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Sharon L. Jansen. *Dangerous Talk and Strange Behavior: Women and Popular Resistance to the Reforms of Henry VIII.* New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996. viii + 232 pp. $39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-312-16090-6.

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A renewed interest in popular attitudes and actions during the English Reformation has resulted in a wealth of new books and articles examining popular piety and local practice. The myth of a magisterial reformation imposed on a largely indifferent population has been shattered. Sixteenth century English people expressed passionate concern about the religious issues of the day.[1] One striking element that emerges from this recent scholarship is the prominent role played by ordinary people, and ordinary women, in religion. From Anne Askew's fiery Protestantism to the staunch Catholicism of Elizabethan recusants such as Margaret Clitherow, the Tudor religious agenda was in large part driven by the role of women.

Sharon L. Jansen, building off of these new trends in historical scholarship, proposes to study the political actions of women during the Henrician Reformation.[2] She is well aware that this is a difficult distinction for a period "remarkable for religious, political, institutional and social change" (p. 2). However, Jansen contends that "while I would have been hard-pressed to draw a line separating Tudor reform from Tudor Reformation, I could separate women whose protests were primarily about doctrine or dogma from women whose protests were more clearly about legitimate authority and right rule" (p. 141). Jansen examines four women's stories beginning with that of Margaret Cheyne, executed in the aftermath of the 1536 Pilgrimage of Grace. Her most familiar example is that of Elizabeth Barton, the prophetic Holy Maid of Kent, executed in 1534. Less well known are the cases of Elizabeth Wood, an ordinary woman of Norfolk sentenced to death for praising the failed Walsingham rebellion of 1537 and Mabel Brigge, condemned for having undertaken a "Black Fast" reportedly directed against the king. Each woman's story merits two chapters, outlining the woman's story and placing it into contemporary and historiographic context.

Jansen's intention is to use the stories as "detailed case studies around which to organize a wider discussion of the types of political activities undertaken by women, for many of whom the extant records are not so complete" (p. 3). Consciously, Jansen made the decision to eliminate those women traditionally discussed in terms of political action: queens and noblewomen. Katherine of Aragon and Anne Boleyn feature only as the focus of popular attitudes and actions. Excepting Margaret Cheyne, whom Jansen plausibly places as an illegitimate daughter of Edward Stafford, third duke of Buckingham, who himself was executed for treason in 1521, the women of *Dangerous Talk and Strange Behavior* come from the common ranks of Tudor society. The relative obscurity of their lives and deaths support Jansen's assertion that ordinary Tudor women took active roles in the immense changes of Henry VIII's reign. But at the end the reader remains with two nagging questions. First, is politics successfully disentangled from religion? Second, is the political agenda, which Jansen attributes to her subjects, genuine, or is it created by the courts and accusers?

Each of the four women convicted were entangled in complex issues of political and religious resistance. Margaret Cheyne's crime was to encourage her husband, Sir John Bulmer, to take part in the Pilgrimage of Grace against Henry VIII's Reformation and reforms. The rebellion built upon a combination of economic, social, political and religious resentments festering in the North of England. Witnesses attested that Margaret Cheyne had encouraged her husband to join the Pilgrimage of Grace and, fatally, to continue treasonous activities after the rebellion's failure in the autumn of 1536. She, herself, admitted that she incited Bulmer to resist the king. But was this a political decision, or, as Jansen herself suggests, the words of "a woman who wanted desperately to get out of the way of danger, not to plunge her husband or herself into it any further"? (p. 17). Jansen continues to undermine her case for Margaret Cheyne's political motivations. Little evidence survives documenting Margaret Cheyne's activities during the rebellion.[3] Her treason conviction appears to have been based upon the vague assertions of a few individuals. At the same time,

other women, such as Lady Rhys, Lady Anne Hussey and Elizabeth Stapleton, took seemingly far more active roles in the rebellion yet escaped unscathed. But according to Jansen, Margaret Cheyne's parentage, combined with hostile relations with her in-laws, arguably left her dangerously vulnerable to the machinations of her enemies and accusers. Nevertheless, Jansen confidently declares that, "I would argue that Margaret Cheyne's presence among the rebels during the Pilgrimage of Grace was deliberate rather than accidental, her participation in the rebellion much more significant than historians have realized" (p. 34).

The story of Elizabeth Barton, the Nun or Holy Maid of Kent, is well known to Tudor historians. Sharon Jansen skillfully recounts her rise to status as a celebrated prophet, meeting with such notables as Bishop Fisher, Sir Thomas More and Gertrude Courtenay, the marchioness of Exeter. Using her earlier research into political prophecy, Jansen makes a strong case for Barton's awareness of the tradition of political protection couched in allegorical terms. "Rather than being a visionary or a pawn, [Elizabeth Barton] might instead have deliberately chosen to address political issues about which she felt strongly, voicing at least some of her opinions in the language of these popular texts" (p. 72). Certainly, Jansen seems justified in presenting Elizabeth Barton as an independent individual and not some mouthpiece of conservative agents. However, Jansen's emphasis on the political elements of Barton's later prophecies should not come at the expense of obvious religious concerns. Is it fair to deny the religious implications of Barton's attacks upon the divorce? By 1532, given her connections to court, she must have been aware of the Protestant sympathies attributed to Anne Boleyn's followers and some of King Henry VIII's intimates. By focusing on politics, Jansen also downplays some intriguing connections she suggests. For instance, why were Barton's views so widely sought? The credibility given to Elizabeth Barton's prophecy in a day of institutional misogyny links into a continental wide phenomenon of women visionaries to which Jansen herself alludes (pp. 70-71). They are mentioned only briefly. Jansen misses the opportunity to explore the gendered threat posed by the Holy Maid of Kent to Henry VIII's rule.

