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Book Review

Kathleen Guler

At first glance, the popular impression of King Edward II of England (1284-1327, r. 1307-1327) persists that he was a weak, immature, effeminate failure of a king who lusted after his male “favorites,” was bullied by his powerful father Edward I Longshanks, and loathed by his long-suffering wife Isabella of France (1295-1358). Much material has been produced about Edward, but unfortunately, large amounts of it are twisted versions of reality, perpetuated rumors, or outright falsehoods. Fictionalized modern accounts, found in novels and movies such as *Braveheart*, further mislead readers’ and viewers’ preconceptions about Edward. Fortunately, historian Kathryn Warner has written an important biography of this king that exposes both his real quirks and the inaccuracies attached to him, all placed within the context of England’s political position in fourteenth-century Europe.

Holding two degrees in medieval history from the University of Manchester, Warner is a well-respected expert on Edward II and the fourteenth century. Her study is based almost completely on primary sources, built on a daunting number of scraps of information found in documents ranging from letters and speeches in Edward’s own words, letters from others surrounding him, itineraries, and various administrative rolls to royal household records, papal letters, and chamber journals. What emerges is not only a richly detailed account of the king’s life, but a fascinating look at his personality that has been hidden behind innuendo and fabrications for centuries.

As the story of Edward’s life unfolds, Warner focuses on the notorious controversies and myths that have grown up around him over time. One of the most persistent was his close bond with his male friends, in particular, Piers Gaveston (c.1284-1312) in the early part of the reign and Hugh Despenser the Younger (c.1286-1326) towards the end of it. Speculation and rumor have plagued writers’ works on Edward from the earliest chroniclers to modern historians, suggesting that his closeness to these men meant he was either bisexual or homosexual. In her chapters on Piers Gaveston, who was the second of four sons of a poor Gascon knight and who had been a squire in Edward I’s household and later a talented

soldier in the army, Warner points out that his and Edward's rapport might have been misinterpreted through the ubiquitous usage of words such as "love." "The early fourteenth century was an age when men bandied about declarations of love for other men far more easily than in later eras" (p.29), meaning it had a different connotation at that time. Chroniclers of the day designated this closeness as "improper," but Warner also clearly points out these writers were unreliable sources that had strong biases against the king, reflecting the mood of England's nobility towards his relationship with Gaveston. The chroniclers likely were trying to gain the aristocracy's favor. The author also notes that Christopher Marlowe's play *Edward II*, written c. 1592, a purely fictional rendition, certainly perpetuated the preconceived notion, carrying it into modern times with each of its continued productions. While Warner concedes that from the surviving evidence no absolute proof can be determined whether Edward's relationships with his favorites were sexual, she notes that both Edward and Gaveston took wives, had children, and even fathered illegitimate children, all in the traditional sense, suggesting that they were simply close friends who chose to defy the growing angst of England's powerful nobles.

Edward's queen, Isabella of France (m. 1308), was supposedly long-suffering, ignored, and despised. Here again Warner carefully examines the surviving documentation and reveals strong clues that Edward and Isabella probably had a warm, even loving, marriage for many years. In one of her letters to him, she called him "my very sweet heart" five times, and he called her his "dear heart" (p.47). Whether—or how much—Isabella was exasperated at the presence of Piers Gaveston during the favorite's years around Edward is not known, but the impression is that she tolerated the situation, whatever it entailed.

How Isabella viewed Edward's relationship with his second predominant "favorite," Hugh Despenser the Younger, was quite another matter. Isabella detested him. Unlike the arrogant but apparently tolerable Gaveston, Despenser appears to have been coldly calculating and greedy, gradually gaining control over Edward's political and financial power. Close to the time that Despenser's "friendship" with Edward deepened, the king's marriage began to sour. Although Warner skirts around the possibility that the favorite caused a major rift between the royal couple, she hints that Despenser may have been a catalyst behind Isabella's departure for France in 1325, never to return to her husband. There, she eventually allied with the exiled nobleman Roger Mortimer, a sworn enemy of both Despenser and Edward. Rumors developed of an affair with Mortimer and whether her eldest child, the future Edward III (1312-1327), could have actually been Mortimer's son. Warner finds no evidence that Isabella and Mortimer were ever lovers. Instead, the

