

Overlooking A Significant Bond: Catherine Parr's Influence On Elizabeth I

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In the popular rhyme about Henry VIII's wives, Catherine Parr is remembered as just a footnote in history, known more for having survived the King than for marrying him. But the final spouse of the king also accomplished much as queen, and no feat was more profound and important in her life than the influence she exerted over her stepdaughter, Elizabeth.

While historians have never been timid in discussing and accurately documenting Catherine's relationship with the princess, they have not focused on the importance of that bond. Indeed, Lacey Baldwin Smith has stated "the Catherine Parr of legend--the wife . . . who reconciled [Henry] to his daughter Elizabeth--is too good to be true."¹ In fact, Catherine's influence on Elizabeth was important. The significance of the queen's influence on Elizabeth is better understood by examining three major parts of their relationship: Catherine's control over the princess's education, the correspondence between the two during Catherine's regency and Elizabeth's expulsion from court, and the attitudes and feelings they had toward each other. When these pieces are taken in sum, Catherine was clearly the driving force in Elizabeth's early life.

The education of the royal children under Queen Catherine was of the highest quality, and, for Elizabeth in particular, it was excellent. Even before her father married Catherine Parr, Elizabeth had shown herself to be a uniquely bright individual. Although rambunctious and wild as a youth, the young princess was exceptionally intelligent and had a natural love of history.² As biographer Francis Hackett stated, she was "born to play on the world as certain prodigies are born to play on the piano."³ Catherine cultivated Elizabeth's inherent intellect into something of substance.

With decisive shrewdness, Catherine took control over Elizabeth's and her young brother Edward's education. She implemented a humanistic, Protestant approach to their studies that had not been seen previously during Henry's

reign. Although irrevocably split from the Roman Catholic Church, England was still more Catholic than Protestant. The Six Articles of 1539, which affirmed communion, celibacy of the clergy, private masses, and confession, marked a final rejection of Lutheran orthodoxy.^[4] Catherine herself had held Protestant leanings for some years. Being keen in mind and rational in her views, “it was perhaps natural that she should favor the tenets of the new religion above the mysteries and intricacies and...contemporary abuses of Catholicism.”^[5] Princess Mary, Elizabeth’s and Edward’s half-sister, was too old and too much a part of England’s Catholic roots to be influenced by Parr’s educational efforts. The two younger children still had malleable minds, however, and were receptive to their stepmother’s instruction.^[6]

In 1544, Catherine reorganized the royal schoolrooms by moving the household to Hampton Court and appointing William Grindal, a highly regarded Greek scholar, as tutor. When Grindal died shortly afterwards, Elizabeth asked to have Roger Ascham, Grindal’s mentor, as her tutor.^[7] Catherine had planned for her attorney, Francis Goldsmith, to take up the job, but gave in to her stepdaughter and allowed Ascham to teach her.^[8] By letting the princess have a choice in the matter, Parr cultivated her independence and ultimately helped her develop into a future queen.^[9] The queen also appointed other humanists as tutors, such as John Cheke, Richard Cox, and Anthony Cooke, along with Calvinist Jean Belmaine, in order to maintain a steady stream of Protestant influences on the children.^[10]

It is wrong to assume Catherine only supervised Elizabeth’s education, merely choosing tutors that would educate in the lines of the Cambridge humanists. In fact, she was the first to take an extremely active role in the personal education of Elizabeth. Historians, however, do not wholly agree with this assertion. B. W. Beckingsale said that it was Europe and England’s unique seventeenth-century experiences, not Catherine, that most prominently contributed to Elizabeth’s educational upbringing.^[11] Beckingsale stated: “[Elizabeth] was educated during those years when the men of the New Learning took advantage of the destruction of the papal authority to assimilate the teaching of Luther and his followers.”^[12] According to many historians, the Reformation movement and the humanistic teachers who rode in with it had the most influence on Elizabeth. Catherine was seen only as a supporting player during this crucial time in the girl’s life, with Grindal, Ascham, and the other Protestant tutors taking center stage. This conclusion is not well founded, however, because these ecclesiastical scholars would have had no chance of entering Henry’s conservative court and sculpting his children’s minds without Catherine’s assistance. She was the chief organizer of the royal schoolroom, bringing in educators who agreed with her religious views and practices. Those educators returned her benevolence by encouraging the royal children to write her regularly, describing their progression.^[13] Catherine’s encouragement both promoted and developed the young girl’s exceptional ability to

learn.^[14] She looked after Elizabeth and made sure that the impressionable princess was taught and instructed in a Protestant-themed education.

Elizabeth evidently took to these teachings with great enthusiasm. She focused on religious works and became prolific in translating various prayers and meditations selected by Parr.^[15] Neville Williams believes Elizabeth's proficiency in translating religious texts stemmed from her desire to gain Catherine's approval.^[16] Whether the princess delighted in Catherine's educational reform is debatable, but it seems clear that she delighted in Catherine's attention.

