

Queen Katherine Parr as a translation bellwether: The instances of Mary and Elizabeth Tudor

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Abstract

Queen Katherine Parr (1512?-1548) is mostly remembered as King Henry VIII's sixth and last wife who nursed her incapacitated and irascible husband towards the end of his life. Her intellectual contribution is often overlooked in spite of Parr being the first English woman to ever have published a book under her own name in England. As a humanist and a devout first-generation Evangelical, she became interested in translation in the vernacular as a means of spreading the New Learning as well as Protestant interpretations of the Gospel. This paper explores her commitment to the translation of Erasmus's *Paraphrases of the New Testament* (1524), as well as her influence on her stepdaughters, princesses Mary and Elizabeth Tudor, through the study of their correspondence. In addition, it addresses the way Queen Katherine's influence on the religious sphere was praised by such contemporaries as Thomas Bentley and John Bale. Indeed, the queen quickly understood the power of translation as a form of expression, not only as the rendering of the original author's ideas, but also, more importantly, as a mode of voicing personal ideas and a way to reach posterity, especially at a time when women were, by law, particularly restricted in the sphere of religious opinions. Queen Katherine Parr encouraged the princesses to join her translation endeavor and thus encouraged them to express their own voices in devotional literature.

Keywords

Reformation, translation, Queen Katherine Parr, Tudor, Erasmus

1. Introduction

When King Henry VIII (r.1509-1547) broke from the Roman Catholic Church in 1534, he may not have anticipated the innumerable and longstanding consequences brought to England. Indeed, the independence of the Church of England paved the way for the infiltration and establishment of the Protestant Reformation. Even though the monarch truly remained a Catholic at heart, members of his entourage swiftly became convinced by the new reading of the Scriptures embodied by Evangelicalism. Whilst the Henrician schism was mostly implemented for personal reasons (Henry wanted a male heir), the then secretly Protestant members of his entourage benefitted from its completion. Among them was Henry's sixth and last wife, Queen Katherine Parr (1512?-1548), who belonged to the first generation of converted English Protestants and who actively, though clandestinely, promoted the new faith¹. In the public memory, the Tudor monarch's wife is often remembered as the king's kind and compassionate last wife, who saw Henry VIII's marriage proposal as a divine sign, cared for her incapacitated husband and created a sense of reunited family by bringing the royal children together. But she was also the first English woman to publish under her own name. This study reveals how translation became part and parcel of Queen Katherine Parr's expression of her faith. After a discussion of the religious context, it focuses on the queen's evolution as a translator, before turning to her influence on the royal princesses, Mary and Elizabeth Tudor.

2. Katherine Parr and the confessional context

Queen Katherine Parr was an intellectual and her way of creating unity among Henry's children was through study. She understood and believed in the function of intellectual pursuit; her aptitude for such endeavors was inherited from her mother, Lady Maud Parr (1492-1531), who had encouraged her own children, including her daughters, to study. Naturally, when Katherine became the royal children's stepmother, she encouraged them to follow in her footsteps.

Evidence suggests that Katherine Parr was a well-versed linguist. Although scholars disagree about her degree of mastery of the Latin language, she may have been introduced to its study from an early age through the reading of the Book of Hours, *Horae ad Usum Sarum*, published in 1495. Parr and the renowned English scholar Roger Ascham (1515-1568) corresponded in Latin in 1547 (James, 2008, p. 31). The inventory drawn up upon the queen's death also mentions books in both Italian and French. At least two copies of the New Testament in French were found, as well as "a book of parchment written in Italian" (Mueller, 2011, pp. 634-635).

Parr's newly acquired status as a queen quickly helped her develop a large intellectual and scholarly network. As a devout Protestant, her interest was first and foremost religious and, at a time when texts became available in the vernacular, she rapidly understood the power of translation as a way to reach people and to teach within and also beyond her private sphere. In view of her thirst to become versed in the Scriptures and her wish to encourage others to discover what she considered as the true religion; translation seemed an ideally suited exercise. All these aspects turned her into an evangelical agent eager to spread the Gospel.

