

G. W. Bernard. *Anne Boleyn: Fatal Attractions*.

New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010. 256 pp. index. append. illus. \$30. ISBN: 978-0-300-16245-5.

The ambition of G. W. Bernard's short biography of Anne Boleyn is great. Designed for the professional and the public alike, Bernard seeks to revisit all the major questions and historical controversies surrounding Anne's life and death, and to suggest fresh and provocative new answers that may not endear him to her modern fans, but which demand serious consideration.

Like all Bernard's work, the book is meticulously researched. He reviews all the available evidence to rethink virtually every assumption that historians have made about Anne. He is impressively systematic and scholarly: for instance, he relies not just on the *Letters and Papers* but has even trawled the Haus-, Hof-, und Staatsarchiv in Vienna (for Eustace Chapuys's accounts in manuscript).

Bernard's style is dispassionate and detached, thoughtfully discursive and enquiring, and even, at times, argumentative, although he happily refrains from lambasting other historians by name when he feels they have erred. He seeks to be judiciously fair and present all the relevant evidence — even if this sometimes appears to undermine his argument. His commitment to a fresh and fair reading of the sources is commendable.

Yet, despite all his erudition and judiciousness, his account is not entirely impartial — Bernard shepherds us towards certain, somewhat controversial, conclusions. He has three main targets: that it was Henry, and not Anne, who wished to abstain from sexual intercourse before their marriage; that Anne was “no ‘evangelical,’ no Lutheran, no proto-Protestant, but deeply attached to

the traditional liturgical ceremonies of the church” (123); and that Anne and those accused with her in 1536 may indeed have been guilty of the charges against them of adultery, incest, and conspiring the king’s death.

Of Henry and Anne’s premarital chastity, Bernard may overstate his case to say it was “manifestly Henry . . . who then deliberately refrained from full sexual relations,” despite some tantalizing evidence to support his theory. Henry did indeed sign a letter to Anne with the words, “written with the hand of him which desireth as much to be yours as you do to have him” (32), suggesting it was Henry who held back, not Anne. Yet why? Bernard suggests Henry would not have wanted his apparent passion for Anne to undermine the moral justification for an annulment of his marriage to Katherine, but then Bernard points out that Henry did undermine the moral core in precisely this way by sending his secretary William Knight to the pope in August 1527 to obtain permission to marry before securing the annulment.

On Anne’s religious beliefs, Bernard rejects the idea that she was an “evangelical.” He does this by controversially denying that any clear water lay between “evangelicalism” and “Protestantism” in the 1520 and ’30s (97–98). Instead, he reads the sermon delivered by Anne’s almoner, John Skip, on 2 April 1536 (the full text of which unusually survives) as an approximation of Anne’s own beliefs — conservative, opposed to the abolition of ceremonies, and hostile to “renovations” in religion (121–23).

Most fascinatingly of all, Bernard says that historians have too swiftly assumed Anne’s innocence of the charges ranged against her in 1536. He argues that although the legal proceedings against Anne and those accused with her were a travesty, this does not preclude their guilt, pointing

our attention to the evidence that has not survived and the fact that their peers judged the accused guilty. He also infers from the release of Wyatt that the matter was carefully investigated and that those who were tried were those against whom sufficient evidence of guilt remained.

His is a minority view, and in many ways, Bernard is being deliberately provocative: half of his purpose is to make us think again, not to accept theories at face value. Bringing an incisive mind to the question, Bernard tries to strip away the layers of accumulated legend. He concludes that Anne and her fellow defendants deserve the Scottish verdict of “non proven” (183). While enough evidence may now not survive to prove they were guilty, this does not, Bernard argues, make them innocent. There may have been fire behind the smoke.

SUZANNAH LIPSCOMB

University of East Anglia