



***Hunting the Falcon: Henry VIII, Anne
Boleyn, and the Marriage That Shook
Europe***

By John Guy and Julia Fox

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Hunting the Falcon: Henry VIII, Anne Boleyn, and the Marriage That Shook Europe. By John Guy and Julia Fox. New York: HarperCollins, 2023. ISBN 978-0-06-307344-9. xxx + 581 pp. \$35.00.

“**T**he King’s Great Matter”: the contemporaneous phrase used for King Henry VIII’s drawn-out labours to divorce Queen Catherine of Aragon to marry Anne Boleyn captures its entropic plenitude. It catalysed the English Reformation, and it involved politics, religion, law, reproductive biology, the Tudor family soap opera, and More (that is, Sir Thomas More, martyred for his opposition to His Majesty’s will). Unsurprisingly, such a rich narrative has generated copious commentary over the last five centuries. A major new non-fiction contribution to this sprawling literature is *Hunting the Falcon: Henry VIII, Anne Boleyn, and the Marriage That Shook Europe* by John Guy and Julia Fox. This informative work probably provides the most in-depth account yet of the fateful relationship between the besotted King and his controversial, tantalising object of affection. In fact, after about 400 pages comprising the body of the text, there are another 175 or so pages of notes, sources, and appendices. This study, co-authored by a couple who have been together for over forty years (about as long as the reign of Queen Elizabeth I) while teaching and publishing early modern British history, almost certainly depends more closely on primary sources than any previous venture. Guy and Fox read through an astounding amount of archival materials dispersed across England, Europe, and the United States, in addition to scholarly editions of numerous sixteenth-century works. Myriad secondary studies by modern historians are also cited. For readers interested in the details, this sturdy tome is the place to find them. Despite its granularity, though, the narrative moves along, the prose is competent, and the plotlines remain clear (even Patience herself, however, might find all the minutiae regarding the fools’ errands of various diplomats as they crisscross Europe on Henry’s behalf a bit weedy).

Besides the plethora of facts and well-supported surmises, the authors also offer reasonable psychological interpretations about Henry’s mentality and make logical if speculative inferences about Anne’s character. The latter is justified by the king’s efforts “to airbrush her out of his life, ordering as many of her portraits, clothes, artworks, personal possessions and letters to be destroyed as he could, creating a challenge for biographers to see who she really was” (410). In light of that historical erasure, much of what we know, or believe we know, about the queen of one thousand days must be extrapolated. Guy and Fox are probably correct in suggesting that Anne was innocent of

the charges levied against her. She was not a “whore” as so many of her detractors labeled her; ultimately, she was guilty mainly of not providing a healthy male son, though in hindsight of course we know what fate had in store for their daughter Elizabeth.

Hunting the Falcon does supply significant European context to the story. In particular it lays out Anne’s courtly, Francophone upbringing on the Continent as a *demoiselle d’honneur*, and the fluid international situation the king was facing from about 1519 to 1536. As a quibble, however, most literary scholars nowadays, myself included, do not believe Sir Thomas Wyatt composed the sublunary, rather basic poem about the men executed for adultery with the queen, which is quoted and discussed in the Epilogue (399–400). It also seems somewhat odd that Hilary Mantel’s *Wolf Hall* trilogy is never mentioned, since the authors seem to be in substantial (implicit) dialogue with that celebrated work of well-researched historical fiction. The play *King Henry VIII, or All Is True*, by Shakespeare and Fletcher, is also, a bit peculiarly, never even name-checked.

To wrap things up, let me whisper lines adapted from “Jordan (II)” by seventeenth-century metaphysical poet George Herbert, whose older brother Lord Edward Herbert of Cherbury was, according to Guy and Fox, “an absolute professional: the first serious historian of the reign of Henry VIII, one of the very best until the twentieth century” (377):

How superfluous is all this long book!
Bittersweet histories already are penned;
You need not copy them, I do contend.

For all the countless hours of scholarly research involved, when it comes to our understanding of Henry’s second marriage, it would be very difficult to argue that this particular volume moves the needle by more than one or two degrees at most. That is, pretty much all of the important recorded events in Henry and Anne’s relationship have previously been reported, examined, and closely analysed; the veracity of certain hypotheses and documents soberly considered and judged; the history refined and sifted to the nth degree. When all is said and done, really next to nothing that is actually new can be found here. It seems, though, that publishers and audiences have a literally insatiable demand for books on certain topics, including the Tudors (others are Shakespeare, World War II and Sir Winston Churchill, the Windsors, the American Civil War and Abraham Lincoln, celebrities both redeemed and destroyed, and ancient Rome). To be sure, it is by no means a bad source for a newbie seeking context for *Wolf Hall* or even the pop musical *Six*, but for any scholar who has previously read even a handful of the numerous well-

regarded biographies, histories, or studies of Henrician literature already out there by the likes of J.J. Scarisbrick, David Loades, Retha Warnicke, Eric Ives, David Starkey, Diarmaid MacCulloch, Garrett Mattingly, Greg Walker, or Seth Lerer, *inter alia*, or who have delved into the primary texts themselves, this is very much old wine in new bottles. As good King Harry was (supposedly) wont to say: “HA!”

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