The Fourth Step-Mother of Elizabeth, Katherine Parr

As discussed in an earlier blog entry, Catherine Howard, Henry VIII passed a law that required all future queens of England to have chaste pasts or be willing to confess any ‘indiscretions.’ Obviously, this eliminated many candidates. Who would be free from scandal or brave enough to tell Henry if she was not?

Enter Katherine Parr, the daughter of Thomas and Maud Parr. Maud, a lady-in-waiting to Queen Catherine of Aragon, was a highly intelligent and well-educated woman. Queen Catherine placed her in charge of the education of many of the youngsters at Court. Her children, especially Katherine, benefited greatly from the Court tutors and developed a life-long love of learning. Maud was widowed at the age of 25 and never remarried. She concentrated her efforts on establishing good matches for her children and protecting her son’s inheritance. In 1529 when Katherine was 16 or 17, she was married to Edward Borough. Edward was in his early twenties when he died in 1533. It is often confused that she married his grandfather, another Edward, perpetuating the myth of her marrying aged widowers. This blogger wonders if the confusion came because she would have resided in a multi-generational household perhaps with the grandfather-in-law as the head.

The Borough family manor, Gainsborough Old Hall.
Gainsborough Old Hall

Maud Parr died the year after Katherine was widowed and it left the young woman basically independent. Katherine arranged her own next marriage to John Neville, Lord Latimer of Snape Castle in Yorkshire, a man in his early forties. The exact date is unknown but they married in 1534. Lord Latimer had two children both of whom became very close to their young stepmother, especially the daughter, Margaret. From the time of her marriage, Katherine had the responsibilities of the household. Her responsibilities expanded to include the entire estate when Lord Latimer took an active role, on the side of the rebels, in the Pilgrimage of Grace. As examples of her abilities, Katherine withheld a siege, protected the occupants of the household and managed, with the help of her brother William, to gain a pardon for Latimer. King Henry did not hold it against Latimer and both Katherine and her husband were welcomed back to Court.

Snape Castle

It was while at Court, with Latimer ailing and soon dying, that Henry became aware of the thirty-year-old Lady Latimer. Described as attractive but not pretty, Katherine always dressed impeccably, had the translucent skin that was so praised in Tudor times, auburn colored hair and a dignified bearing.

Katherine Parr by an unknown artist. Displayed at Montacute House.

Thomas Wriothesley, Lord Chancellor, wrote to the Duke of Norfolk that there was "a woman, in my judgement, for certain virtue, wisdom and gentleness, most meet for his Highness. And sure I am that his Majesty had never a wife more agreeable to his heart than she is. The Lord grant them long life and much joy together" (Weir 498). Praise indeed considering he later tried to have her arrested and executed.

Eustace Chapuys, the Spanish Ambassador, reported to Charles V that Katherine "is graceful and of cheerful countenance; and is praised for her virtue" (Hume 248). He continued that she was not "so beautiful" and that there was "no hope of issue, seeing that she had none with her two former husbands" (Gairdner XVIII 954). Charming and amiable, she was pleasant to nobles and servants alike. Sensible and efficient, a good conversationalist, experienced with step-children, and having aided an ailing spouse, Katherine seemed ideal to become the sixth wife of Henry VIII.
Held in the possession of the National Portrait Gallery, this portrait had been mistakenly identified as Lady Jane Grey for many years. Done in 1545 it is now credited to be Katherine Parr.

Interestingly, she was the only one of Henry’s wives who did not want to become his next bride. Historians believe this for a couple of reasons: she was intelligent enough to see the dangers involved; and she had developed an interest in Thomas Seymour, Lord High Admiral. Once Henry proposed, Katherine accepted her fate and became determined to make the best of the situation. Most commentators now believe she saw her chance to promote a more liberal religious agenda and the betterment of her family. As was Henry’s custom, his bride’s family advanced along with her elevation. Katherine’s brother, William Parr, was granted the Earldom of Essex in his own right. Her sister Ann and brother-in-law Sir William Herbert gained positions at Court as did members of her extended family, the Throckmortons and her step-daughter Margaret Neville.

As Queen, Katherine used her influence to encourage the King to bring to Court his children from their respective households. She felt they should be there, beyond the wedding celebrations, and see their father more. Henry gave his approval and Katherine wrote them all to come. Agnes Strickland assures that Katherine, who knew Princess Mary well, was also “acquainted with Elizabeth before she became queen, and greatly admired her wit and manners” (Strickland Volume 4 14).

A letter from 10-year-old Elizabeth survives in which she wrote, flowing with gratitude, to acknowledge what Katherine had done.

"Madame, The affection that you have testified in wishing that I should be suffered to be with you in the Court, and requesting this of the King my father, with so much earnestness, is a proof of your goodness. So great a mark of your tenderness for me obliges me to examine myself a little, to see if I can find anything in me that can merit it, but I can find nothing but a great zeal and devotion to the service of your Majesty. But as that zeal has not been called into action so as to manifest itself, I see well that it is only the greatness of soul in your Majesty which makes you do me this honour, and this redoubles my
zeal towards your Majesty. I can assure you also that my conduct will be such that you shall never have cause to complain of having done me the honour of calling me to you; at least, I will make it my constant care that I do nothing but with a design to show always my obedience and respect. I await with much impatience the orders of the King my father for the accomplishment of the happiness for which I sigh, and I remain with much submission, your Majesty's very dear Elizabeth” (Queen Elizabeth I 21-22).

