

The Affair of Seymour & Princess Elizabeth



An account of Thomas Seymour's affair with Princess Elizabeth Tudor during 1547-8 which resulted in Princess Elizabeth becoming pregnant.

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Soon after Henry VIII died on 28 January 1547 and Edward VI, became king at age nine, Catherine Parr, Henry's widow, married Thomas Seymour, uncle of Edward VI, with whom she had had an affair prior to her marriage with Henry VIII.

As brother of the Lord Protector, Edward Seymour, 1st Duke of Somerset, Thomas was created 1st Baron Seymour of Sudeley and made Lord High Admiral. He and Catherine were secretly married in April or May 1547, following which he moved into his wife's house, Chelsea Manor in London, bringing with him the 11-year-old Lady Jane Grey,¹ who, in early February 1547, had been sent to live in Seymour's household. Already living in Chelsea Manor² and under Dowager Queen Catherine's guardianship was Catharine's step-daughter, the 13-year-old Elizabeth,³ daughter of Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn, half-sister of Edward VI and cousin of Jane Grey.

Within days of Seymour's arrival, Elizabeth started to receive early-morning visits from him. To begin with, Seymour engaged in romps and horseplay with the young teenager, which included entering her bedroom in his nightgown, tickling her and slapping her on her buttocks as she lay in bed.⁴ Elizabeth's governess, Kat Ashley,⁵ thinking this scandalous, reported it to Catherine; but Catherine, instead of confronting her husband about this, chose to occasionally join in, seemingly not realising where her husband's flirtatious activities might lead.

However, in the spring of 1548, when a now-pregnant Catharine discovered her husband and Elizabeth embracing each other, she sent Elizabeth away, in May 1548, to live with Sir Anthony Denny and his wife Joan Champernowne, Kat Ashley's sister, at Cheshunt in Hertfordshire. Soon after, on 12 June 1548, Catherine and Thomas Seymour moved their household from Chelsea to Sudeley Castle, which had been granted to Seymour when he became Baron Seymour of Sudeley.⁶

Throughout that summer, whilst living at Cheshunt, Elizabeth was reported to be ill with migraines, jaundice, digestive problems and irregular menstruation. Catherine Parr, meanwhile, had her own problems and died on 5 September 1548 due to complications of childbirth. Within a week, Thomas Seymour promptly resumed his attentions to Elizabeth by letter, planning to marry her. Even Kat Ashley sought to convince Elizabeth to take him as her husband. Elizabeth, by now a 15-year-old teenager, was receptive, but unready to agree to anything unless permitted by the Council.

Besides attempting to marry Elizabeth, Seymour also attempted to gain control of the King and to plot against his brother, the Lord Protector. In January 1549, he was arrested and imprisoned in the Tower on suspicion of embezzlement at the Bristol mint and conspiring to

depose Somerset as the Protector, kidnap the King, marry Elizabeth without the Council's consent, and make himself de facto king as the Lord Protector. Somerset sent Sir Robert Tyrwhit to Hatfield, to question and extract a confession from Elizabeth concerning her relationship with Seymour, whilst her closest companions—her cofferer, Thomas Parry, and her governess, Kat Ashley—were taken to London on 21 January 1549 for questioning.

Although questioned for weeks, Elizabeth, using her well-honed wit, admitted nothing incriminating, so that all that her exasperated interrogator, Sir Robert Tyrwhitt, could report to Somerset was that “in no way will she confess any practice by Mistress Ashley or the cofferer concerning my lord Admiral; and yet I do see it in her face that she is guilty and do perceive as yet she will abide more storms ere she accuse Mistress Ashley.”

Likewise, Kat Ashley, who had been Elizabeth's governess since 1537 and taught Elizabeth not only the usual needlework, embroidery, dancing and riding, but also mathematics, geography, astronomy, history, French, Italian, Flemish, and Spanish, revealed nothing treasonous. As for Seymour, a lack of clear evidence for treason ruled out a trial, so he was condemned instead by an Act of Attainder and beheaded on 20 March 1549.