author presents the strong likelihood that they were only political allies. Further, Isabella could not have met Mortimer until years *after* her last child was born in 1321. Warner also shows proof that Edward and Isabella were together when each of their four children was conceived. Interestingly, based on the period's events Isabella allegedly earned the nickname "She-Wolf of France" (p. 39). However, that epithet was actually Shakespeare's title for Margaret of Anjou, mistakenly applied to Isabella in 1757 by poet Thomas Grey.

Throughout the book, Warner highlights Edward's inadequacy as a king, the odd hobbies that made him the butt of jokes, and his generosity. On the one hand, Edward paid little attention to his country, neglecting important political issues while he spent time with his favorites. He also placed himself in the company of lowborn tradesmen, preferring their company and performing robust physical labor alongside them. He appears to have disliked any sort of regal and "idyllic" court life, which probably bored him. This caused a great amount of furor amongst his nobles, who disdained such work and considered it inappropriate for a king to enjoy. On the other hand, Edward was extremely generous to those around him—not only to his favorites, to Isabella, and to others of the aristocracy with whom he was pleased—but to strangers, messengers, and others on down the scale to the lowest ranks. While he was generous to a fault, unfortunately this strained his treasury, already depleted due to his father's wars. To give huge gifts of lands and titles to his favorites, especially the arrogant Gaveston and the hated Despenser, created serious animosity. Warner carefully examines the period when Edward's power waned: in September 1326, Isabella and Mortimer staged a small-scale but very successful invasion that resulted in Edward's deposition, Despenser's execution, and the placement of the young Edward III on the throne under Isabella and Mortimer's regency. Even while trying to avoid capture and after his imprisonment, Edward continued to show generosity; sometimes he is compared to the image of Nero fiddling away while Rome burned.

In the final chapter, "The Curious Case of the King Who Lived," Warner addresses the intriguing controversy of when and how Edward actually died. According to fourteenth century chroniclers, he supposedly died in late September 1327, murdered, first by suffocation, then "with a plumber's red-hot iron inserted through a horn leading to the inmost parts of the bowel, [his killers] burned out the respiratory organs beyond the intestines, taking care that no wound should be discernible on the royal body" (p. 243). This method of murder was handed down in numerous accounts over the years. Warner, however, refutes this as pure falsehood, first citing the unreliability of the chroniclers, and more importantly, laying out strong evidence that Edward may have survived for a few years past his

alleged death date, perhaps up to 1330, or even later. While this evidence is not indisputable, it includes traces of at least four conspiracies to rescue Edward, the mysteries of why no one was allowed to view his body after his alleged death, why he was not buried for three months afterward, and why he was not laid in state like other kings. No details remain of his December 1327 funeral either. Most importantly, Warner cites letters that have surfaced which date to the years after the funeral, stating that Edward was “alive and in good health of body, in a safe place at his own wish [or command]” (p.248). Some conspirators of the time believed he was kept at Corfe Castle in Dorset, prompting armed plots to free him in 1329-1330. Other letters suggest Edward had fled to Italy and lived out his years there.

This biography includes a genealogy tracing from Edward’s grandparents through four generations after him; a useful note on wages and prices of the period; several color plates, mostly of locations important to the biography plus photographs of related documents; and a warm foreword by historian Ian Mortimer, who gives the author a resounding endorsement. The one item missing is a map. Although most of the place names will be familiar to scholars of this period, a map showing their locations would have been a good addition.

Warner has pieced together a richly detailed puzzle that corrects many of the misconceptions about Edward II of England and produces a much more complete portrayal of his personality. Where the truth is unknown due to the lack of surviving evidence, Warner says so. Her approach is remarkably even-handed; while she points out the good things Edward did, she does not gloss over his terrible flaws. Warner’s biography is a welcome addition to the collection of anyone studying this period. She will be following up with a biography of Isabella of France, due in spring 2016.