There is an interesting interlude in the chronology of Elizabeth's life between the summers of 1543 and 1544. Most historians (Linda Porter is an exception) believe Elizabeth offended her father in some way and was banished to Ashridge near the Hertfordshire-Buckinghamshire border—near Berkhamsted where the Queen held the lordship of the manor. Because Katherine kept in contact with Elizabeth and she sent her other step-daughter, Margaret Neville, to act “as liaison between her step-mother and step-sister” it appears as if the youngster had not offended her (James 172-173). Elizabeth, obviously, had no ill-feelings as she wrote to Katherine that “inimical Fourtune …has deprived me for a whole year of your most illustrious presence…” Elizabeth conveyed to Katherine her belief that she was “not only bound to serve but also to revere you with daughterly love …” (Marcus 5).

Henry was abroad, Katherine was Regent and Elizabeth was persistent. By petitioning her step-mother to speak to her father, who was on military campaign, Elizabeth was able to end “this my exile” (Marcus 5). Katherine successfully convinced the King to allow Elizabeth to join her at Hampton Court in late July of 1544 cementing her step-daughter's affection. Elizabeth seemed secure in Katherine's affection although she never took it for granted as she wrote “I know that I have your love and that you have not forgotten me for if your grace had not a good opinion of me you would not have offered friendship to me that way” (James 136).

Fragment of the letter to Katherine from 10-year-old Elizabeth. Written in Italian. On line five you can make out the reference to her exile [mio exilio].

The regard Elizabeth had for Katherine was also shown in the New Year's Day gift that she presented to her in
December of 1544. Elizabeth translated, in italic script, Marguerite of Navarre’s *Le Miroir de l’ame pecheresse* [The Mirror of a Sinful Soul]. The gift itself was a tribute to her spiritual leanings, her education and her affection. The dedication was “To our most noble and virtuous Queen Katherine, Elizabeth, her humble daughter, wisheth perpetual felicity and everlasting joy.” In the accompanying letter Elizabeth hoped that Katherine would “rub out, polish, and mend (or else cause to mend) the words (or rather the order of my writing), the which I know in many places to be rude and nothing done as it should be” (Marcus 6-7). This shows the trust Elizabeth had for Katherine as a loving mentor and the respect she had for Katherine’s intellectual abilities.

Elizabeth’s translation of *The Mirror of the Sinful Soul* with a cover of embroidery she worked herself. Notice Katherine’s initials in the center.

The next year, Elizabeth translated Katherine’s book, *Prayers or Meditations*, into French, Italian and Latin for her father (James 137). One would suspect that Elizabeth would not want to upset Henry nor jeopardize Katherine by presenting to him materials that would be contrary to his religious beliefs.


When Henry had gone to France in July 1544, he appointed Katherine his Regent. This certainly was an expression of his respect and affection for her. Lord Chancellor Wriothesley, Archbishop Cranmer, Lord Hertford, Dr. Thomas Thirlby and William Petre were her advisors. Not a woman to be gainstayed, in September 1544, Katherine, dealing with her Regency Council, let it be known that exasperation had set in and she was “wearyed with their continual clamor” (Gairdner XIX 231).

Thomas Wriothesley, despite his earlier praise for Katherine, grew to distrust her as he was concerned about the liberal religious views she held and strong personality. Early in 1544 Katherine had written in the Tenth Psalm of her text *Psalms or Prayers taken out of the Holy Scripture* this thought-provoking sentence “I am so vexed that I am utterly weary; help me against them that lie in wait for me” (Parr 318). This has been tagged as a response to the Catholic attempts to discredit her, led by Wriothesley and Stephen Gardiner, Bishop of Winchester, because of her evangelical leanings.

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Thomas Wriothesley, 1st Earl of Southampton, Lord Chancellor

The unease of these two men reached a peak in the summer of 1546 and led to their attempt to arrest Katherine. They convinced Henry that she harbored radical leanings and fueled his irritation of the recent views Katherine had expressed. Wriothesley lined up the arrest warrant, gathered forty yeomen of the guard and descended upon Katherine while she was in the Whitehall gardens with Henry.

Little did Wriothesley know, Katherine had been warned and had hastened to Henry to apologize for seeming to overstep her boundaries. She assured the King that she had debated him to distract him from the pain in his leg and to take instruction from him on the proper theological discourse, not to lecture him. Katherine supposedly said that she felt it “preposterous for a woman to instruct her lord” (Strickland III 246). Henry was certainly ready to believe her. Upon the conclusion of Katherine’s assurances, Henry replied, “And is it so, sweetheart? Then we are perfect friends” (Strickland III 246).

