



*Young and Damned and Fair:
The Life and Tragedy of Catherine
Howard at the Court of Henry VIII*

Gareth Russell

London: William Collins, 2017

Review by: Nicola Clark



Young and Damned and Fair: The Life and Tragedy of Catherine Howard at the Court of Henry VIII. By Gareth Russell. London: William Collins, 2017. ISBN 978-0-00-812827-2. xxx + 480 pp. £25.00.

As is the case with many biographical narratives written for a general audience, *Young and Damned and Fair* is difficult to review fairly for a scholarly journal, because scholars are not its primary intended audience, and academic analysis not its only goal. However, this is the case for the vast majority of new work on Catherine Howard, with little to no new academic research appearing in print in recent years. What Russell is trying to do is to provide an up-to-date, in-depth, source-led biography of Catherine Howard for a twenty-first century audience (the last, and still the one most used by academics, was Lacey Baldwin Smith's *A Tudor Tragedy: The Life and Times of Catherine Howard* published by Jonathan Cape in 1961, reissued under the title *Catherine Howard: The Queen Whose Adulteries Made a Fool of Henry VIII* by Amberley in 2010), and in this it is very successful.

Russell's credentials as an author would be considered by most academics to be stronger than those he has as a scholar; to date he has written two novels and four other non-fiction history books on topics as disparate as World War I and the English monarchy. This book has as its basis research undertaken for an MA dissertation on Catherine's household. The introduction lays out the book's specific focus and intention as one of myth-busting. Putting Catherine's household at the centre of her story, Russell claims, sheds new light not only on the role of Catherine's family, the Howards, in her rise and fall, but also "makes her story a grand tale of the Henrician court in its twilight" (xxv). It is the former that marks a new and worthwhile departure from the existing narrative. As Russell explains throughout, the "traditional image that has Norfolk pulling the strings of a willing puppet to ensure that Catherine's queenship functioned as a gaudy free-for-all for her relatives" is not sustained by the evidence (167). The family cannot have engineered Catherine's appointment to court expressly to push her towards the throne for the simple reason, neatly explained here, that nobody could yet have known that Anne of Cleves would not be a success. Even as this became clear, it would have been madness on the part of the Howards to promote Catherine as an alternative; as Russell demonstrates, the relationships that she had had with men while in her grandmother's household were not a secret from most family members, and they were hardly likely to actively place 'damaged goods' before the King. Rather, he saw her, he liked her, and he pursued that initial attraction, quite probably to the family's hidden dismay.

Other new and old assumptions tackled thoughtfully include Catherine's birthdate and thus her age, which, as he points out, has been given in the past as anywhere between 1518 and 1527. The evidence is weighed at length and Russell plausibly argues for a date of 1522-23, making Catherine considerably older than some other historians would have her at the time of her first known sexual relationship with Henry Manno in 1536, thirteen or fourteen. This leads directly to another welcome myth-busting exercise concerning the recent trend to paint Catherine as the victim of sexual abuse. Russell argues convincingly that this interpretation "can only be sustained by either willful or accidental ignorance of almost every piece of relevant surviving evidence" (62); that not only does the surviving evidence not use the contemporary vocabulary for abuse, but that in fact it reveals Catherine, the higher-status partner, as the driving force behind her relationships.

From a strictly academic perspective there are a few minor factual inaccuracies. It is highly unlikely that Joan Acworth/Bulmer really did work as Catherine's 'secretary' regardless of her epistolary sign-off using that term, and Catherine's aunt Katherine Howard/ap Rhys/Daubeney, Countess of Bridgwater, not only lived apart from her second husband, but also underwent a divorce process as a later case in the Court of Chancery makes clear. The endnotes, while pleasingly comprehensive and often including additional detailed commentary, reveal an uneven use of original material. While Russell has sometimes gone to the original manuscript source, there are also numerous occasions where he has fallen back on a printed edition, and the lack of obvious reason for this may make academic readers nervous, even as it makes it possible for a general audience to potentially follow his footsteps with greater ease.

This notwithstanding, Russell does set out many facts and details that are usually forgotten or overlooked, including the fact that Manno was married at the time of his relationship with Catherine, thus making it impossible for marriage to ever have been an option for them; the fact that though Joan Acworth/Bulmer wrote to Catherine to request a position in the latter's household after she became queen, there is no evidence to prove that she ever actually got one. Russell's detailed, thoughtful, and evidence-based approach to Catherine's story is much needed in the academic as well as the wider field, and students of this period will find much of interest here.

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