

Retha M. Warnicke. *Wicked Women of Tudor England: Queens, Aristocrats, Commoners.*

Queenship and Power. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012. x + 272 pp. \$27. ISBN: 978-1-137-03237-9.

Retha Warnicke's *Wicked Women of Tudor England* corrects 500 years of historiography on six early modern English women, two queens, two aristocrats, and two commoners. All six are labeled wicked by their contemporaries. As Warnicke's research attests, however, these judgments have very little to do with their actions, but are fueled by a desire either to attack or to praise their husbands and are largely the result of early modern rumormongering. While twentieth- and twenty-first-century historians may not evaluate these women in quite the same terms, as Warnicke illustrates, they reinforce the label by relying on biased records and by assuming the women to be the subjects of anonymous literary allegories. Warnicke proves through logical reinterpretation of historical evidence and persuasive argumentation that such judgments distort understandings of the women's verifiable legacies. *Wicked* is a description that has stuck to all six women, but it is not one that can correctly be applied to any of them.

The introductory chapter situates within early modern culture the concept of *wicked*, a term that is gendered, and when applied to women encompasses a range of offenses, from murder and adultery to "contrariness and shrewishness" (1). In a culture that placed a high premium on reputation and where gossip and rumor "served as an important pastime" (3), married women, especially women whose husbands occupied prominent public positions, were susceptible to being attacked as wicked. The term potentially defames both wife and husband, calling into question her nature, but also possibly condemning him as a weak and ineffective master of his household. Given the public role of these women's husbands, Warnicke rightly shows that archival records have to be taken as suspect. Furthermore, Warnicke's consideration of the ways these records have been redeployed in modern scholarship demonstrates that the "patterns of slander and libel," so much a part of the early modern archive, continue to inform current understandings of them (181).

The book's subsequent six chapters — one for each of the women examined: Anne Boleyn; Katherine Howard; Anne Seymour, Duchess of Somerset; Lettice, Countess of Leicester and Essex; and Sir Thomas More's first and second wives, Jane and Alice — are organized into two parts. In the first Warnicke offers a thorough canvassing of the historiography of each woman by their contemporaries up to the present, while in the second she refutes the charges against them through

her painstaking process of reconsidering previous accounts of the women's lives and contextualizing historical records. Warnicke analyzes an impressive array of sources, including histories and chronicles, letters, diplomatic reports, polemical religious writings, and literary texts. She assesses the records, exposing biases, inaccuracies, and distortions. Ultimately, Warnicke restores Anne Boleyn's reputation, asserting that she is neither an adulterer nor a flirt, and persuasively argues that Katherine Howard is likely a victim of sexual abuse and predation. She equally asserts that the excessive haughtiness attributed to Anne Seymour; the sexual impropriety charged to Lettice, Countess of Leicester and Essex; and the unruliness and shrewishness assigned to Jane and Alice More, respectively, are myths. In other words, she clears the women's names, showing that none of them are "wicked."

Warnicke's book does not offer as refined a reading of literary texts as it does of other historical records. For instance, to support her position that Sir Thomas Wyatt's "Whoso list to hunt" is not an allegory of his rumored love for Anne Boleyn, she cites the flattering language from a dedicatory epistle framing a translation he wrote for Katherine of Aragon, claiming that "these do not sound like the sentiments" of a man in love with Anne (22–23). Considering the conventionality of such addresses, it does not necessarily follow that Wyatt would not have a romantic attachment to Anne, nor does it preclude him from writing poems to the king's beloved, which is a common courtly protocol. Warnicke's interpretation of the dedication is less convincing than the many other pieces of evidence she uses to challenge this common reading of Wyatt's sonnet.

On the whole, however, Warnicke's methodology should be taken as a model for future scholarship, as she cogently substantiates the biases and inaccuracies informing these women's historical reputations — in past and present writings — through her sensitive reconsideration of all known sources. While the book is intended for a scholarly audience, its prose is accessible and clear. It serves as necessary reading for anyone wishing to understand more about early modern attitudes toward gender, expectations of women's behavior, and the early modern culture of gossip.

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