

ART. XII. – *The Devotional Writings of Queen Catherine* Parr.*

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IN the 1530's, obsessed by his need for a male heir, Henry VIII spearheaded a religious revolution which led to the separation of the English church from the domination of Rome. Within the Protestant persuasion which that revolution established were those who were known as "Erasmians". Strongly influenced by the humanist tradition, they sought to produce books in the vernacular to help spread the new learning of the reformed religion. Within this group of dedicated enthusiasts, the sixth queen of Henry VIII, Catherine Parr (1512-1548), had a very real place. Her part in the movement should be of interest to the Society not only for her Westmorland descent but because the town of Kendal possesses a manuscript, said to be in her own hand, of part of one of the books she contributed to this body of religious literature.

Her education, her religious devotion and her pre-eminent position made her an ideal propagandist for the Reformed religious viewpoint. She had a history of avid interest in religious disputation, and, prior to her marriage to Henry VIII, when she was still Lady Latimer, had gathered around her at her home in Charterhouse a circle of other like-minded Reformed religious thinkers. In addition, as a member by marriage of the Tudor family, she was heir to a legacy of intellectual piety and scholastic patronage begun by Margaret Beaufort, Countess of Richmond, and carried on by Katherine of Aragon. In her turn, Catherine's passion for education and religious discussion was passed on to her step-children, Margaret Neville, and Edward and Elizabeth Tudor, and to her ward, Lady Jane Grey. Not only in England, but on the continent too, this tradition of erudite ladies who both patronized scholars and divines and contributed their own writings as well to the literate public was strong and the writings of Marguerite of Navarre, in particular *The Mirror of the Sinful Soul*, had significant influence on Catherine Parr's own works.

Catherine Parr's writings can be conveniently divided into three categories, (i) those of which she was undeniably the author, (ii) those which have been ascribed to her, and (iii) those which she may have written but for which she has received no credit.

(i) In the first category are two works, *Prayers and Meditations* and *Lamentation of a Sinner*. *Prayers and Meditations* was first published in 1545, and is in two parts. The first, or meditational part, is a paraphrase of the *Psalms*. It is arranged in 288 short verses of no more than one or two sentences each. The second section has five prayers, the most frequently published and therefore best known being "A prayer for the king" and "A prayer for men to say entering into battle". The book was a queen's private meditations published in the hope of not only establishing her own religious sincerity but of reinforcing others, and she described it as a work "wherein the mind is stirred patiently to suffer all afflictions here, to set at naught the vain prosperity of this world, and always to long for the everlasting felicity". No one from St. Augustine on would quibble with the sentiment. Limited as she was by her husband's increasingly conservative tendencies, her full religious convictions found complete expression only after his death.

* This is the spelling used by the *Dictionary of National Biography*, but she spelt it Kateryn.

In 1547 Catherine's second book, *Lamentation of a Sinner*, was published at the behest of her brother, William Parr, the Marquess of Northampton, and her close friends, William Cecil, and Catherine, Duchess of Suffolk. This work is a full pronouncement, in the form of a meditational discussion, of the queen's religious beliefs. Her disgust with Rome, her condemnation of the papacy, her total commitment to the vernacular Bible and her steadfast belief in the superiority of Divine Law over mortal judgement are all clearly expressed. The influence of two other writers is apparent: Thomas à Kempis and Marguerite of Navarre. Both *The Imitation of Christ* and *The Mirror of the Sinful Soul* are paraphrased frequently.¹ Catherine's is a gentle confession of personal failures and feared inadequacies and of ultimate trust in and dependence on God's grace and mercy – not philosophically profound but moving in its obvious sincerity.

Lamentation of a Sinner was first published by Edward Whitchurch in 1547. Another edition, also by Whitchurch, appeared in 1548. It was suppressed during Mary's reign, but when Elizabeth came to the throne two further editions appeared. One was published in 1563 by John Alde and the second, in 1582, was included in Thomas Bentley's collection of noblewomen's writings, *The Monument of Matrons*.

Prayers and Meditations was published originally in 1545 and new editions were issued nineteen times by 1595. The editions fall into three categories: Berthelet's early editions, the Wykes group and the 'non-aligned' editions.² Besides the printed versions of the book, there is one in manuscript, supposedly in Catherine Parr's hand, belonging to the town of Kendal. It is incomplete, missing the last fifty-nine verses of the published versions. Originally presented by Catherine to Elizabeth Tuke, daughter of Sir Brian Tuke, Treasurer of the chamber of Henry VIII, it remained with her descendants until the late seventeenth century. It then passed to the Offley family of Wychnor Park, Shropshire, who sold it with all the rest of their estate to Theophilus Levett in 1746. In 1927, Basil Levett sold it to a London dealer.³

Both *Lamentations of a Sinner* and *Prayers and Meditations* were translated into Latin by Sir John Radcliffe of Cleeve, the son of Robert Radcliffe, first Earl of Sussex.⁴ Jean Bellemain, the French tutor of Edward VI and a member of his privy chamber, turned *Lamentation* into a French poem. Two known copies of Bellemain's translation exist. One is in the British Library and the other is among the Cecil Papers at Hatfield House.⁵ *Prayers and Meditations* were also translated by the queen's step-daughter, the Princess Elizabeth, who turned it into French, Italian and Latin for her father as a New Year's gift in 1545.⁶

