Kateryn Parr and the Course of True Love

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One of the greatest love stories of the Tudor era was the passionate affair and brief marriage of Henry VIII's sixth queen, Kateryn Parr (c.1512-1548), with Henry's brother-in-law, Sir Thomas Seymour (c.1508-1549), later Lord Seymour of Sudeley. In a literature seasoned with real or reputed extramarital affairs, especially those involving Anne Boleyn and Catherine Howard, Kateryn Parr and Thomas Seymour's decade-long involvement has been generally overlooked. Beginning about 1537, it survived two of Kateryn's marriages, royal displeasure, public scandal, and a brush with the headman's axe. It ended only with the queen's death in childbirth with Seymour's child on 5 September 1548.

In an era of political matches made for dynastic and economic reasons, Kateryn's first exposure to marriage if not romance occurred when she was barely eleven. Her widowed mother, Maud Parr, opened negotiations with Henry Scrope, Lord Scrope of Bolton, for a marriage between Kateryn and his young son and heir. But Scrope had greater ambitions for his son than the daughter of a shire knight and the marriage negotiations ended after a year. Undeterred, in 1529 when Kateryn was 16, Maud made a match for her with Edward Borough, the 20-year-old son and heir of Sir Thomas Borough, Lord Borough of Gainsborough, in Lincolnshire. Kateryn's new father-in-law, Sir Thomas, was an outspoken supporter of the king's divorce from Catherine of Aragon and subsequently served as Anne Boleyn's chamberlain. Although on the right side of the English Reformation at court, at home Borough was a bully and a tyrant. Kateryn's young husband lived in terror of his father and was frail in health. Edward may also have inherited the seeds of insanity from his 'lunatic' grandfather for whom he was named.

Exiled from her family, lonely in the north and married to a feeble boy, Kateryn's first marriage could hardly have been a happy one. Fortunately for her, it was short-lived and by the winter of 1532-33 the unhappy Edward was dead. It was probably at Sizergh Castle in Westmorland that Kateryn met and married her second husband, the considerably older, twice-widowed John Neville, Lord Latimer of Snape in Yorkshire (1493-1542). Latimer was a man with a troubled young son, a motherless 8-year-old daughter and a family of unruly relatives. He and Kateryn had been married barely two years when the religious unrest in the north exploded into the religious uprising known as the Pilgrimage of Grace.

In the second week of October 1536 an armed mob appeared at Snape and carried off Kateryn's husband. For weeks Kateryn did not know whether Latimer was alive or dead and then in the middle of January, another mob appeared and took Kateryn and her two young stepchildren hostage. These events drove a wedge between Kateryn and her indecisive husband whose loyalties were suspect by the king and who had been unable to protect her from violence. She refused to remain in Yorkshire, and by the summer of 1537 the Latimers had moved south, spending time in London. Kateryn never again returned to the north.

In London, Kateryn was introduced to her brother William's circle of friends, which included Sir Thomas Seymour, the younger brother of the late Queen Jane. Seymour was everything feeble Edward Borough and dithering John Neville were not. Tall, handsome, well-built and charismatic, Seymour was known for his seductive voice and sartorial splendour. He captained his own warship, wrote poetry, composed music and was intensely attractive to women. The king, himself, joked about Seymour's prowess in the bedchamber. The late queen's brother was an inveterate traveller, intelligent and curious, but he also was deeply ambitious, had a jealous nature, a terrible temper, and an overwhelming envy of his elder brother, Edward, future Duke of Somerset.
By the time the Latimers moved to London about 1537, Lord Latimer at 43 was an old man, sickly and querulous. Traumatized by her experiences in the north and nursing a dying husband, Kateryn fell instantly in love with her brother's friend. Seymour, at almost 30, had never married although he had just ended an unsuccessful courtship of Mary Howard, dowager Duchess of Richmond, when he had been unable to secure her brother, the poet Earl of Surrey's approval to their marriage. What Seymour's original intentions were toward the almost-but-not-quite widowed Kateryn is difficult to say. He had a miniature of himself painted by Holbein and may have presented it to Kateryn. In it, he wears in his cap a pink or small carnation, emblem of romantic love. Kateryn's own feelings are a matter of record. 'I would not have you to think,' she wrote Seymour a decade later, 'that this mine honest goodwill towards you to proceed of any sudden motion or passion for as truly as God is God, my mind was fully bent the other time I was at liberty to marry you before any man I know.' Kateryn was not rich, not particularly well-connected and still had a husband living. From Seymour's previous amours it is likely that he desired little more than a secret seduction but the evidence of the Holbein miniature suggests that he may have been more serious about Kateryn than history has given him credit for.

