is not the first to consider this possibility. Eric Ives reviewed the transcripts of Anne’s indictments, specifically the charges of adultery and high treason. Ives concluded that the evidence of adultery does not come close to proving the charge, either by modern standards or by those of the time.[6] However, Bernard has a “hunch” (p. 192) and an anti-Boleyn poem composed by Lancelot de Carles, a servant of the French ambassador. The fact that de Carles witnessed neither the trial nor the execution does not bother Bernard. The flawed documentary basis of the charges in which Anne was accused of committing adultery two months after Elizabeth’s birth or at Greenwich when she was, in fact, at Hampton Court, are “errors of transcription” (p. 166). It is only by “imagining evidence that does not survive” (p. 170), dismissing the inaccuracies in Anne’s indictments, evincing skepticism about the repeated and consistent denials of all the principals charged (except Mark Smeaton), and uncritically accepting one hostile poem as if it were an objective account, that Bernard is able to construct the semblance of an argument for Anne’s guilt.

The above problem is likely the result of the author being pulled in many directions at the same time: peer readers’ reports demanding supported arguments; popular enchantment with unconventional insights; and Bernard’s own view that Anne was probably guilty despite the lack of supporting evidence. It is a situation most scholars experience at one time or another—hunches that are not supported by the documentary evidence. It is very frustrating. Bernard is too good a historian not to notice the lack of credible evidence against Anne but he insists that “sometimes gossip is true” (p. 164). Indeed, but it is more often harmful though unintentional slander without factual basis. Perhaps his publisher stressed word count so Bernard was not given enough space to inflect his narrative with insights from gender history that would have contextualized his charges that Anne Boleyn was widely regarded as a “harlot” (p. 184). If Yale University Press did restrict Bernard in this way, it did him a disservice. It was commonplace in Tudor England to lob a charge of sexual immorality at women accused of witchcraft, heresy, gossip-mongering, disruption, or any behavior the accuser disapproved of.[7] The fact that many people attacked Anne Boleyn for sexual misconduct (without specific evidence) demonstrates only that she was as vulnerable to this un-

substantiated slur as the rest her gender in patriarchal sixteenth-century England.

One of the long-recognized perils of the biographical format is that authors become too personally involved with the figures in their study. Bernard finds that Henry “reasonably” (p. 191) reached his conviction that Anne was guilty of adultery, incest, and treason. According to Bernard, Anne was exhibiting behavior not “befitting her new status” as queen (p. 165). From the fact that she discussed Henry VIII’s impotency with her brother, George, Bernard (citing T. B. Pugh) infers that she was obviously looking for a lover since “a woman never mentions her husband’s impotency unless she is willing to take a lover” (p. 169). Bernard finds that George Boleyn was clearly innocent of the charge of incest (his conviction was a “conundrum,” p. 177), but was nevertheless guilty of “effrontery” (p. 179). These are highly debatable value judgments possibly helpful for the popular audience but scholars may prefer to form their own opinions after reviewing the evidence.

Bernard wisely follows Ives in positing that the relationship between Anne and Henry was a real one and that it may have been Henry rather than Anne who held back from full sexual intercourse until marriage (p. 31). This is one instance where there has been a positive reflection of academic discourse in even the most salacious pop-cultural representation. Michael Hirst, screenwriter for Showtime’s *The Tudors* (2007-10), had clearly read Ives’s *Anne Boleyn* and therefore avoided the previously accepted depiction of Anne Boleyn as a cold-hearted and calculating gold-digger. It is only by following Ives in restoring the genuineness of this relationship that Anne Boleyn’s tragic fate is recognized for what it was—a profoundly shocking event that mystified contemporaries and eludes satisfactory explanation to this day.

This reviewer shares Bernard’s and Retha Warnicke’s disquiet over the traditional political-factional explanation for Anne Boleyn’s fall and execution along with five men on charges of adultery. Warnicke suggested that Anne’s last miscarriage was of a deformed fetus, triggering a historically specific reaction in Henry VIII that led to the queen’s trial and execution.[8] For Bernard, the Scottish legal principle of a “not proven” (p. 183) verdict which leaves the accused still shrouded in a cloud of suspicion despite a lack of evidence against them is more fair to Anne than the Anglo-American legal maxim of “innocent until proven guilty.” Bernard proceeds from the assumption that Anne was guilty but concedes that the king’s prosecution did not prove their case. Although

there is no evidence to support either Bernard’s or Warnicke’s theories of why Henry turned so suddenly on Anne, they are probably right to seek a non-rational explanation. A full understanding of Anne’s fall and execution may never be achieved as it lies in the realm of the psyche and of irrationalism, which leave few traces in the documentary record. But both Bernard and Warnicke have done what scholars are supposed to do: suggest explanations they find plausible in their publications and see if their colleagues find them convincing. They may not have enough documentary evidence to support their arguments but they deserve credit for thinking outside the box.

Notes

[1]. For previous iterations of the debate over Anne Boleyn between Bernard and Ives, see G. W. Bernard, “The Fall of Anne Boleyn,” *English Historical Review* 106, no. 420 (July 1991): 584-610; E. W. Ives, “The Fall of Anne Boleyn Reconsidered,” *English Historical Review* 107, no. 424 (July 1992): 561-664; G. W. Bernard, “The Fall of Anne Boleyn: A Rejoinder,” *English Historical Review*, 107, no. 424 (July 1992): 665-674; G. W. Bernard, “Anne Boleyn’s Religion,” *The Historical Journal* 36, no. 1 (March 1993): 1-20; and E. W. Ives, “Anne Boleyn and the Early Reformation in England: The Contemporary Evidence,” *The Historical Journal* 37, no. 2 (June 1994): 389-400.

[2]. G. W. Bernard, *The King’s Reformation: Henry VIII and the Remaking of the English Church* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), and *The Power of the Early Tudor Nobility: A Study of the Fourth and Fifth Earls of Shrewsbury* (Sussex: Harvester Press, 1985).

[3]. For the fluidity of historiographic terminology on religion in early modern England, see the essays in S. Wabuda and C. Litzenberger, eds., *Belief and Practice in Reformation England: A Tribute to Patrick Collinson from His Students* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998).

[4]. For an interdisciplinary appreciation of the complexity of Elizabeth’s faith, see R. Bowers, “The Chapel Royal, the First Edwardian Prayer Book, and Elizabeth’s Settlement of Religion, 1559,” *The Historical Journal* 43, no. 2 (June 2000): 317-344.

[5]. Ives, *The Life and Death of Anne Boleyn* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 283.

[6]. *Ibid.*, 344.

[7]. Laura Gowing, “Women, Status and the Popular Culture of Dishonour,” *Transactions of the Royal His-*

torical Society, sixth series, vol. 6 (1996): 225-234. This was a feature not just of Tudor England but many other early modern patriarchal societies in western Europe, see for example, L. Roper, "Witchcraft and Fantasy in Early Modern Germany," *History Workshop* 32 (Autumn 1991): 19-43; and K. A. Edwards, "Female Sociability, Physical-

ity, and Authority in an Early Modern Haunting," *Journal of Social History* 33, no. 3 (Spring 2000): 601-621.

[8]. R. Warnicke, *The Rise and Fall of Anne Boleyn: Family Politics at the Court of Henry VIII* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), chap. 8.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-albion>

Citation: Jeri L. McIntosh. Review of Bernard, G. W., *Anne Boleyn: Fatal Attractions*. H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. September, 2011.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=30932>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.