(ii) In the second category of works, those ascribed to Catherine, are two translations into English, one of Savonarola's *A goodly exposition . . . upon the li Psalm*,⁷ and one of Erasmus' *Paraphrase of St. Matthew*, as published in Nicholas Udall's edition of the *Paraphrases*. Both ascriptions are speculative. John Strype alone attributes the 1549 Savonarola work to Catherine. Several English translations of it already existed and while it is possible that Catherine may have worked on it in order to exercise her Latin, there is no indication that she was the source of the subsequent publication. Indeed, the fact that it was published anonymously a year after her death, at a period when all of her works were being widely issued under her own name, argues against it. In the case of *St. Matthew*, this translation alone of the four gospels in the *Paraphrases*, is uncredited and undedicated. Udall, the director of the project, claims no knowledge of the translator which is surprising. It is known that Princess Mary and Dr Francis Mallet collaborated

on *St. John* and that the queen wrote to her step-daughter trying to persuade Mary to allow her name to be mentioned as the translator.⁸ Given this attitude, it is hard to imagine that Catherine would maintain her own anonymity had she indeed been responsible for *St. Matthew*.

(iii) One work exists for which there is reliable evidence that Catherine may have been the translator but has never received credit for it. Almost all editions of the *Prayers and Meditations* published after 1556 contain, in addition to the *Prayers*, a work originally entitled *Psalms or Prayers taken out of Holy Scripture*.⁹ Catherine's *Prayers* and these anonymous *Psalms* were frequently bound together and entitled *The King's Psalms and the Queen's Prayers*, without any other source of authorship being given. These *Psalms* had originally been published in Cologne in Latin about 1525. The ascription attributes the collection to John Fisher, Bishop of Rochester. In 1544, the King's Printer, Thomas Berthelet, published the *Psalms* in a Latin edition with no mention of Fisher. Although his name remained connected with the book on the continent,¹⁰ it was conveniently forgotten in England. That same year, the first English translation of the *Psalms* appeared in print, also published by Berthelet. The translation was published anonymously but there are good grounds for proposing Catherine Parr as the translator. John Strype, in his book *Ecclesiastical Memorials*, ascribed the *Psalms* to the queen's authorship.¹¹ Nicholas Udall's dedication of the English translation of Erasmus' *Paraphrase of Acts* referred to the queen's "composing and setting forth many goodly Psalms and diverse other contemplative meditations".¹² It is significant that he specifically used the word 'Psalms'. And there are also two very suggestive bills for books sent to the queen by Thomas Berthelet and countersigned by her chamberlain.¹³ The first, dated January 1547, records several books in special bindings delivered to the queen, among which are some thirty of her own *Prayers and Meditations* bound variously in white satin and leather, embossed with gilt. One item on the bill refers to "a book of psalm prayers covered in white and gilt on leather". These must be presentation copies of Catherine's book and indicate that the queen was in the habit of giving such copies of her work to her friends. The second bill is even more enlightening. Dated 1 May 1544, and written in Thomas Berthelet's hand, it records charges for some fourteen of the "books of the psalm prayers, gorgeously bound and gilt on leather". The *Psalms* had been published, in Latin, for the first time on 18 April 1544 and in English on 25 May 1544, and it is therefore highly likely that the "psalm prayers" were identical with *Psalms or Prayers*, and were also presentation copies. Catherine's patronage of Thomas Berthelet also reinforces the probability of her connexion with this book.

One last piece of evidence tying the *Psalms* to Catherine Parr is the fact that her "a prayer for the king" was originally published appended to the first edition of the *Psalms*, and is included with them in every subsequent edition. This prayer is also one of the five which ends the *Prayers and Meditations*, and occasionally it appears twice when the two are bound together, once after each book, as in the 6 November/2 July 1545 edition.¹⁴ From 1547 on, Catherine Parr's "A prayer for men to say entering into battle" is usually appended as well.

Why did Catherine choose to translate this particular work? Principally perhaps its humanist origins appealed to her. Certainly the ideas expressed were identical to the ones she held. The psalm-like format of the short verse form is one she frequently used herself.¹⁵ As the connexion of the book with the Bishop of Rochester had been either

ignored or forgotten, no religious or political objection could be raised to its unexceptional, mildly humanist themes. As a translation rather than an original piece of writing, Catherine may have preferred to publish it anonymously. She was deeply interested in translating religious works from Latin into English, such as the Udall translation of Erasmus' *Acts*. We know from some of Edward VI's letters, that she was studying Latin.¹⁶ This is supported by a bill, dated 12 April 1544, for "a primer for her grace in Latin and English with epistles and gospels unbounded".¹⁷ She might then have translated the *Psalms* as a Latin exercise and being encouraged to publish it, as she was with *Lamentation of a Sinner*, modestly agreed only on the condition that it should be published anonymously. She indicated her exaggerated modesty over her very good Latin in a letter to the University of Cambridge when she said:

Your letters I have received . . . and as they be Latinly written (which is so signified unto me by those that be learned in the Latin tongue), so I know you could have uttered your desires and opinions familiarly in our vulgar tongue, aptest for my intelligence.¹⁸

The persistent publication of the *Prayers* and the *Psalms* together in later editions indicates that, in the publisher's mind at least, a relationship existed between them.