When Wriothesley came to arrest her, Henry gave him a dressing down and sent him off. Obviously, this was a very close call for Katherine and she never again conveyed any views counter to the Establishment.

One area which Katherine thwarted convention was in her encouragement of Elizabeth’s education. The resulting life-long influence cannot be undervalued. For over four years, although they did not live together that entire time, a close bond was formed. This intelligent and capable woman encouraged and loved this exceptional child. By taking charge of Elizabeth’s education, both book learning and practical application (Elizabeth witnessed Katherine’s Regency), Katherine influenced the reign of her step-daughter.

Elizabeth received an excellent education. She was educated alongside her brother for many years until it was decided by Katherine to employ a tutor solely for the princess. This would have been an exception rather than the rule in 16th century England although there were many highly educated women of the previous generation: Anne Boleyn, Mary More and, of course, Katherine Parr. Katherine’s deep and genuine love of learning makes her so admirable as an interesting, remarkable woman.

Copy of Katherine’s text, Lamentations of a Sinner, published in 1547 with her signature.

As Maud Parr’s daughter, a woman who had set up a school at Court and bequeathed money in her will for education, Katherine’s taste for learning was formed young and continued throughout her life. Margaret Neville, her step-daughter, said in the spring of 1545 ‘I am never able to render to her grace sufficient thanks for the goody education and tender love and bountiful goodness which I have
evermore found in her highness....” Prince Edward pretty much said the same thing in 1546. He thanked Katherine for her “tender and loving letters” and for the “encouragement to go forward in such things wherein your grace beareth me on hand that I am already entered” (James 141). And Elizabeth praised Katherine for her “fervent zeal your Highness hath towards all godly learning” (Wood 178).

The educations of Edward and Elizabeth were certainly guided by Katherine Parr. Many of their tutors were committed Protestants and humanists. The tutors’ willingness to educate the princess in the exacting disciplines was telling. With Katherine also in charge of Jane Grey’s education, her patronage and direction helped formulate two of the sharpest minds of the era—both belonging to females. Of note is a rare difference of opinion between Katherine and her step-daughter. In early 1548, Elizabeth’s tutor, William Grindal died. Katherine wanted to replace him with Francis Goldsmith but Elizabeth wanted Roger Ascham, a fellow from St. John’s College in Cambridge who was well-acquainted with Katherine (James 322). Writing to Edward’s tutor, Sir John Cheke, Ascham expressed his “uneasy at being the cause of disagreement between the queen and her stepdaughter on such an important matter, actually counseled Elizabeth to accept Goldsmith” (Porter 306). It probably did not take much persuasion, as Ascham became the royal tutor.

Elizabeth is a product of Katherine Parr. The future Queen Regina’s education, religious beliefs, and open-mindedness stem from the guidance of her step-mother. Her devotion was reflected in 1582, when Thomas Bentley’s work, The Monument of Matrons, depicted Katherine Parr as one of the virtuous Queens of history (Fraser 405). Elizabeth’s actions of not forgetting the woman who had permitted her to see the possibilities of rule and to establish England as a cultural center, was certainly a tribute.

The relationship of Elizabeth and Katherine cannot be revealed without the discussion of Thomas Seymour. This blogger does not want to expend too much time on this topic for all its relevance because of its worthiness of an entire entry on its own. Thomas Seymour, as brother-in-law to King Henry VIII and uncle to the future king, held prominent positions at Court. He was there during the times that Katherine Parr was and they began a romance before Henry VIII turned his attention to her. Upon Henry’s death in January of 1547, the sensible Katherine allowed Seymour to talk her into marriage well before the conventional time-frame of mourning was over. Katherine had married him for love and as a last chance of happiness.

Little did Katherine know that Seymour had had designs on Elizabeth as a possible wife. He never quite seemed to relinquish the idea and for her own safety, Elizabeth was removed from her step-mother’s household at Chelsea in 1548 to the care of Anthony Denny and his wife at Cheshunt. Katherine was pregnant and Seymour could not keep in check his, shall it be said, emotional immaturity and grandiose aspirations.

The story leads to Sudeley Castle where Katherine gave birth to a baby girl, Mary, and died days later of puerperal fever. She is buried in the chapel in the Castle grounds.
Katherine Parr was interred in St. Mary’s Chapel on the grounds of Sudeley under this tomb in the 1800s.

When Elizabeth left Chelsea for her own residence of Cheston, Katherine, according to Gregorio Leti, told her “God has given you great qualities. Cultivate them always, and labour to improve them, for I believe you are destined by Heaven to be Queen of England” (Strickland 26).

References


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Prayers or Meditations. Quite the same Wikipedia. Just better. Prayers or Meditations. From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia. Embroidered back cover of the trilingual translation by Elizabeth I. Parr's monogram is in the centre. Prayers or Meditations, written in 1545 by the English queen Catherine Parr, was the first book published in England by a woman under her own name and in English language.[1] It first appeared in print on 8 June 1545.[2] Preceded in the previous year by her anonymously published Psalms or Prayers, the 60-page book consisted of vernacular texts selected and...