The educational reforms Catherine implemented into the royal schoolrooms of Edward and Elizabeth are nothing short of remarkable. She recruited tutors sympathetic to her beliefs and worked with the children on a personal level. Historians have generally recognized this role, but have not considered its implications. Catherine's "hands-on" approach in teaching Elizabeth made the unbendable, resilient girl open up to the queen and allow herself to be taught the finer points of language, religion, culture, and royalty. When Catherine began overseeing all educational plans, Elizabeth was eleven. This proved an optimal time to instill in her the beliefs, values, and royal attributes she displayed as queen fifteen years later. Catherine herself sheds light on her motives by telling Elizabeth, "God has given you great qualities, cultivate them always, and labour to improve them, for I believe that you are destined by Heaven to be Queen of England."^[17] The present queen could definitely see the future queen being molded under her watchful eye.

The years 1543-44 brought many changes to the royal household that would solidify Catherine and Elizabeth's relationship. In the summer of 1543, Henry banished Elizabeth from the court for a year after a dispute between them. The cause for the expulsion was unknown, but Katharine Anthony conceived two possible scenarios. First, Henry's standards for his children were too high and he may have felt that Elizabeth's unruly spirit and carefree attitude were unfit and unwelcome. Secondly, Elizabeth was mature in thought and growing quickly at a young age, and the king might have been reminded of her mother, Anne Boleyn. Anthony elaborated on this second reason when she said that Elizabeth, "with her prim mouth and grown-up ways may have called the dead woman to life again."^[18] Whether or not either scenario was true, Catherine still made an effort to stay in contact with her stepdaughter.

It was during this period that Catherine began her regency over England. In early 1544 Henry was preparing to launch an invasion of France, an attack he led in person.^[19] By an ordinance of the Privy Council in July of that year, Parr was appointed regent in Henry's absence. This gave the queen immediate power over England and the necessary means to strengthen her bond with Elizabeth. Catherine, however, did not have permanent, supreme

authority over England. She was in fact only a temporary head of state, and five special commissioners were appointed to advise her.^[20]

Before Henry left for battle, Parliament thought it dangerous and foolhardy for him to risk his life with the royal succession “dependant on the life of a boy,” prince Edward, so the Third Succession Act was issued.^[21] The order of succession under the Act gave the throne to Edward and his heirs, followed by Mary and her heirs, and finally Elizabeth and her heirs, and “those Henry might designate by letters patent or will.”^[22] On the surface, it looks as though Elizabeth was restored to her place in the royal succession and all was well with the kingdom. It could be argued that it did not matter whether Henry banished the princess because the Act had supreme authority, leaving the issue moot.^[23]

Nevertheless, there was much more to the declaration. First, Mary and Elizabeth may have had their succession restored, but not their legitimacy. In other words, Parliament could ignore legitimacy in determining succession. This may not have been much of an issue for the king, but it was a blow to the spirits of his two daughters. Second, Henry set conditions by letters patent or will, which his daughters would have had to meet before becoming eligible to assume the throne. Parliament gave Henry power “to establish impossible conditions for his daughters” to meet, thus further chilling his relationship with them.^[24] The king bowed to the normal succession of his children, but established obstacles to their royal inheritance. Henry apparently thought of his daughters, especially the exiled Elizabeth, as second-rate children.

With Henry at war in France, Catherine reigning as Queen Regent of England, and Elizabeth away in exile at Ashridge, the setting was ideal for the queen to further strengthen her relationship with her stepdaughter and ultimately bring her back into the royal circle. While at Ashridge, Elizabeth wrote to Catherine regularly. She dared not write to her father, as she was frightened of possibly angering him again in some way that would further their estrangement. Instead, she pleaded for the queen to act as a liaison to Henry. Elizabeth’s earliest surviving letter was “a touching request for Catherine to intercede with her father...to end some piece of misunderstanding.”^[25] The princess must have been strengthened and overjoyed when she learned that her stepmother “mentioned her to the king in every letter she wrote.”^[26]

Catherine, however, did more than write letters to the king, asking for his blessings. She sent Elizabeth many gifts and commissioned a portrait of the princess in an attempt to “remind the court of her stepdaughter’s existence as well as her position as a daughter of the king.”^[27] Catherine also took great care in sending her letters to Elizabeth by using another stepdaughter from a previous marriage, Margaret Neville, to act as a liaison between the two.^[28]

According to Susan E. James, Neville was “trustworthy, young, and lively enough to provide compatible companionship for Elizabeth,” and thus was ideal for carrying messages between Parr and Elizabeth.^[29] Clearly, the queen made it her top priority during this time to mend Elizabeth’s wounded spirit and bring her back to the court.

