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## REFORMATION QUEEN: THE LIFE AND MIND OF KATHERINE PARR

**T**he young girl, sitting in her father's study, with crossed legs and pen in hand, scribbling her name in the margins of his books, may not have caught the attention of most people. Noble girls were expected to learn the basics, but children were still children. It was said that as a girl Katherine had her palm read and was told that she would one day rise to great power. Whether or not the story is apocryphal no one knows for sure, but she certainly had hopes that one day she would be important. As she would write near the end of her life: "Christ came to serve his brethren, and I coveted to rule over them." Despite her hopes, the death of her father put her family in serious financial hardship. Her dowry was not impressive, and she would not have been voted "most likely to be queen."

For the Parr name to rise to the second-highest position in the land was no small accomplishment, even if Katherine could not have planned it. From their earliest years, the Parrs struggled to climb the ladder of power. The first Parr, Sir William (1350–1404), owned a meager portion of the villa of Parr. Having served as a knight for

FIG. 1.1 KATHERINE PARR AND HER TIMES

1478	Thomas Parr born
1508	Thomas Parr marries Maude Greene
1509	Henry VIII becomes king
1509	Henry VIII marries Catherine of Aragon
ca. 1512	Katherine Parr born
1512	Michelangelo completes Sistine Chapel
1516	Birth of Princess Mary
1517	Thomas Parr dies
1517	Martin Luther posts "95 Theses" in Wittenberg
1521	Martin Luther excommunicated by Pope Leo X
ca. 1525	Birth of Katherine Howard
1526	Katherine Parr marries Lord Borough
1526	William Tyndale publishes English New Testament
1527	Henry VIII seeks annulment of his marriage to Catherine of Aragon
1528	Lord Borough dies
1529	Maude (Greene) Parr dies
1533	Thomas Cranmer becomes Archbishop of Canterbury
1533	Henry VIII marries Anne Boleyn
1533	Princess Elizabeth born
1534	Katherine Parr marries John Neville, the third Lord Latimer
1534	Church of England separates from Rome
1536	Anne Boleyn executed on the false charges of witchcraft, incest, and adultery on May 19; Henry marries Jane Seymour 11 days later.

John of Gaunt (the Duke of Lancaster and the famous protector of John Wyclif), William met Elizabeth de Roos (d. ca. 1392), a wealthy heir of her grandfather. It was a transaction that brought William a quarter of the barony of Kendal and its castle.

Keeping the land, however, would prove to be difficult for the Parrs. William's son, John (1382–1408), inherited the land after his father's death and married Agnes Crophill. Unfortu-

- 1536 John Calvin publishes the first edition of the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*
- 1536–37 Pilgrimage of Grace; Lord Latimer taken hostage
- 1537 Prince Edward born to Henry VIII and Jane Seymour; Jane dies from complications a few days later
- 1540 Henry VIII marries Anne of Cleves in January, annuls marriage July 9
- 1540 Henry VIII marries Katherine Howard on July 28
- 1542 Katherine Howard executed for adultery
- 1543 Lord Latimer dies
- 1543 Thomas Seymour courts Katherine Parr
- 1543 Henry VIII and Katherine Parr marry on July 12
- 1544 Katherine Parr becomes regent as Henry VIII fights in France
- 1545 *Prayers or Meditations* published
- 1545 Council of Trent begins
- 1546 Katherine Parr suspected of being Protestant by Stephen Gardiner and Thomas Wriothesley
- 1547 Henry VIII dies in January; Edward VI becomes king
- 1547 Katherine Parr and Thomas Seymour marry in April
- 1547 *The Lamentation or Complaint of a Sinner* published
- 1548 Katherine Parr gives birth to Mary on August 30
- 1548 Katherine Parr dies on September 5
- 1549 Thomas Seymour executed for treason on March 20

nately, upon his death, their son, Thomas (1407/8–61), was not yet a year old, and the family inheritance was given to Sir Thomas Tunstall of Thurland, Lancashire. By the time Thomas was of age, he had to reconstruct the Parr family influence all over again. Through cunning political maneuvering, Parr managed to gain two-thirds of the barony of Kendal (and make a significant amount of income from it), only to lose it again. But this hardly held him back—with perseverance and other

significant connections, Parr was still able to climb the power ladder again.

It was his sons, William (1434–83) and John Parr (d. 1475), who brought the family name lasting influence. Skilled with building alliances, William married Elizabeth Fitzhugh (1462–1505), whose powerful family owned a large amount of land, and he fostered a risky loyalty to Edward IV. It was a prodigious move, and when the Fitzhugh line ended, William's son Sir Thomas (1478–1517) inherited half the barony of Kendal.

