

Inspiration from Kick@ss Tudor Women

Day Three: Elizabeth Barton

Hey there, and welcome back to Day 3 of the Inspiration from Kickass Tudor Women minicourse. I hope you're enjoying learning about these women so far, and I'm really loving putting this all together!

Today's woman is fairly well known in popular culture, and made appearances in the Tudors and other tellings of the story of Henry's relationship with Anne Boleyn. But a lot of that is based on the high drama of it, and the kind of tabloid nature of it, without really looking at the woman herself.

She was a mystic, she was a nun, and she was one of the few women who dared to question the King's judgment. But she also started off life as a humble servant girl. She is Elizabeth Barton, known to us as the Maid of Kent.

Elizabeth Barton was born about 1506, and when she was still a teenager she entered service for a farmer, Thomas Cobb. This was quite a common career move for women. Even women who would become great ladies would be expected to spend part of their lives working for another family of, hopefully, a slightly higher social rank. The indomitable Bess of Hardwick, my history crush, got her start working for another family, and rose to become the second wealthiest woman in the country, just after Queen Elizabeth. So it was very common for women to go into service, and there was no shame in it.

The idea was that you would learn more about how to run a household, be introduced to new people and new ways of thinking, and perhaps find a good match and get married out of it. All in all, a pretty good deal for everyone. Even poor people would have servants in this way, with neighboring teenagers helping out in return for room and board, and a small wage. The family was meant to take care of their servant, and the servant would do good work, and continue their rudimentary education. Generally contracts were for a year, and after that they could be renewed, or both parties could move on. Elizabeth would have lived in the servants quarters of his house, in the attic.

So Elizabeth Barton, a poor girl working in service for Thomas Cobb in Adlington, in Kent. Thomas Cobb had been a bailiff and steward and helped run the Archbishop of Canterbury's estates in the parish. He was the most senior officer on the manor, and he was very important in the local community. The priest of the town was a Richard Masters, but before him, interestingly, the famous Erasmus had been the rector.

Elizabeth joined his home either in late 1524 or 1525 when she was about 19 years old. Women had a lot of work on the farm. They would sweep, and tidy up, then milk the cows, feed the calves, and make breakfast for the family after waking the children. They were part of the brewing and baking, and would make butter and cheese. They would also handle killing all the poultry, and carry corn and malt to the mill. They also would have their own garden for things for the kitchen, and would work with cloth, spinning and making clothing.

Inspiration from Kick@ss Tudor Women

Day Three: Elizabeth Barton

At easter time 1525, probably only a few weeks after having been hired, Elizabeth fell greatly ill. Her throat would swell so much so that she would need to struggle for breath, and it seemed as if she had, "suffered the pangs of death itself." Everyone was afraid that the swelling would keep her from being able to breathe. Other times her illness seemed subdued. It seemed to come in waves. She was moved from the servants attic to one of the children's rooms. The baby was also ill, so it was easier to nurse them together.

In November she was still very ill, and Thomas Cobb had been paying for her even though she couldn't work, and she must have been very afraid that her employment was going to end when the year was up, which was coming up soon. She was also probably very bored, having been sick for months, and she would start to mutter to herself when in delerium. Sometimes she would talk about the Seven Deadly Sins, the Ten Commandments, and other Biblical verses she had heard. People began to listen to her, and as soon as she was well enough, Cobb said that she should be able to sit at the dinner table with him and his wife.

Cobb asked the priest, Richard Masters, to visit her, along with a local man, Edward Thwaites. This is where it gets mysterious. Some people say that the men plotted to exploit her. But it seems as if they really took everything at face value, and it seems that they were starting to think of her as a prophetess.

Masters wrote a report about her to the Archbishop of Canterbury, William Warham, who visited her immediately. He thought the case was fascinating, and told Masters that if she had any other similar speeches, he should be informed immediately. More people came to see her, from Christ Church, Canterbury. Elizabeth still seemed to be very sick. She continued in trances, talking about visiting Heaven, and she was almost caught in a lie when she said that the Virgin told her the nearby chapel in the small hamlet Court-at-Street, a few miles away, should ring the bell for a miracle. Cobb said that there were no bells at that chapel, which seemed to imply that she had made it up, but she recovered, and continued talking about things like what the hermit, who lived at the chapel, had eaten for dinner.

So as time goes on, her faith is examined, and she claimed to have witnessed the angels and devils fighting for her inquisitors' souls. She also began to use her trances to attack the religious reform movement. But her popularity grew throughout Kent, and on one day when she said a miracle was expected, between 2 and 3 thousand people came to see her. She talked for hours, was prostrate at the feet of a statue of the Virgin Mary, and then declared that she was completely healed.

It became a sensation, and the Archbishop sent a report to the King. Henry passed the report to Thomas More, following up and asking him what he thought about it. More was skeptical, saying that there was nothing that, "a right simple woman might in my mind speak if of her own wit well enough," but even he admitted that, "because it was constantly reported for a truth that Got wrought in her, and that a miracle was showed upon her, I durst now nor would not be bold in judging the matter."

Inspiration from Kick@ss Tudor Women

Day Three: Elizabeth Barton

Just at this time Henry VIII was starting to begin his courtship of Anne Boleyn, and Elizabeth was building her own reputation. She said she wanted to become a nun, and Archbishop Warham arranged her entry into a convent. She entered the Benedictine House of St. Sepulchre's in Canterbury, and she was sent to this 400 year old nunnery.