Catherine ultimately did pull Elizabeth out of exile, effectively ending her yearlong banishment. While this fact is not refuted, few historians consider it significant. Elizabeth would have come back to court eventually, some might say, and it just happened during Parr’s regency. Still, it did not just happen under Catherine’s watch; it happened *because* it was under her watch. Catherine’s pleadings with Henry to forgive Elizabeth were the ultimate cause of the reunion. The king eventually agreed, giving his daughter permission to go to Greenwich to be with the queen and her half-sister Mary. In July of 1544, Elizabeth traveled to London and joined Catherine at St. James’s Palace. In a letter to the queen she stated that her exile had deprived her “for a whole year of your most illustrious presence, and...yet has robbed me of the same good.”^[30]

The high regard Elizabeth had for Catherine during this time is quite evident in the religious translations she produced as a gift for the queen on New Year’s Day of the following year. Elizabeth’s translation of the French meditation “The Mirror of a Sinful Soul” was a painstakingly long and dull project, one in which the princess must have taken great pains to produce.^[31] While the verses were humanistic and Protestant, giving evidence to Elizabeth’s education and tutoring under Catherine, more important was her humility in presenting the gift to her stepmother. Elizabeth knew the work was not perfect, but hoped Parr would “rub out, polish and mend the words . . . which I know in many places rude.”^[32] The translation was inscribed, “To our noble and virtuous Queen Katherine, Elizabeth her humble daughter wishes perpetual felicity and everlasting joy,” further testifying to the respect and adulation she had for the queen.^[33]

Catherine received Elizabeth’s gift with great pleasure, and was “deeply touched that she had gone to such trouble” in translating the piece.^[34] In truth, the effort was the culmination of more than a year’s worth of growing friendship between the two. It was a friendship guided by and orchestrated by Catherine. In light of the events of 1544, one can clearly see the unmistakable influence the queen had in bringing Elizabeth back into the royal family. Given the title of Queen Regent during Henry’s campaign in France, she took it upon herself to use the short time she had as “interim ruler” to strengthen her relationship with her stepdaughter. Through letters of endearment, numerous gifts, and her ability to reunite her stepdaughter with the rest of the family, she showed the full measure of her influence over Elizabeth.

After the events of 1543-44, Catherine became more than a loving mother, but also a political mentor. Both

had grown closer in mind and heart, and their attitudes toward each other reflected this union. Hackett is correct in stating that Catherine “possessed the odd gift that can turn any one not a monster into a human being—the solvency of good will.”^[35] Elizabeth was certainly no monster, and Catherine’s ability to not only love and cherish the girl but also clear the path for her future reign gives credence to her “good will.” In fact, it seems as though the stepmother and stepdaughter understood each other better than anyone else could. Both were “wholly English” and Protestants. Further, both were well educated in the curriculum of the time.^[36] It was Elizabeth’s keen ability to closely observe the queen in action that would have the most lasting effects on her and eventually become the foundation in her own sovereignty.

Anne Boleyn, now long dead and not even a memory, was no match for the caring and affectionate love Catherine provided the girl so early in life.^[37] The princess, as young as she was, had seen many queens, tutors, caretakers, and even love interests of her father come and go, with none leaving the mark that Catherine did. James goes even further by saying that Elizabeth, during her own reign, would mirror Catherine’s attempts to be at the same time both the devoted Christian woman and the aggressive powerful leader.^[38] It seemed that Elizabeth had Catherine in mind when she ascended the throne.

Historians have accurately documented the relationship of the two women, but many do not adequately stress Catherine’s importance. They have only shed a dim light on the story, leaving a large part barely seen and wholly obscure. When all is taken into account, a different story appears: a strong, intelligent, and shrewd woman using her position to mold a princess and future queen.

Catherine Parr was much more than simply a strong influence on Elizabeth’s early years. She molded the unrefined little girl into a young woman, and instilled in her all of the intellectual, religious, and political qualities of a queen. Catherine was the one teacher the princess truly learned from, the one queen she would most ardently emulate, and the one woman she could ever truly call “mother.” Elizabeth’s life would have been different had Catherine not graced it. She would have grown up without a Protestant upbringing, without a commanding queen to imitate, and without a tender and devoted stepmother to call her own. James correctly stated that “[Catherine’s] influence on Elizabeth’s life and education was seminal,” but that simple statement is insufficient.^[39] Her influence was indeed crucial, but James’ statement only attested to the initial impact of the relationship, not its ultimate effects on Elizabeth’s career. As a child, Parr told her own mother, “My hands are ordained to touch crowns and scepters, not needles and spindles.”^[40] Catherine’s youthful prophecy would eventually come true, and when it did, she immediately began ordaining those “crowns and scepters” for Elizabeth’s head and hands.