The third case study looks at the heretofore-obscure case of Elizabeth Wood, convicted for treasonous words spoken at the tailor's shop window in Aylesham. Quoting popular prophecy she reportedly denounced Henry VIII's rule and declared: "It is a pity he filed any clouts more than one" (p. 81).[4] Unfortunately, little more is preserved in the historical record about Elizabeth Wood's crimes. Jansen attempts to fill in the gap by relating this case to a number of other investigations into women's treasonable words. Many of these parallels relate to the king's divorce, but some examples deal with Henry himself or a variety of policies. As Jansen notes, Henrician legislation, particularly the 1534 Treason Act and the 1536 Succession Act, dramatically broadened the definition of treason. Now, words were enough to condemn a person, as Elizabeth Wood sadly found.

The last case in Jansen's book is the saddest. Mabel Brigge was executed in 1538 for carrying out a black fast against the king and the duke of Norfolk. In the retelling, a delicate web of local politics emerges. Brigge was apparently hired by Isabel Buck to perform a fast. The two women asserted that its purpose was the recovery of money which Buck had lost. Fasting was a common religious activity in early modern England, often publicly prescribed by religious authorities as evidence of contrition. However, according to two witnesses, Mabel Brigge's fast was not penitential but depraved. A black fast was a witch's tool to injure another. Mabel Brigge, therefore, was accused of treasonous witchcraft. Despite her protestations of innocence and some corroborating testimony, she was quickly sentenced and executed. Interestingly enough, Jansen notes that her employer, Isabel Buck, was reprieved. As with Wood's case, the context of Brigge's conviction is provided in a host of similar examples of disorderly conduct or suspect religious activities.

In her conclusion, Jansen reiterates several important arguments stemming from her research into these cases. She maintains that most women of the time "must have been aware of what they were saying and doing" (p. 143) In other words, the political implications of their speaking against royal policy and behavior was not lost on these women or their contemporaries. That many women testified as witnesses in such cases also supports Jansen's belief that early Tudor women were politically aware. She also found that marital and social status did not affect the verdict. These suggestions challenge the commonplace that rank and marriage usually served to protect women from prosecution in the early modern period. Finally, Jansen argues that when it comes to treasonable words, there is no significant gender difference. But beyond that, little more can be deduced than the fact that "women, many women, did engage in politically oriented comment, action, and reaction" (p. 144).

Jansen's insistence upon separating out political motivations from religious ones weakens her conclusion. Most of the treason that she describes related as much

to spiritual matters as to secular. Criticisms of Henry's divorce might well be not so much political statements as reflections of the faith, allegiance and morality of Englishwomen and men. On the sketchy trial records (often without any first hand accounts from the women in question), it is difficult to be certain about the accused women's motivations. Ordinary English subjects held strong opinions regarding their monarchs and governments. Are these, by definition, political? Jansen would have you think so. I am less certain than she that simply because the cases do not involve dogma or doctrine that they are political. In the troubled years of the Henrician reformation, comments which might have previously passed unnoticed now became treasonable. Religious disobedience and social disorder were closely related, at least in the minds of magistrates and ministers, to political disobedience. Consequently, numerous investigations into these forms of "dangerous talk" ensued, particularly after the Pilgrimage of Grace. Jansen would have been wise to avoid singling out politics in her examination of women's resistance. There are also some tantalizing areas she touches upon in her work. Of chief issue, is how the treason cases of these women reflect the gender views of Tudor society. The presence of so many women in these cases challenges the common belief that women's words were more readily excused or overlooked by early modern governors. While "in most cases what they said seems to have been recognized for what it was–foolish talk" (p. 101), the court records attest to authorities' concerns and women's vulnerabilities.

Jansen's book is a valuable exploration of women and resistance in Henrician England. Hampered by a paucity of materials, she nevertheless presents four cases of women who threatened the stability of the regime sufficiently that they were executed. Add to that the supporting examples which she presents and you have a strong case for further re-examining our assumptions about the place of women in Tudor society. I remain uncomfortable with her categorization of all these practices as distinctly political, and might challenge her contention that all of these women were consciously challenging authority. The evidence remains inconclusive. However, I applaud the work that has gone into investigating and presenting these women's cases. I only wish that editorial efforts had been so exhaustive–the table of contents glaringly misspells "behavior" twice. Some readers may be disappointed at the size. The book is slim and notes comprise over a quarter of the volume. Jansen leaps back and forth from her main figure in each chapter to discuss similar examples or provide context. As such, the work demands attentive reading to follow the narrative. For the specialist interested in the subject, *Dangerous Talk and Strange Behavior* is a rewarding read.

NOTES:

[1]. Most notably Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England, 1400-1580*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992) and J. J Scarisbrick, *The Reformation and the English People*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994).

[2]. Barbara Harris focused on prominent women of the court in her article "Women and Politics in Early Tudor England" *Historical Journal*, v. 33 (1990), pp. 259-281.

[3]. If Margaret Cheyne's role is obscure, Bulmer's is well documented. See Michael Bush, *The Pilgrimage of Grace: A Study of the Rebel Armies of October 1536*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), pp. 159-160, 171-172, 392.

[4]. Jansen properly glosses "clout" as a slang term for "pocket" and suggests that Wood's comments might be understood as "It's a pity the king has picked more than a single pocket" (p. 82). I would suggest that it might also be interpreted as slang for undergarments, turning Wood's phrase into an attack upon Henry's infidelity to Katherine of Aragon.

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