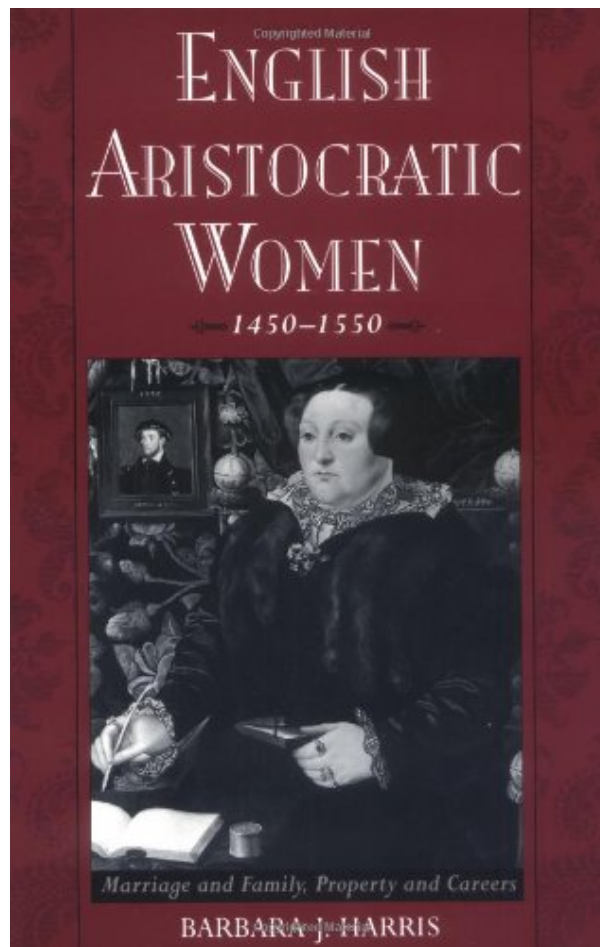


ENGLISH ARISTOCRATIC WOMEN, 1450-1550: MARRIAGE AND FAMILY, PROPERTY AND CAREERS BY BARBARA J. HARRIS



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1450-1550



Marriage and Family, Property and Careers

BARBARA J. HARRIS

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Review

Harris's work is comprehensive in every respect, and details virtually every possible experience that aristocratic women might have had in the late Yorkist and early Tudor periods. She is especially adept at making these women appear, as they were, human, with real-life joys, sorrows, and challenges. It is this dimension that makes Harris's work especially distinctive."--Sixteenth Century Journal

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About the Author

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Portraits of aristocratic women from the Yorkist and Tudor periods reveal elaborately clothed and bejeweled nobility, exemplars of their families' wealth. Unlike their male counterparts, their sitters have not been judged for their professional accomplishments. In this groundbreaking study, Barbara J. Harris argues that the roles of aristocratic wives, mothers, and widows constituted careers for women that had as much public and political significance and were as crucial for the survival and prosperity of their families and class as their husband's careers. Women, Harris demonstrates, were trained from an early age to manage their families' property and households; arrange the marriages and careers of their children; create, sustain, and exploit the client-patron relationships that were an essential element in politics at the regional and national levels; and, finally, manage the transmission and distribution of property from one generation to another, since most wives outlived their husbands.

English Aristocratic Women unveils the lives of noblewomen whose historical influence has previously been dismissed, as well as those who became favorites at the court of Henry VIII. Through extensive archival research of documents belonging to more than twelve hundred families, Harris paints a collective portrait of upper-class women of this period. By recognizing the full significance of the aristocratic women's careers, this book reinterprets the politics and gender relations of early modern England. Barbara J. Harris is Professor of History and Women's Studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Her previous works include *Edward Stafford, Third Duke of Buckingham, 1478-1521*.

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A Truly Revealing and Enlightening Study

By Mithridates VI of Pontus

Barbara Harris', *English Aristocratic Women from 1450-1550*, sheds much needed light on the position of women in the rigid patriarchal society of Tudor England. Her primary thesis is that "aristocratic women gained wealth, authority, and power as they managed their husbands' property and households, arranged marriages and careers of their children, maintained and exploited kin and client networks essential to their families' political power, and supervised the transmission and distribution of property to the next generation," (pg 6). This and secondary conclusions are supported with a vast array of data from wills and other documents meticulously presented to the reader in a highly readable fashion. She describes and explains the structures of patriarchy: primogenital inheritance enforced by male entail, arranged marriages, dowries, and jointures. She then follows women through all stages of their lives from childhood to death. Widows gain special attention in this text since a massive percentage (around 60) remarried, many multiple times, and used their newfound independence, since they were no longer covert femme who had no legal power, to

arrange for themselves advantages marriages. Harris examines in detail the conflicts that arose between remarried women and their multiple stepsons from different marriages in an effort to gain control of willed estates etc. What is most interesting to me was her inclusion of the husbands perspective of the purpose of his wife, womens' perspective on the purpose of childbirth, women at court, and Harris' examination of the reason that the patriarchal system did not change even with so many women (an men) who continued to defy it.