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- ¹ Lacey Baldwin Smith, *Henry VIII: The Mask of Royalty* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1971), 223.
- ² Agnes Strickland, *Life of Queen Elizabeth* (New York: George H. Doran Co., n.d.), 10.
- ³ Francis Hackett, *Henry the Eighth* (Garden City, New York: Garden City Publishing Co., Inc., 1991), 386-87.
- ^[4] Carolly Erickson, *Great Harry* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1980), 293.
- ^[5] Alison Weir, *The Six Wives of Henry VIII* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1991), 490.
- ⁶ Leslie Stephen, ed., *Dictionary of National Biography: IX, XVII* (New York: Macmillan and Co., 1887), 309. Stephen says scholars think Edward's handwriting resembles Parr's, due to the queen personally supervising his schooling.
- ⁷ Alison Plowden, *The Young Elizabeth* (New York: Stein and Day Publishers, 1971), 93-4.
- ⁸ Susan E. James, *Kateryn Parr: The Making of a Queen* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, Ltd., 1999), 140.
- ⁹ Pearl Hogrefe, *Women of Action in Tudor England: Nine Biographical Sketches* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1977), 205.
- ¹⁰ John Guy, *Tudor England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 15, 195; and Neville Williams, *Henry VIII and His Court* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1971), 237. Guy has written, "Humanism understood in the strict sense of the study of humane letters reached England in the fifteenth century, where it was purified by scholars...who emphasized Platonism and the study of Greek literature as the means of better understanding and writing."
- ^[11] B.W. Beckingsale, *Elizabeth I* (New York: Arco Publishing Co., Inc., 1963), 37.
- ^[12] *Ibid.*, 39.
- ^[13] James, 142.
- ^[14] Agnes Strickland, *Strickland's Lives of the Queens of England* (Boston: Aldine Book Publishing Co., n.d.), 2:296.
- ^[15] Katharine Anthony, *Queen Elizabeth* (Massachusetts: The Plimpton Press, 1929), 33. According to Anthony, Elizabeth turned "English into Latin, French, and Italian with great industry."
- ^[16] Neville Williams, *Henry VIII and His Court* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1971), 238.
- ^[17] Strickland, 15.
- ^[18] Anthony, 30-1. Anthony continues to elaborate by saying that these theories "would have contributed to her banishment, whatever her own fault may have been", and that "Henry could not bear the remotest suggestion that he was in the wrong."
- ^[19] Antonia Fraser, *The Tudors*, rev. ed. (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000), 35. "[Henry] joined the Holy League, formed by Pope Julius II with Venice and Spain against France, whose conquests in Italy had destroyed the balance of power."
- ^[20] F. G. Emmison, *Tudor Secretary: Sir William Petre at Court and Home* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1961), 53. Archbishop Cranmer, Chancellor Wriothesley, [Edward Seymour, Earl of] Hertford, [Dr. Thomas] Bishop [Bishop of Westminster], and [Sir William] Petre were the five appointees commissioned to guide Parr through her regency.
- ^[21] Mortimer Levine, *Tudor Dynastic Problems: 1460-1571* (London: George Allen and Union, Ltd., 1973), 71.
- ^[22] *Ibid.*
- ^[23] Henry VIII, Henry VIII cap. I (1544); Statutes of the Realm, 3: 955-8, in Levine, 161-62.
- ^[24] *Ibid.*, 71.
- ^[25] Williams, 239.
- ^[26] Hogrefe, 204. When Elizabeth got wind of Parr's efforts, she "wrote a letter of thanks and begged the queen to ask a father's blessing for her" (204).
- ^[27] James, 172.
- ^[28] *Ibid.*, 173.
- ^[29] *Ibid.*
- ^[30] Elizabeth I, *British Library* (Cott. Otho C.x.231); quoted in James, 173.
- ^[31] Hogrefe, 204. The meditation was in fact a poem by Margaret of Navarre. Hogrefe quotes Elizabeth's preface of her translation, to "the most noble and virtuous queen by her humble daughter."
- ^[32] Elizabeth I, quoted in Williams, *Henry VIII and His Court*, 239.
- ^[33] Elizabeth I, quoted in Karen Lindsey, *Divorced, Beheaded, Survived: A Feminist Reinterpretation of the Wives of Henry VIII* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1995), 189.
- ^[34] Weir, *The Six Wives of Henry VIII*, 512.
- ^[35] Hackett, 387.

[36] Anthony, 33.

[37] Lindsey, 205.

[38] James, 186. James also states: “The queen’s androgynous approach to the regency . . . was to form the basis for Elizabeth’s later approach to rule as a woman.”

[39] Ibid, 142.

[40] John Strype, *Ecclesiastical Memorials of Henry VIII, Edward VI, and Mary I*, 3 volumes (London, 1822), 132; quoted in James, 176.