Suspicious nevertheless abounded that, in 1548, Seymour had made Elizabeth pregnant, and that the princess had then either aborted the child or the child was still-born.⁷

Certain 'Oxfordians' believe that Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford, was in fact that suspected child of Princess Elizabeth and Thomas Seymour, and passed off as the son of John de Vere, 16th Earl of Oxford, and his second wife, Margery Golding.⁸ But Edward de Vere was, according to records, born the son of the Earl and Countess of Oxford on 12 April 1550 at the family's ancestral home, Hedingham Castle. Moreover, he received a gilded christening cup on his christening from Edward VI, after whom he is thought to have been named in order to honour the king. The christening took place on 17 April 1550, five days after the birth as per normal, with the christening cup being authorised as a gift from the King by the Privy Council. It is highly unlikely that a 15-month-old baby could have been passed off as a new-born child, which would have had to have been the case if the child had been Princess Elizabeth's.

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Endnotes

¹ Lady Jane Grey (c. 1536/1537 – 12 February 1554) was the eldest daughter of Henry Grey, 1st Duke of Suffolk, and his wife, Frances. Through her mother, Jane was the great-granddaughter of Henry VII; grandniece of Henry VIII; and first cousin once removed of Edward VI, Mary I and Elizabeth I.

² Chelsea Manor, also known as Chelsea Place, for which the borough of Chelsea, London, is named, was a former royal residence acquired by Henry VIII of England in 1536. It was one of the residences of Tudor Princess Elizabeth after her mother, Anne Boleyn, was beheaded on 19 May 1536. In 1544, the king granted the manor of Chelsea to his wife Queen Catherine Parr for life as part of her dowry. After Henry's death on 28 January 1547, Catherine moved there from the court, and resided there as a widow and then as the wife of Sir Thomas Seymour. Princess Elizabeth lived there with her as a ward of the Dowager Queen until May 1548. Seymour and Catherine left Chelsea Manor for Sudeley Castle on 12 June 1548.

After Queen Catherine's death on 5 September 1548, the manor was occupied until 1638 by Crown lessees or those to whom the sovereign gave occupancy of the house. These included John Dudley, Duke of Northumberland, 1551-3, who held meetings of the King's Council at Chelsea; his widow Jane from 1554 until her death in 1555; Anne of Cleves who died there in 1557; Anne Seymour, Duchess of Somerset, until her death in 1587; and from 1591 the Lord High Admiral Charles Howard, Lord Howard of Effingham and later Earl of Nottingham, whose wife Catherine was a close friend of Queen Elizabeth I. During the Nottinghams' residence at Chelsea, Queen Elizabeth made frequent visits to dine with them.

³ Elizabeth Tudor was born 7 September 1533.

⁴ According to Katherine Ashley (The Robert Tyrwhitt Commission of Enquiry, February, 1549):

“Seymour... would come many mornings into the Lady Elizabeth's chamber, before she were ready, and sometimes before she did rise. And if she were up, he would bid her good morrow, and ask how she did, and strike her upon the back or on the buttocks familiarly, and so go forth through his lodgings; and sometime go through to the maidens and play with them, and so go forth... If Lady Elizabeth was in bed, he would... make as though he would come at her. And he would go further into the bed, so that he could not come at her.”

⁵ Katherine Champernowne. In 1545 she married John Ashley, Elizabeth's senior gentleman attendant and cousin of Anne Boleyn.

⁶ Lady Jane Grey lived with the Seymour and Catharine at Sudeley Castle in Gloucestershire until Catherine's death in childbirth in September 1548.

⁷ The Word Cipher, a cipher ascribed to Francis Bacon and deciphered by Orville Owen, supports the general suspicion that Elizabeth was made pregnant by Seymour and that the child was still-born. Although much in the Word Cipher can be supported by hard evidence, there is also much that cannot. Generally speaking, the Word Cipher, although mentioned by Bacon, is considered to be either unproven or spurious.

⁸ Edward de Vere, Viscount Bulbeck, became the 17th Earl of Oxford and hereditary Lord Great Chamberlain of England on his father's death on 3 August 1562. Being only 12 years old at the time, he became a royal ward of the Queen and was placed in the household of Sir William Cecil, the Queen's secretary of state and chief advisor.