This is an extraordinary text about which there is so much to praise. However, be warned, this is only for the historian/or casual history lover who is used to reading a serious scholarly and meticulously argued (with tons of examples and figures) text. This is simply a must buy for anyone who is truly interested in Tudor England.

2 of 3 people found the following review helpful.

English Aristocratic Women, their Careers, and Patriarchy: An Investigation of a Modern Female Perspective

By Brittany E. Couture

Dr. Barbara J. Harris' text, *English Aristocratic Women 1450-1550*, is an important contribution to the historical analysis of women's history and brings an innovative perspective to the debate of continuity and change within the history of women's studies. Dr. Harris redefines aristocratic women's familial, conjugal, social, and political activities in Yorkist and early Tudor England. Her primary investigation focuses on the utility of the female gentry in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries and argues that the various roles of wives, mothers, and widows established careers for women that had as much of a political, social and familial impact on their social existence as did their husbands' careers. Despite this modern and original perspective on the aristocratic roles of the English women in early modern society, Dr. Harris is careful to discuss the dichotomous and incongruous nature of the lives led by these women. She argues that while these women constructed empowering careers for themselves, they were still subjected to the patriarchal society in which they lived and were ultimately subordinated by the well established patriarchal institutions that defined both their "legal and material situation" (6). In order to support her thesis Dr. Harris examines the function of these women and their activities within the family and society in general by studying family archives of estate documents, personal letters, wills, and chancery cases. Dr. Harris emphasizes this significant contradiction between female empowerment and subordination by analyzing sources not only written by women, but also by analyzing the male perspective of women. With the comparison of these contrasting view points, Dr. Harris ultimately creates a valid historical analysis on the status of aristocratic women and their overall lives.

In her text, Dr. Harris provides this balanced perception of aristocratic women's history by juxtaposing personal data found in the accounts of noble women and their husbands with publicly available political data. She incorporated 763 male wills and 266 female wills into her analysis and compared her results with data acquired from chancery cases, state papers, and the Cotton and Harleian Collections at the British Library (15). In all, Dr. Harris studied approximately 1,200 aristocratic couples and their children through these various documents, ultimately compiling a very rich source of information for her study.

By using these extensive and well-balanced set of primary sources, Dr. Harris is able to establish the contradictions found within the familial, conjugal and social relations of aristocratic women with respect to their male counterparts. While Dr. Harris is able to draw conclusions about certain types of female autonomy and the power given and maintained by these women during this period, she is also careful to note the sources of an undeniable struggle inflicted upon aristocratic women due to the patriarchal intuitions in which they were a part of. In order for her to collectively describe the familial, social, and political station of these women, Dr. Harris redefines the terms Patriarchy and Career by stripping them of their modern definitions

and applications and by placing them into the more applicable context of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, ultimately redefining our view of the utility of the female gentry. Thus women's roles within society and within the home become defined as careers and that these careers change according to the female life cycle (Ch. 2, 4, 6 and 7).

Dr. Harris adopted fellow historian Theodore Koditschek's definition of patriarchy and describes it as a "loosely connected constellation of related social systems that ensures the systematic subordination and social inferiority of women and their relative exclusion from access to wealth, status, and power" (qtd. 10). She does this in order to draw her conclusions closer together for her readers and to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of the period in which these women lived.

Using this definition of patriarchy, Dr. Harris makes a clear statement that woman during this period had to create their own alliances by networking and finessing their given societal standards and in doing so, created life-long careers for themselves. The careers that Dr. Harris discusses in her text revolve around the aristocratic female life-cycle and the gradual change from the inexperienced wife to the knowledgeable and capable partner who is, in some cases, trusted long after death (62). The evidence about women that Dr. Harris draws upon for her research provides rich and specific cases of women and their experiences during this period that allows Dr. Harris to form more cohesive conclusions about aristocratic women. Thus her depiction of women proposes a more poised and well-adjusted composition of women's lives, that ultimately makes her text a wonderful contribution to the history of women's studies.

The Data that Dr. Harris uncovered on young aristocratic girls within Yorkist and early Tudor England revealed that mother's cultivated their daughters to become good wives and mothers (27-8). Dr. Harris states that aristocratic girls within this time period were required to have some variant of knowledge in subjects such as estate management, including the ability to exercise authority over large numbers of people, property law, basic math and above all, to maintain their "subordinate agency," that is, the ability to be resourceful as junior partners of their households without breaching their dependant position to their husbands (28). As girls grew into these wives, their responsibilities grew as well, and they were required create networks of people not only with in the extended family, but with those in the community as well. According to the research that Dr. Harris did on these women, this meant that wives during this period enacted as a type of ambassador, or link between families, in addition to creating outside networks that helped advance their male kin's careers (61). Another major responsibility as a wife during this period was motherhood, which included raising and promoting the next generation (99).