Whatever their plans at Lord Latimer's death in February 1543, nothing came of them. Only weeks into her widowhood, it was made plain to Kateryn that a new suitor had proposed himself and that suitor was the king. About the time of Latimer's death,

Kateryn had joined the court as a member of Princess Mary's household. It was here that the king saw her and his frequent visits to his daughter led to gossip at court. Henry did not leave the gossips in suspense for long and within four months of Lord Latimer's death, Kateryn was coerced into accepting him as her third husband. 'Better to be his mistress than his wife', she is reported to have protested, but she was left with little choice but to obey. On 12 July 1543, in the Queen's Closet at Hampton Court, Kateryn Parr, Lady Latimer, became Henry VIII's sixth wife and England's new queen. Seymour's response was fury but it was a fury he was unable to express. He left the country, which was safer for him and for his erstwhile lover. On business both official and unofficial, he travelled on the continent, fought privateers from the quarterdeck of his ship and stayed as far away from court as he could. Kateryn tried to put thoughts of Seymour from her and concentrated on her new duties and responsibilities at court. Among these were attempts to become pregnant with a new male heir to the throne, but her royal husband's deteriorating physical condition made this difficult.

Kateryn was unique among Henry's queens. She had not been raised at a court nor was she part of a powerful dynasty. She had spent all of her adult years in the north and as the widow of a northern country squire, child of a northern gentry family, came to a court whose byzantine alliances and enmities she would at first have only been able to guess at. The king alone had raised her to the throne and it was on the king alone that she could depend for support in the early days of her marriage. Any mention of Seymour would have been dangerous but there were those at court, friends and enemies alike, who were only too aware of the recent Parr-Seymour liaison. Katherine Willoughby, Duchess of Suffolk, who came to be a close friend of the new queen's, had a notable stable of horses. She named one of her mares 'Parr' and one of her stallions 'Seymour'.

Nicholas Udall, teacher, writer and one of the new queen's pensioners, wrote a play in the summer of 1544 for Kateryn's amusement called 'Ralph Roister Doister'. In it, the main character of 'Kitte' is a caricature of the queen, her absent betrothed, 'Gawain Goodlucke', a stand-in for Henry VIII, and the eponymous hero 'Ralph', who tries to seduce Kitte away from Gawain, bears an uncanny resemblance to Seymour. If Kateryn's friends were willing to openly satirize her relationship with Seymour, her enemies could hardly have been doing less. It was probably only Seymour's long absences from court that kept Kateryn safe from even more vituperative gossip.

Three years after Kateryn's marriage to Henry, in the summer of 1546, the conservatives at court, worried about the queen's increasingly evangelical religious position, mounted a campaign designed to lead to her arrest. The Bishop of Winchester, Duke of Norfolk,

Sir William Paget and Sir Thomas Wriothesley conspired to convince the king that the queen's beliefs were heretical and therefore treasonous. Only quick thinking on the part of Kateryn's doctor, who warned her in time of the plot, saved her from a fatal trip to the Tower. Time, however, was running out for Henry and on 28 January 1547, he died at Westminster and was buried beside his third queen at Windsor. Shortly before the king's death, Thomas Seymour returned to court and by the beginning of March, he and the queen-dowager had become lovers.

Their affair was both illegal and incredibly dangerous. Were Kateryn to immediately become pregnant, who could say who the father of her child might be? As queen-dowager she was forbidden to marry without the permission of her young stepson, Edward VI. In reality this meant the consent of the head of the regency government, Seymour's despised elder brother, Edward, Duke of Somerset, and lord-protector. Hand-carried by trusted messengers, the lovers wrote passionate letters to each other, many of which still survive. In order to see Thomas in comparative safety, Kateryn left court and spent most of her time at her dower manors of Hanworth and Chelsea, just outside London.