Only three years elapsed between Catherine Parr's first acknowledged publication and her death. Three years in which the shifting web of court plots and politics filled most of her time. Her meditations were her sanctuary, her reassurance that beyond the intrigues and dangers of the world lay the never-ending mercy of God. She published these works in an attempt to bring that conviction and reassurance to others. After her death, the Protestant faction found in them a politically useful tool to spread, at least among their own kind, the religious doctrine of the new age. The importance of her writings today is historic rather than literary. They are an example of what a well-born, humanist-educated, Protestant-oriented woman was thinking and feeling in 1547. They are significant because they help illustrate the religious consciousness of a group whose influence in part redirected the history of the sixteenth century. As a spokesman for her circle, Catherine Parr's devotional works are important and their grace and sincerity reflect the attractiveness of the mind that drew that circle to her.

Notes and References

¹ Marguerite of Navarre's book, *The Mirror of the Sinful Soul*, first appeared in England, in French, in 1531, and, in a second more comprehensive edition in 1535. The eleven-year-old Princess Elizabeth chose this work to translate as a gift for her step-mother on New Year's Day in 1544, perhaps because she knew it was one of Catherine's favourites. Elizabeth's gift was written in her own hand and bound in an embroidered cover of her devising. (Bodleian MS Cherry 36, kept as Selden cupboard 116.)

² See K. Pantzer, *Short-Title Catalogue* (Revised Edition), volume 2, for a list of the various editions of *Prayers and Meditations*.

³ The Office of Information, Town Hall, Kendal graciously provided me with Sir Algernon Tudor-Craig's research on the provenance of the manuscript, as well as a transcript of it.

⁴ B.M. Royal MS 7D.IX.

⁵ B.M. Royal MS 16 Exxviii, and Cecil Papers #314.

⁶ B.M. Royal MS 7D.X.

⁷ Fully entitled, *A goodly exposition, after the manner of a contemplation upon the li Psalm called Miserere mei deus*, the text was first published in 1538 in Paris in Latin and English. In 1539 it was published in London by Robert Redman bound in with Savonarola's *Meditation of Psalm of In te Domine speravi*. In 1540 a new

edition was published in London by J. Herforde for R. Toye. No ascription is given in the colophon for the 1549 English translation.

⁸ B.M. Cott. MS Vespasian F3/f.37.

⁹ The first such joint edition was Thomas Berthelet's 6 November 1545 issue.

¹⁰ Halkett and Laing, *A Dictionary of Anonymous and Pseudonymous Publications in the English Language*, third edition, P282, p. 161.

¹¹ Strype, *Memorials*, II, i, 204 ff.

¹² Nicholas Udall, English translation of Erasmus' *The Paraphrase of Acts*, preface.

¹³ P.R.O.: Aug. Office Misc. Book 161, art. 46, and P.R.O.: Excheq. Q.R. Accounts 424.12. The queen's chamberlain was her uncle, Sir William Parr, Baron Parr of Horton. Also see, Frances B. Rose-Troup, "Two Book Bills of Katherine Parr", reprinted from *The Library*, January 1911, in *Six Pamphlets on the History of Books*, Bodleian 2581.d.73(4).

¹⁴ Cambridge UL, Syn 8.54.69².

¹⁵ Catherine's habit of writing down quasi-Biblical verses is preserved in her prayer book at Sudeley Castle. In it she has filled the flyleaf with such verses. Dent-Brocklehurst MS collection, Sudeley Castle, "A sermon of St. Chrysostome", published by Thomas Lupsette in London and autographed by the queen on the title page. The following verses were inscribed by Catherine on the flyleaf.

"Delight not thou in the multitude of ungodly men and have no pleasure in them, for they fear not God.

Trust not in wicked wretches, for they shall not help in the day of punishment and wrath.

Be not carried away with every wind and walk not in every path, for so doth the sinner that hath a double tongue.

Be gentle to hear the word of God, that thou mayst understand it, and make a true answer with wisdom.

Be swift to hear and slow in giving answer.

Be not a privy accuser as long as thou livest, and use no slander with thy tongue.

See that thou justify small and great alike.

Refuse not the prayer of one that is in trouble, and turn not away thy face from the needy."

¹⁶ "I hear too, that your highness is progressing in the Latin tongue and in Belles Létres." B.M. Harl. MS 5087, 10 June 1546, in Latin, Edward VI to Catherine Parr.

¹⁷ P.R.O.: Aug Office Misc Book 161, No. 69.

¹⁸ B.M. Lansdowne MS 1236 f. 11, 1545, Catherine Parr to the University of Cambridge.