Thomas, through his cousin Cuthbert Tunstall, kept the Parr family in the inner circle of Henry VIII and eventually became a knight. His influence was greatest in northern England, where his acquisition of land continued. In 1508, Thomas married Maude, the youngest daughter of Sir Thomas Greene, and had three children, William (1513–71), Anne, and Katherine (1512/14–48). Katherine was no more than five years old when Thomas died in November 1517, leaving Maude to care for the children by herself.<sup>1</sup>

### **The Life of Katherine**

The Parrs were fortunate in that, even after Thomas's death, they remained within the inner circle of Henry. That Katherine's grandmother, Elizabeth, had strong connections to Henry's grandmother, Margaret Beaufort, also helped. But despite the important family connections, the Parr money was not nearly strong enough to offer a substantial dowry.

1. For a helpful and concise Parr family history, see Rosemary Horrox, "Parr Family," in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography: From the Earliest Times to the Year 2000*, vol. 42, *Osborne-Pate*, ed. H. C. G. Matthew and Brian Harrison (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 838. For a traditional view of Parr family history, see Anthony Martienssen, *Queen Katherine Parr* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1973). Katherine's birth date varies from biographer to biographer. Some have placed it at 1512 (see Alison Weir, *The Six Wives of Henry VIII* [New York: Grove Press, 1991], 486).

Much is uncertain about the early years of Katherine's life. In 1526 Maude successfully arranged a marriage between Katherine and Edward, Lord Borough. Borough's wife had died when he was around sixty-three years old, leaving him with a family. He quickly sought to remarry, and Katherine, an attractive young woman, was his choice. "Like many girls in her position," writes biographer Alison Weir, "Katherine found herself a stepmother to children older than herself." In 1528 Lord Borough died, and Katherine became a teenaged widow. The following year, on May 20, 1529, Katherine buried her mother, Maude, in the church of the Blackfriars, London.<sup>2</sup>

Things began to look up again when, in 1534, Katherine married John Neville, the third Lord Latimer, a distant relative. Latimer had been married twice before, with the last Lady Latimer dying around 1526/27. He was of strong medieval ancestry and had already loyally served Henry, having been knighted at twenty years of age. In 1536–37, Latimer became an important figure in the Pilgrimage of Grace, considered one of the worst uprisings against Henry's religious policy in the history of his reign. As supporters of the old faith, the rebels did not welcome concessions to the Reformers. Latimer, a Catholic, did not immediately side with the rebels, but they eventually pressured him to play a leading role in the rebellion. This move could have cost him his life when other rebel leaders were executed had he not been pardoned by Henry. Katherine's position as Lady Latimer brought her into the adult life of court attendance, entertaining, and household management, and is one of the many direct connections she had to the king.

2. The following discussion draws from these works: Agnes Strickland, *Lives of the Queens of England from the Norman Conquest with Anecdotes of Their Courts*, vol. 4 (Philadelphia: Lea and Blanchard, 1848), 15–16, 24; Alison Weir, *The Six Wives of Henry VIII*, 489–91, 493; Alison Weir, *The Children of Henry VIII* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1996), 41–80.

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KATHERINE PARR'S LIFE

In March 1543, after leading thousands of men to battle against the Scots, Lord Latimer fell sick and died. By that time Henry had married Katherine Howard, had executed her for adultery, and had set his eyes on Katherine Parr. But before the king had formally expressed an interest in her, Sir Thomas Seymour, a handsome, wealthy, ambitious, and devious man, had already caught Katherine's attention. The Seymour family was politically powerful and Thomas well



1.2 Queen Katherine Parr, engraving by J. Cochran after the painting by Holbein.

known as a self-serving charmer who preyed on the women of the court. He cast his spell on Katherine and won her engagement, but they were not to marry, since the king (her fourth cousin) had had his eyes on her first. Determined to have whatever and whomever he wanted, Henry interfered with the engagement by sending Thomas to Brussels as ambassador to the Netherlands. Thomas got the message, and though Katherine's heart was his, no woman of this period who valued her position or life would resist the king, and she finally gave in. On July 12, 1543, Henry and Katherine married in a private ceremony.

With execution as an alternative to divorce, it was dangerous to be the wife of Henry. Katherine, however, had a few benefits that his other wives did not, the foremost being that his son Edward, by his third wife, Jane Seymour, had already been born. Once Henry had satisfied his lust for an heir, he was ready to turn his attention toward finding a mate. By the time of his marriage to Katherine, Henry had three children under his care: Mary, daughter of his first wife, Catherine of Aragon; Elizabeth, daughter of his second wife, Anne Boleyn; and Edward. Anne Boleyn had been executed in 1536 under the false charges of witchcraft, incest, and adultery. Jane Seymour had died after giving birth to Edward, and Henry's fourth marriage to Anne of Cleves, whom he found unattractive, had been annulled without consummation. His fifth wife, Katherine Howard, had been executed for infidelity. But in Katherine Parr, Henry found a woman whom he could respect in his limited way. Even more, she won the trust of Henry's children and became a mother to them.

### **The Education of a Queen**

Early historians of Parr emphasized Katherine's family connections with royalty, life as a young girl in the court,