Seymour rode across the fields at night to visit her. 'When it shall be your pleasure to repair hither,' Kateryn wrote to him from Chelsea, 'ye must take some pain to come early in the morning, that ye may be gone again by seven o'clock. And so, I suppose, ye may come without suspect. I pray you let me have knowledge overnight at what hour ye will come, that your portress may wait at the gate to the fields for you.' Seymour replied that the weeks without her 'were four days longer in everyone of them than they were under the plumet (duvet) at Chelsea.' He asked her for a love token, 'one of your small pictures', just as he had given her his miniature so many years before. Kateryn replied that she would grant his desire and 'have sent in haste to the painters for one of my little pictures …'

Gradually their friends became privy to the affair. The Duchess of Suffolk urged them on. Kateryn's sister, Anne, wife of Sir William Herbert, made her London home of Baynard's Castle on the Thames available to them for assignations. Inevitably, as both Seymour and Kateryn were aware, their enemies were bound to find out. People recognized Seymour on his nocturnal rides across the fields to Chelsea and made innuendos about his intimacy with the queen. In an attempt to stave off scandal and win important friends to their side, Seymour urged Kateryn to write to the young king asking for permission to marry. Kateryn had always had a good relationship with her stepson, and in theory the king agreed that she should marry his uncle. With little more

than this as encouragement, Seymour convinced Kateryn to marry him sometime in May, probably at the Herberts' home of Baynard's Castle.

When news of the marriage leaked out, the outcry was tremendous. The lord-protector was furious and told the king that the queen had lied to him and had actually been carrying on an affair with his uncle almost since his father died. Kateryn's influence with her stepson was ended. So great was the gossip and the scandalous jokes retailed in every tavern in London that an infuriated Seymour went to Parliament in an attempt to force a bill prohibiting the libelling of the queen.

Kateryn's anger at her exclusion from the regency was tempered by her joy at living openly as Seymour's wife, spending her time at Hanworth, Chelsea and Seymour Place in London. Her happiness increased when in the summer of 1547 she was given custody of the 14-year-old Princess Elizabeth. Kateryn and Elizabeth were very close. Her stepmother allowed Elizabeth freedoms she had never known. While at Chelsea, she was allowed to go out on a barge at night with only a handful of attendants. Kateryn and Thomas would wake her in the morning by tickling her in her bed and when the princess put on the regulation mourning dress for her father, they playfully ripped it so that only happiness should have place in their household.

Gossip about such frolics began to trickle back to court. While Kateryn may have played such games in the high spirits of her newly acquired freedom, other emotions were less innocent. Seymour did his best to win Elizabeth's affections in an effort to ensure her compliance with his ambition to supplant his brother as head of the regency council. Elizabeth, in return, developed a teenaged crush on the dashing Seymour, a crush shared and encouraged by her governess Kat Ashley. None of this would have been of much moment in a normal household but in the household of the queen, guardian of a stepdaughter whose biological mother had been executed for adultery, such emotional manipulations were a recipe for disaster.

Contrary to the traditional literature, Kateryn did not discover Elizabeth and Seymour in a compromising embrace nor did she send Elizabeth away. The princess was still a member of the household when Kateryn became pregnant with Seymour's child at Christmas 1547 and she stayed with Kateryn until the following spring. It was then that Seymour decided that his wife should be confined as far away from the gossip, the pressure of court politics and the annual summer plagues as possible, and in the second week of June accompanied her to his manor of Sudeley in Gloucestershire. Elizabeth went to live with Kat Ashley's sister, Lady Denny, at Cheshunt.

Abandoning his political ambitions for the moment, Seymour stayed by his wife's side throughout the summer, making certain that she ate correctly and took frequent exercise. Kateryn went into labour on 30 August and was delivered of a daughter, Mary, named for the Queen's stepdaughter, Mary Tudor. But despite all Seymour's efforts, the Queen died of puerperal fever 'between two and three of the clock in the morning' of 5 September leaving his baby daughter to his mother's care, Seymour returned to London. Made desperate by his loss and 'an heavy man for the Queen', the bereaved lord of Sudeley seemed to colleagues to be intent on suicide. He embarked on a series of frantic and violent acts directed at gaining a royal princess as a bride and overthrowing his brother's protectorate. Six months after Kateryn's death, Thomas Seymour was beheaded on Tower Hill at the orders of his brother, the Duke of Somerset. Thomas and Kateryn's only child, Mary Seymour, did not live to see her second birthday and almost certainly died, probably in the summer of 1550, at the Lincolnshire home of her guardian, the Duchess of Suffolk.

The affair of Kateryn Parr and Thomas Seymour is one of the most passionate Tudor love stories. It affected the political balance at court at the beginning of Edward VI's reign. But as importantly, it is unique for the personal letters and paintings which have survived and which continue to bring the lovers to life.