

ART. X. – *A Tudor Divorce. The Marital History of William Parr, Marquess of Northampton*  
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THE marital history of William Parr, Marquess of Northampton, whose sister Kateryn, was the sixth wife of Henry VIII, is of significance in sixteenth century social history, paralleling as it does King Henry's own efforts to divorce his first wife and marry the seductive Anne Boleyn. Parr, too, managed to divorce his unloved first wife and marry the woman he loved, but not without much effort and aggravation. It took a special act of Parliament for the Marquess to secure his divorce and then over the next twenty years the validity of the divorce depended on court politics and the good will of England's ruling monarch. William Parr's marital career was as full of ups and downs as his political one and both began when he was only four years old and his father died, leaving little William the sole male hope of the ambitious Parr family.

William Parr was born in 1513, the second child and only son of Sir Thomas Parr and his wife, Matilda Green. 'Maud' Green, heiress of the Green family of Greens Norton, Northamptonshire, was only sixteen when the career courtier, thirty-two-year-old Parr, married her.<sup>1</sup> Apparently she loved him deeply and after Sir Thomas' sudden death in 1517, she never married again. Sir Thomas, like his father before him, had gone to court to seek his fortune. One of the lively, erudite and fun-loving young men who made up the young King Henry's inner circle, Sir Thomas frequently distinguished himself for his charm and physical prowess. In the royal New Year's revels in January 1510, Sir Thomas, joined by his younger brother, William Parr, his close friend Henry Bouchier, Earl of Essex, and eight other young gallants dressed themselves up in coats and hose of Kendal green and playing the parts of Robin Hood's men, "ran for a gladness to the Queen's grace".<sup>2</sup> It was into this world of courtly sophistication, gaiety and intrigue that Sir Thomas took his young bride when he married her in 1508.<sup>3</sup> The new Lady Parr, raised in the quiet of rural Northamptonshire, was delighted by her new surroundings and proved the equal of her considerably older husband in intelligence and charm. Both the king and his queen, Catherine of Aragon, were fond of Lady Parr, so much so that when Sir Thomas died suddenly in 1517, the queen made a place for the young widow in her household. At twenty-five, with three children under six – Kateryn, William and Anne – to provide for, Maud Parr might have married again, but she did not. For generations, the Parrs had sought a title to go with their considerable estate holdings but without success, and at her husband's death, Maud Parr determined that her son, four-year-old William, would achieve one.<sup>4</sup> The widowed Lady Parr had been left in financially straightened circumstances, but she was well-connected and by now quite conversant in the best way to go about achieving her ends at court. As lady-in-waiting to the queen, Lady Parr was in a position to acquire the thing she wanted most – a brilliant marriage for her only son.

The first person Maud Parr turned to was the Earl of Essex. She saw in her husband's old friend the answer to her ambitions for her son. As the second Earl of Essex, Henry Bouchier was a long-time friend of the king's. He had been a soldier, courtier, sportsman, gambler and general rakehell, and in 1526 near the end of his life, he had grown fat and

tired and increasingly deaf. A very rich man in spite of his extravagances, he was the child of Anne Woodville, sister to Edward IV's queen, and thus his family had not only wealth and nobility but the royal cachet. What was more, the Earl of Essex had only one legitimate child – a nine-year-old daughter, Anne.

Steadfastly, ruthlessly, obsessively, Lady Parr set out to achieve a marriage with Anne Bouchier for her son. In her will, written five years later, Maud Parr mentions 'divers friends'<sup>5</sup> to whom she was financially indebted for William's marriage. She cajoled friends and relations – particularly her husband's cousin, Cuthbert Tunstall, Bishop of Durham – anyone that had influence at court, to promote the marriage. And she borrowed money – from Tunstall, from Sir Edward Montague, from the king himself – to arrange it. In 1527 she pulled it off. On 9 February, a marriage licence was issued for William Parr, esquire, and the Lady Anne Bouchier.<sup>6</sup> The groom was thirteen and the bride barely ten. It was the beginning of a forty-four-year relationship that neither wanted and that both did everything they could to end.