Even though at first the intellectual context may have seemed favorable to her enterprise, Queen Katherine was soon confronted with King Henry VIII's hostility to Protestantism, expressed in *The Necessary Doctrine and Erudition for Any Christian Man*, commonly known as *The King's Book*, published in 1543. Indeed, after the Protestant-friendly *Ten Articles* (1536), Henry had back-pedaled as he witnessed the rapidly increasing number of Lutherans in the

¹ For the sake of clarity, the terms 'Protestantism' and 'Protestant' are used in this article even though they became widely used to refer to the evangelical movement only during the reign of Mary I (MacCulloch, 1996; Ryrie & Marshall, 2002).

country. He consequently had his Parliament pass a series of restrictive laws in 1539: *An Act Abolishing Diversity in Opinions*, better known as the *Six Articles*, and, in 1543, the *Act for the Advancement of True Religion*, limiting the reading of the Bible to members of the higher spheres of society, and among whom women were only permitted private reading. However, the queen persisted in conducting in her personal apartments secret private Bible study groups, known as conventicles. As she brought together her Protestant entourage, she attracted the wrath of the Court's conservative faction who attempted (and almost succeeded) to overthrow her by denouncing her to the king. In a famous episode related in John Foxe's *Acts and Monuments*, Katherine Parr barely escaped arrest and charges of heresy (Foxe, 1576, p. 1237).

3. Katherine Parr as translator

On April 25, 1544, London printer Thomas Berthelet released the anonymous translation into English of *Psalmi seu precatationes ex variis scripturae locis collectae*, a series of Latin psalms originally published by Catholic Bishop John Fisher in Cologne, around 1525. The translation appeared under the title *Psalms and Prayers taken out of Holye scripture, Anno Domini MDXLIIII*. It remained anonymous for some time, until chronicler John Strype (1643-1737) first attributed it to Katherine Parr in his impressive *History of the Church of England* (Strype, 1603, p. 204). Recent scholarship on Parr corroborates his assertion (James, 1999, pp. 200-208; Mueller, 2011, pp. 197-200).

Psalms and Prayers offers a collection of passages taken from the Vulgate and from apocryphal sources by Fisher, organized and rearranged by Parr in fifteen psalms. The first eight psalms deal with the sinner's torments, while the final seven evoke the sinner's desire to be delivered from his or her enemies (Mueller, 2011, pp. 200-204). By appropriating someone else's words, in the manner of plagiarism and rewriting, which was a common and accepted practice at the time, translation became a way for Queen Katherine to start expressing the anxiety of her soul and her desire for salvation. She adopted Fisher's choices to express her own faith, and for the first time she publicly expressed her fervor. We can detect an early attempt to contribute to the spreading of the Scriptures in the vernacular. As early as May 1544, she kept a printed pocket version of her own translation and ordered twenty copies to be shared with members of her household. This translation marks the first stage of the queen's public (though understandably limited) literary and devotional activity.

4. The translation of Erasmus's *paraphrases of the New Testament*

In her *Psalms and Prayers*, Katherine Parr was active on the intellectual scene as a translator. She also added her personal touch in the form of two prayers, which she is believed to have penned. The book was composed during the siege of Boulogne in the summer of 1544, at which time she was named regent, in the absence of the king. She added a *Prayer for the King* and *A prayer for men to say going into the battle*², both of which did not go unnoticed by Nicholas Udall (1504-1556) who praised her "[...] for composing and setting forth divers most godly *Psalms and meditations* of your own penning and setting forth [...] England can never be able to render thanks sufficient" (Mueller, 2011, p. 162). Udall, a humanist preacher with Protestant sympathies, highlighted the queen's contribution to the country as well as to the Protestant cause. Indeed, one of the novelties brought by Protestantism was to promote the writing of texts in the vernacular.

² In a compelling article, Micheline White refutes the veracity of Parr having added these prayers. According to her, these were not Parr's original compositions, as historians have assumed, but translations of Erasmus's "Inituri praelium" from his *Precationes aliquot novae* (White, 2020, pp. 67-91).

Katherine Parr shared, along with Udall and other intellectual figures, the task of translating Erasmus's *Paraphrases of the New Testament*, which had been published in Basel in 1524 by humanist printer Johann Froben (c. 1460-1527). The motivation behind this venture was two-fold: to facilitate the reception of Erasmus's work as a didactic humanist project, and to help readers access on their own the Scriptures as well as texts dealing with doctrinal matters. Katherine Parr had established contacts within both the University of Oxford and the University of Cambridge, both of whom asked for financial aid, which she granted. It remains unclear whether the queen herself spearheaded the project or benefitted from the total or partial help of various intellectual authorities, possibly including Nicholas Udall. On this matter, historians disagree. According to Susan Felch, Nicolas Udall asked the queen to become involved in the project, while Janel Mueller affirms that the project was conceived by Parr herself, who subsequently requested that Udall supervise (Mueller 2011, p. 200; Felch, 2008, p.42). In any case, the queen's involvement is to be seen on various levels. In addition to actually translating a text passage, she may have been the *maître d'ouvrage* at the origin of the endeavor, the architect leading a team of translators from various backgrounds and trainings. Moreover, she also had the role of *maître d'œuvre*, the recipient of the translated text, as the dedicatory epistle reveals. She was inextricably connected to the project.