She lived quietly at the nunnery, seeming to be virtuous. Her visions were mostly of angels, martyrs, confessors, and the normal things like that. She also tried to speak to the spirits of recently deceased people for their families. Her room was simple, furnished with two cushions, two rugs, a small mattress with two blankets, two pillows, and a bolster. She also had two plates, four dishes, and two saucers. She had a basin and candlesticks, a plank of wood for a table, and a small wooden chest. When she received things, she gave them away. There's a story of one man who asked her to intervene with God when he was sick, and he was saddened to hear that he had given her 4 nobles, but she gave it all to charity except for 6 shillings.

As long as her visions were simple like this, there was no problem, and no one was worried about it.

In October of 1528 Archbishop Warham wrote a letter to Cardinal Wolsey, the papal legate, who was then trying to get Henry VIII his divorce. Barton wanted to talk with the Cardinal, and Warham was happy to set it up. This interest shows that she was becoming a bit more political, and she was beginning to speak out against Henry's attempted divorce. Later Thomas Cranmer, when he replaced Warham as archbishop, said that he believed that both Wolsey and Warham were afraid of her. So she now had access to Wolsey, and would wind up meeting with Henry on several occasions.

Every time she met him she spoke against the marriage. The monks never seemed to doubt that she was holy, and she was very outspoken. Barton spoke these words to Henry herself, and Bishop John Fisher noted that she was, "right, honest, religious, and very good and virtuous." Barton came out and said that she heard threats from God that Henry would not live 7 months if he married Anne Boleyn, and she told others that he wouldn't be king for a month after marrying Anne Boleyn.

Of course Henry didn't listen to her, and proceeded with a legatine court, and by 1530 Barton was becoming a political force. She even corresponded with the Pope, saying that there would be plagues if the pope favored Anne Boleyn, and that the pope himself would be destroyed if he didn't support Catherine of Aragon.

Thomas More eventually met her, and he seemed impressed by her, writing her later, and telling her that it was his advice that she should stop talking about the King and the divorce. More became convinced that she was speaking for God, but he didn't want to see her killed over it.

Inspiration from Kick@ss Tudor Women

Day Three: Elizabeth Barton

In 1532 it seemed like the marriage between Henry and Anne was going to go through, and Elizabeth kept speaking out about it. That October Henry and Anne passed through Canterbury on the way to Calais, and they both had been a bit worried by her prophesies. They reached out towards her to try to get her to be quiet. Henry asked whether he could make her an abess in return for her silence. Anne Boleyn's mother sent her a note asking if she would come to wait on Anne. Elizabeth turned both of these offers down.

Henry did marry Anne in secret, and now Elizabeth had to prove that her prophesies were true. Was Henry going to die in a month? Or seven? When he didn't die people still didn't start to doubt her, but by July Henry realized that he had survived all of her prophesies, and he was becoming furious at the nun. He asked his new minister Thomas Cromwell to have Cranmer begin an investigation.

Elizabeth rode to see Cranmer, and it was there that she was surprised with an interrogation. She insisted that her visions were all true. She asked for more time, saying that she might not have interpreted them all correctly, and said that she would like to go back to and get an answer in her next trance, and could she come back? Cranmer played along, and Elizabeth thought she had done well. But Cranmer was just trying to get what he could out of her before sending her to Cromwell.

Barton had written to Catherine of Aragon, who refused to see her. Her chaplain did talk with her, and he would later be attainted for misprision of treason for talking with Elizabeth. Cromwell wanted to get Elizabeth to confess to having had a relationship with Catherine, and Barton wouldn't admit to one. Catherine had been wise in avoiding her - even Cromwell said that she had done well with that.

Barton was sent to the Tower of London after Cranmer had extricated all the information he needed out off her. Barton began to crack under interrogation, telling Cromwell that she had never had visions, that everything she said was, "feigned of her own imagination, only to satisfy the minds of them the which resorted unto her and to obtain worldly praise."

That said, she vacillated, and wrote to supporters that she did stand by her visions. Time was running out for her, though. That autumn, of 1533, Cromwell had rounded up everyone who had known and supported her, and had them arrested, and any pamphlets and books about her and her prophesies were burned.

The problem was that there was no proof of treason, and because Barton had told Henry everything she prophesied, there was no secrecy. Cromwell sealed the deal saying that she had meant to induce people to rise against her. He spoke for a long time about her treachery, and it riled up the crowd who started chanting To the Stake!

The monks and nuns all begged Henry for forgiveness, and everyone started to distance themselves from her. In November 1533 she had to do a public penance. She had to read a

Inspiration from Kick@ss Tudor Women
Day Three: Elizabeth Barton

short confession, and said she was, “a most miserable and wretched person, who had been the original of all this mischief, and by my falsehood have deceived all these persons here and many now present.”

Then a sermon was given, and everyone had to do the same thing in Canterbury later. But by January 1534 Parliament brought up the attainders against Barton, and if Parliament sentenced you, you could be condemned without a trial. She was sentenced to death, and on April 20th 1534 she was hanged. She said, “hither am I come to die, and I have not been the only cause of mine own death which most justly I have deserved, but also I am the cause of all these persons which at this time ehre suffer. And yet to say the truth, I am not so much to be blamed considering it was well known unto these learned men that I was a poor wench without learning and therefore they might have easily perceived that the things that were done by me could not proceed in no such sort. Because the things which I feigned was profitable unto them, therefore they much praised me and bare me in hand that it was the Holy Ghost and not I that did them, and then I being puffed up with their praises fell into a certain pride and foolish fantasy with myself and I thought I might feign what I would, which thing hath brought me to this case.”

Her head was chopped off to be mounted at London Bridge, but her headless body was permitted burial in the church of the Grey Friars in London.

I think Elizabeth is fascinating because she got the attention of all these people, and even had the King and Anne Boleyn worried.