From the beginning they were ill-suited – William, charming, social but feckless, loving court and its intrigues, and Anne, serious, religious, uninterested in politics or society, wanting only to live quietly in the country. The two years prior to his marriage, William had spent living in the household of the king's young bastard son, Henry Fitzroy, Duke of Richmond, where his uncle was Chamberlain. Schooled there by royal tutors, William Parr was well-educated, handsome, cultured and fun-loving. Anne, apparently, had little interest in learning or the arts. William was also an accomplished rider, and he and the Duke delighted in riding out for long hours in the saddle with William's uncle. The two boys were such close friends that Richmond's rather acerbic tutor, Richard Croke, complained at one point to Richmond's godfather, Cardinal Wolsey, about the friendship. The result of the complaint was that Croke was replaced as tutor.<sup>7</sup>

The idea of becoming an earl must have dazzled the young Parr, but it was probably with a heavy heart that thirteen-year-old William left his best friend and the carefree days of childhood to take up the duties of husband to an unknown little girl. Although they were not expected to live together as man and wife, William moved into the household of his new father-in-law, the Earl of Essex. Life with the gouty old man and his sober-minded daughter was not easy. As a royal favourite, Essex lived far above his income and spent much of his time dodging about from manor to manor hiding out from creditors and sending a steady stream of complaints to the king's chief minister, Thomas Cromwell.<sup>8</sup>

Not only personality but religion came between William and Anne. Anne was a conservative, stubborn girl with a mind of her own and after Henry VIII's divorce and the separation of the English church from Rome, she clung to a belief in the old ways. While William, like his two sisters and his uncle, wholeheartedly embraced the new religion and all the changes that went with it. When the time came to consummate their marriage – some three or four years later – neither William nor Anne was at all inclined to do so. It wasn't until nearly twelve years after the wedding that Anne and William were definitely recorded as living together and then it was for a very brief time.

Maud Parr could hardly have known her son's brilliant marriage would be a personal catastrophe. Neither title nor child would come of it, but Lady Parr did not live to see the results. She died in 1531 when William was eighteen. Nine years later while out

riding, the unwieldy, deaf old Earl of Essex was thrown from his horse and broke his neck. Anne and William became Lord and Lady Parr, for the king had taken the Essex title away from them and given it to his favourite, Thomas Cromwell. William was furious and so presumably was Anne. William was reluctantly living with Anne on the expectation of her father's title. Their marriage collapsed barely two years after the Earl of Essex's death. Neither had apparently been particularly faithful during the strained years of their marriage and in 1541, the conservative but impulsive Lady Anne, who unlike her late mother-in-law had never liked life at court, eloped to the country with "one Hunt or Huntley".<sup>9</sup>

Parr was both appalled and outraged. His reputation had suffered a shattering blow and he had visions of his wife's great inheritance slipping through his fingers. In 1542 he secured a legal separation from Anne on the grounds of adultery, and on 13 March 1543 he went one step further. Anne had given birth to her lover's child and William was determined to bar the child from any right in his or its mother's inheritance. With the help of his friends at court he pushed a bill through Parliament stating:

"that whereas the Lady Anne . . . giving her mind to live in (adultery), contrary to the law of God . . . and she being admonished . . . nevertheless she being very obstinate and fully minded to preserve and continue in the same abominable Vice did not only refuse his (Parr's) said counsel and godly exhortations, but also said openly, that she would take her pleasure, and live as she listed, saying that she never loved (Parr), nor never would . . ."<sup>10</sup>

But this bill was as far as Parr could go, because while Henry VIII might now divorce wives with impunity, his subjects had a much harder time of it. Then for William and all the Parrs everything changed, because on 12 July 1543 William's sister, the twice-widowed Kateryn Parr, became Henry VIII's wife and Queen of England. Overnight positions were reversed. By December, William had become Earl of Essex with control of most of his wife's estates.