Queen Katherine took it upon herself to divide the tasks and assign the different parts of the translation to members of her household as well as to her close entourage. Her private correspondence supplies information on this matter. Indeed, in order to translate the Paraphrase of Mark, she sought the help of Thomas Caius (?-1572), an Oxford academic who had become her private chaplain. She also asked the aid of one of the King's private physicians, George Owen (1499-1558), who was well known for his Protestant sympathies, as a letter from Thomas Caius dated September 30th, 1545 clearly shows (Mueller, 2011, p. 108). In his capacity as royal physician, Caius also cared for Princess Mary, the future Mary I (r. 1553-1558), who was very close to her stepmother. The princess, who remained faithful to Roman Catholicism, her mother's faith, first agreed to join the project and started working on passages of the Paraphrase of John and subsequently withdrew, arguing violent bouts of migraine which supposedly prevented her from being fully involved. The commonly accepted theory is that Mary realized she had agreed to be part of what she at first thought was a humanist project and soon afterwards understood that most contributors were Protestant. Given her beliefs in the Roman Catholic faith, this alone was enough to create a situation which was not acceptable to her. The queen's correspondence shows her wish that Princess Mary be part of the intellectual circle of her time and leave a legacy for posterity. She encouraged her to continue working on her translation and to publish under her true identity. As her correspondence reveals, Parr felt compelled to insist when she saw the princess's reticence. The following excerpt is taken from a letter dated September, 20th. There is no mention of the year but Janel Mueller suggests 1545 or 1547, which corresponds to the time span during which the project took place:

I pray you to [...] signify whether you wish it to go out most happily into the light under your name, or whether rather by an unknown author. (2011, p. 88)³

The queen proceeded to highlight the fact that Mary's dedication and commitment to the translation project might contribute to the princess's posterity as an author, and insisted on the recognition this would bring:

To which work really, in my opinion, you will be seen to do an injury, if you refuse the book to be transmitted to posterity on the authority on your name for the most accurate translating of which you have undertaken so many labors for the highest good

³ Punctuation and spelling have been modernized.

of the commonwealth; and more than these (as is well enough known) you would have undertaken, if the health of your body had permitted. Since no one does not know the amount of sweat you have laboriously put into this work, I do not see why you should reject the praise that all confer on you deservedly. However, I leave this whole matter to your prudence, so that whatever position you wish to take, I will esteem it most greatly to be approved. (Mueller, 2011, p. 88)

Facing the princess's unwavering refusal, Katherine Parr found a replacement in the person of one of her own chaplains, Francis Mallet (?-1570), who took over where the princess left off and completed her work. He did so under the direction of Nicholas Udall, who wrote the dedicatory preface. He dedicated his translation of the Gospel of Luke to the queen. Parr may also have personally contributed by translating, with great enthusiasm and application, the Paraphrase of the Gospel according to Matthew. Thus, in his *Ecclesiastical Memorials*, John Strype wrote: "But I am apt to think Queen Katherine herself might do one [chapter] at least, and perhaps that upon St. Matthew" (Strype, 1547, p. 48). Historian Robert Dick Sider confirms Strype's hypothesis, in his critical edition of Erasmus's works. He claims that Parr was involved in the choice of translators working on the project and submitted their contributions to Udall, who became in charge of proofreading and publishing (Sider, 1984, p. xxx). Through this collaborative translation enterprise, Katherine Parr's contribution to religious Court literature in the vernacular is crucial, and her awareness of posterity shows she thought the project would produce a monumental text. One can only speculate as to whether this translation was merely meant to be a scholarly project targeting an intellectual elite, or if its initiators put together a scheme destined to promote an alternative version of the Bible in English, known as *Matthew's Bible*⁴. If this was the case, the project, and Katherine Parr's spearheading it, played a substantial role in the establishment of the Reformation in England. Indeed, a few years later, King Edward VI (1547-1553) demanded that each parish buy a copy of the *Paraphrases* as well as the Great Bible, both to be displayed in their church (for further details about this point, see Van Parys-Rotondi, 2017). Fifteen thousand copies of the translation are known to have been in circulation at the time.