Although limited compared to that of male resources, the resources available on aristocratic mothers during this period still allowed Dr. Harris to make conclusions about the status of wives and mothers and their roles within the household. She states that the "success in bearing children, particularly sons, ensured the survival of their husbands' lineages and constituted a crucial service to their spouses and in-laws" (99). She also stated that "their positions as mothers to the next generation strengthened their relationships with their spouses and increased their leverage with their husbands' close kin" (99). Thus, it was in a woman's best interest to have children within her marriage despite the dangers of pregnancy and childbirth at this time. However, along with the terms 'patriarchy' and 'career', the term mother changed for Dr. Harris as well. In this period, while compassion, tenderness and devotion to one's child were crucial characteristics of motherhood, the term mother did not necessarily represent or denote the same application that we know of motherhood today, but rather specific evidence shows that the utility of these mothers "created a class-specific, historically distinctive form of motherhood": they were business women (100).

As their children grew out of infancy, mothers focused their children's training for the future with a tenacious veracity (111). Dr. Harris cites specific examples of women like Katherine, Countess of Huntingdon who

participated in the negotiations of marriage in order to secure her daughter's future. Women's involvement in these business transactions typically increased after their husband's death (111 and 112). In short, when a husband died, the widow was left as head of their household and assumed many of the responsibilities once performed by the man. Therefore, after the husband's death, the widow legally acted as though she was a man (112). The range of sources gathered by Dr. Harris proves substantial enough to draw solid conclusions about women and their daily lives. However, although Dr. Harris has collected a great deal of evidence to conduct her research there still remains several problems in the investigation of women and their experiences within the English aristocratic elite.

First, even though Dr. Harris has incorporated personal female evidence into her research, she is still working predominantly with insuperable male evidence. Dr. Harris' research includes 763 male wills and male controlled public political records which are contrasted with a comparatively paltry 266 female wills and personal accounts. This discrepancy in available sources projects a male perspective onto the material being researched which cannot be ignored. Thus, most of the depictions of women during this period come from the male perspective of women and society, only allowing a very small window of information on how women actually perceived themselves and the society in which they lived.

In addition to this male dominated system, women's entire career structures were centered on the advancement of their male kin. As mentioned earlier, mothers had to insure the progression of their male children along with helping their husbands to arrange suitable marriages for their daughters. As wives, women "incorporated reproductive, managerial, political, and social functions essential to the survival and prosperity of their husbands' Patronlineages and if left the executors of their husband's will, they had to insure that their husband's wealth, land and other legal work was taken care of following his death. In addition to their new jobs as fem soles, widows also had to secure futures for children and the continuation of their family (61,128-30). Therefore the female evidence found and researched by Dr. Harris may be biased toward the male outlook of the time, consequently making these feminine resources somewhat flawed by preventing women from truly rendering an 'autonomous' interpretation of themselves in their personal accounts. That is to say that these female records include discussions either completely devoted to or surrounding around the topic of men and their advancement of success as apposed to writing documents that are devoted completely to themselves.

Thirdly, Aristocratic women only made up about five to ten percent of early modern English society, therefore the evidence found for these women do not reflect the majority of the English female experience as a whole. Education and laws applied differently to women of different classes within English society. Women of the English peasantry and other lower classes would not have had the same legal representation or affluence to acquire even slightly similar experiences as the women that Dr. Harris studied, and as a result, the research that Dr. Harris has done only applies to women of the Aristocratic elite and is not applicable to the entirety of female English society on the whole. In addition, Dr. Harris' research is limited to the understanding of aristocratic women in Yorkist and early Tudor, England. While possibly similar, her findings do not reflect aristocratic women's experiences in other regions and time periods. And finally, all of the evidence found and researched by Dr. Harris is ultimately left up to the interpretation of the researcher herself and therefore may bring in or include biases that may be unbeknown to the researcher herself.

However, despite all of this information, Dr. Harris has cultivated a group of resources, both male and female, that has opened up a whole new perspective on aristocratic women and their lives during this time. Although historians may never be able to definitively answer some of the questions put forth in the debate of women's history, Dr. Harris has compiled a great many rich sources and strong conclusions about the status of these women and their lives with respect to their male kin, and therefore has made an important contribution to the study and development of aristocratic women of this period, thus bringing an innovative

perspective to the debate of continuity and change within the history of women's studies.

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Lots of information and facts for people who really want to know what it was like.

By Alexa Porter

Gives a very clear picture of how wealthy, aristocratic women lived. We read about queens and sometimes we read about the servants having their adventures, but seldom read about the women who were married to wealthy men, ran huge estates on their own sometimes (after their husband's death, or when they were away at war). Lots of information and facts for people who really want to know what it was like.

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