With the now-penniless Anne in exile in the country, life at court became very pleasant for the new brother-in-law of the king. William had a brief but passionate affair with Dorothy Bray, who had been one of Anne of Cleves' maids-in-waiting.<sup>11</sup> But the affair ended and in 1544 William Parr fell deeply in love. Elisabeth Brooke was the independent and vivacious daughter of Lord Cobham of Kent and the niece of the poet, Sir Thomas Wyatt. She was also one of the most beautiful of Kateryn Parr's maids-in-waiting. There had even been rumours two years before that she might marry the king. Witty, charming and in sympathy with the new religion, Elisabeth was in William Parr's eyes everything that Anne was not. Elisabeth was also very young and no doubt flattered by the dashing Earl of Essex's attentions. For a while the lovers were discrete but by 1545 Elisabeth's father had realised what was going on and was having his daughter watched.<sup>12</sup> For three years William and Elisabeth waited without much hope that they would ever be allowed to marry and then on 28 January 1547, Henry VIII died.

William Parr wasted no time in trying to get his first marriage annulled. He had stayed quiet while his sister was queen, probably because Kateryn's own position was so precarious. But now with Henry's death, he was free to pursue the divorce he so ardently wanted. In April, Parr petitioned a commission to dissolve his first marriage and set him free to marry again.<sup>13</sup> The commission was duly convened but could not seem to reach any sort of conclusion on the matter, and William ran out of patience. In the summer

of 1547 he married Elisabeth Brooke in secret, heedless of his position, his reputation or anything else. In January of the following year, the scandal broke.<sup>14</sup> Elisabeth was sent from court; Parr was expelled from the Privy Council and they were forbidden on pain of death to see each other. The prime mover of this draconian reaction was the Lord Protector of England, Edward Seymour, Duke of Somerset. Since Seymour had himself divorced his first wife for adultery, the action was unjustifiably hypocritical. William never forgave him.

For three years the case dragged on. It was not until March 1551, after Somerset's downfall, that a private bill was passed in Parliament dissolving William and Anne's marriage and confirming William's marriage to Elisabeth.<sup>15</sup> It was precisely over the point of his divorce that Parr swung his support from Somerset to the Earl of Warwick and thus later became enmeshed in the brief and tragic reign of Lady Jane Grey. The divorce from Anne and the settlement of William's marriage to Elisabeth was short-lived for in July 1553, Mary Tudor ascended the throne and reversed the decision. Parr was thrown in the Tower on a charge of treason for his part in the Jane Grey conspiracy, his annulment was cancelled, and his sometime-wife, Elisabeth, was evicted from their home in Southwark. Ironically, it was left to the Catholic Lady Anne to plead for Parr's life with the new queen. And she did just that, although possibly not just for the sake of altruism but in an attempt to salvage some of her inheritance from confiscation by the Crown.<sup>16</sup> Mary considered pressing Parr to take Anne back as his wife but dropped the idea, probably because Anne, herself, had no desire to return to William.

Forced apart once more, Elisabeth Parr lived alone, without official position or income, for another five years. Finally, in 1558, Mary Tudor died and her sister became Elizabeth I of England. After fourteen years, William and Elisabeth were finally free to live together openly and officially as the Marquess and Marchioness of Northampton, a title secured for Parr in 1547 by the Duke of Somerset when he was counting on Parr's support in consolidating his position as Lord Protector of England after Henry VIII's death. The past, however, continued to haunt the Parrs. Even though the new queen allowed their marriage, she never really approved of it. In 1566, after a stormy meeting of the Privy Council to discuss her own proposed marriage, Queen Elizabeth turned on Parr, exclaiming that "he had better talk about the arguments used to enable him to get married again when he had a wife living instead of mincing words with (me)."<sup>17</sup>

In spite of the queen's disapproval of Parr's marital irregularities, she maintained a deep affection for both him and his wife. She had known the charming Marquess since she was a child in the household of her step-mother, Kateryn Parr. As for Elisabeth Parr, the Spanish ambassador wrote in 1564, ". . . the Marchioness of Northampton is a great favourite of the Queen . . . She is a person of great understanding, and so much esteemed by the Queen that some little friction exists between her and Robert (Earl of Leicester)." The ambassador went to visit Elisabeth Parr at Westminster where she lived,

and there found the Queen, who had gone over from St James' to dine with her almost alone, and was there when I had sent word, as I afterwards found out. They played me this trick between them, and kept the secret until I was in the Queen's presence, and then laughed greatly at it. I was there until almost night, the Marchioness on her couch and the Queen near her.<sup>18</sup>

For a queen whose great favourites were her male courtiers, Elizabeth's care and

concern for the Marchioness demonstrated in what affection and high esteem she held Elisabeth Parr.

William and Elisabeth only had seven years together and they were shadowed by Elisabeth's ill health. In 1562 she nearly died of jaundice and two years later she developed malignant breast cancer. She fought against it for nearly a year, travelling on the continent with her brother, trying cures and doctors but to no avail. Elisabeth, Marchioness of Northampton, died on 2 April 1565. Her funeral was elaborate and expensive and paid for by the queen.

Near the end of his life, William Parr became involved with a sixteen-year-old Swedish girl who had arrived in England in the train of Cecilia, Margravine of Baden. He gave her presents and then changed his mind. As one correspondent related:

My Lord Marquess was suitor, and ensured to one of the Sweden lady's women, and had given her divers jewels, and now hath repented, saying he had another wife alive, and would have his jewels, but cannot get them.<sup>19</sup>

Anne Bouchier, in this case, proved to be a convenient excuse to hide behind, but Helena Snakenborg's charms were such that Parr changed his mind again and married her six months before his death.<sup>20</sup>

As for Anne Bouchier, although she did not remarry and most of her inheritance remained in her former husband's hands, she continued her life unhindered in the country, which was the choice she had made for herself. She and William died in the same year – 1571 – an irony of fate that ended a marriage which had never been a marriage but that had bound two lives together through four royal reigns and forty-four anxious years.

## Notes and References

- <sup>1</sup> Lucy Toulmain Smith, *The Itinerary of John Leland, 1535-1543*, viii, 124.
- <sup>2</sup> *Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic, Henry VIII*, 2, ii, 1490.
- <sup>3</sup> On 25 October 1507, Maud Green and her sister, Anne, were given licence of entry, without proof of age, for moieties of their father's estate. On the same day, Thomas Parr was granted the wardship and marriage of Maud Green.
- <sup>4</sup> Although the majority of the Parr holdings were in Westmorland, with Thomas Parr's marriage to Maud Green, the Parrs gained considerable estates in Northamptonshire as well.
- <sup>5</sup> PRO:PCC:F.12 Thower (Probate 11, 1531).
- <sup>6</sup> *Allegations for Marriage Licences Issued by the Bishop of London (1520-1610)*, I, Harleian Society, xxv, 5.
- <sup>7</sup> PRO:SP1/37/140-1.
- <sup>8</sup> *Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic, Henry VIII*, 14, i, 411 and PRO:SP1/82/289-90.
- <sup>9</sup> George Baker, *History and Antiquities of the County of Northampton*, ii, 60.
- <sup>10</sup> Bodleian: Rawlinson MS A.112,66<sup>b</sup> and 67<sup>b</sup>.
- <sup>11</sup> *Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic, Henry VIII*, 16, 1339, and Lacey Baldwin Smith, *A Tudor Tragedy*, 159.
- <sup>12</sup> B. M. Harl, MS 283 f.175.
- <sup>13</sup> *Calendar of State Papers Domestic, 1547-1580*, 32 (Quoted in Sir Lewis Dibdin and Sir Charles Healey, *English Church Law and Divorce*, 62-69).
- <sup>14</sup> J. R. Dasant, *Acts of the Privy Council of England*, II, 164-165.
- <sup>15</sup> *Journal of the House of Lords*, i (Henry VIII) 217a, 223a, 224a, 230a, 233b, 408b, 409b, 413, 418a, 429a. Also see A. R. Winnett, *Divorce and Remarriage in Anglicanism*, 40-41, 53-54, and Dibden and Healey, *Church Law*, op. cit., 62-69.
- <sup>16</sup> *Calendar of State Papers Spanish*, xi, 204.

<sup>17</sup> *ibid*, xi, 591-592.

<sup>18</sup> *ibid*, *Elizabeth*, i, 381.

<sup>19</sup> Hatfield MS., quoted in Charles A. Bradford, *Helena, Marchioness of Northampton*, 43-44.

<sup>20</sup> *Correspondence Diplomatique de Bertrand de Salignac de la Mothe Fénelon*, iv, 94. The portrait of a young lady, British School, 1569, in the Tate Gallery (T.400), London, is reputed to be of Helena, Marchioness of Northampton.