The queen's dedication to this translation project raises the question of female contributions to intellectual life within the context of the time. In his preface to the first translation of Montaigne's *Essays*, linguist and lexicographer John Florio (1553-1625) stated that "all translations are reputed femalls" (1603), illustrating the fact that translation was considered as an endeavor requiring little or no thought. Jaime Goodrich suggests Early Modern women translated more for personal reasons than for public reasons, since the exercise was seen as a feminine response to the process of intellectual stimulation (Goodrich, 2008, pp. 2-3). The translation of the *Paraphrases* is a remarkable achievement, given the fact that it was made in an intellectual context in which public sphere matters were reserved for men. This added to the Act for the Advancement of True Religion which already imposed a strict legislative framework and a set of restrictions.

5. Katherine Parr as a mentor to Princess Elizabeth

Soon after the *Paraphrases* project was completed, the queen became involved in another publication. The siege of Boulogne turned out to be a fruitful period for her, as she met daily with Thomas Cranmer (1489-1556), Archbishop of Canterbury, one of the protagonists of the Reformation in England; it is very likely the latter impacted Parr's decision to convert to

⁴ Several English translations of the Bible were authorized in England by Henry VIII: Tyndale's Bible (1526), Coverdale Bible (1535), Matthew's Bible (1537) and The Great Bible (1539).

Protestantism. At his instigation, she began working on her own devotional manual, which assembled a series of psalms and prayers. Given the religious context and the bouts of fury the King was prone to late in his life, she waited until after his death to make public her Protestant work, which was published in November 1547 under the title *The Lamentacyon of a Synner*. As was often the case, the final product was not an entirely original work, having been very much inspired by another woman's work: *Le Miroir de l'âme pécheresse* composed in 1530 by Marguerite of Navarre (1492-1549), whose spiritual commitment had a strong impact on Parr. A decade earlier, Anne Boleyn (1501?-1536) had received a copy of the original from the author herself while she was sojourning at the French Court between 1514 and 1521. Anne's daughter, Princess Elizabeth, had kept her mother's French connections alive and worked on a translation, consulting either the 1533 or the 1539 edition of *Le miroir de l'âme pécheresse*. In the short space of a few weeks, she produced its English translation, entitled *The mirror of gold for the sinful soul*, and offered it as a gift to Katherine Parr to celebrate the new year 1545. The title refers to a poem by Lady Margaret Beaufort, Elizabeth's great-grand-mother, which she had already translated into English in 1506 and entitled *The myroure of golde for the synfull soule*. The identity of the members of Elizabeth's entourage, if any, who encouraged the princess to delve into this project is unclear. For obvious reasons, it seems plausible to assume they were either her royal parents or close members of her household. One of her tutors, Jean Bellemain, a French scholar known for being a staunch Calvinist, is believed to have assisted her (Elizabeth was only eleven years old at the time) as she had not yet fully mastered the French language, which she clearly did later in her life. The presence of Jean Bellemain as one of Elizabeth's preceptors is notable, as he translated *The Lamentacyon of a Synner* into French under the title *La complainte de l'âme pécheresse* after 1546.

Furthermore, Protestant churchman and controversialist John Bale (1495-1563) profusely mentioned the princess's commitment in his edition of her translation and was followed by Thomas Bentley, who published Elizabeth's translation under the title *A Godly Meditation of the Christian soul...compiled in French by Lady Margaret queen of Navarre, and aptly translated into English by the right virtuous lady Elizabeth, daughter to our late sovereign King Henry the viii*.

Throughout his work, he repeatedly praised the princess's endeavor and included an engraving of Elizabeth crowned and kneeling at Christ's feet, showing her as a model of piety. There may have been, one might imagine, an influence working both ways between the queen and the princess, as Elizabeth's just and apt translation may, in return, have been a model for Katherine Parr's work on *Lamentacyon of a Synner*. Elizabeth accompanied her work with a letter in which she praised Katherine Parr's brilliant wit and mentorship:

NOT ONLY knowing the affectuous will, and fervent zeal, the which your highness has towards all godly learning, as also my duty towards you (most gracious and sovereign) [...] And therefore have I (as for a say, or beginning) following the right notable saying of the proverb) afore said) translated this little book out of French rhyme, into English prose: joining the sentences together as well as the capacities of my simple wit, and small learning could extend themselves. [...] (MS Cherry 36, fols 2r-4v, reproduced in Mueller & Marcus, 1992, pp. 6-7)

She proceeded to ask the queen to correct and amend any inaccuracy or wrong choice of words she might have made and, in doing so, she positioned herself as a pupil with her schoolmaster:

And although I know that as for my part, which I have wrought in it: (as well spiritual, as manual) there is nothing done as it should be: nor else worthy to come, in your grace's hands, but rather all unperfect and incorrect: yet do I trust also that howbeit it is like a

work which is but new begone, and sharpen: that the file of your excellent wit, and godly learning, in the reading of it (if so it vouchsafe your highness to do) shall rub out, polish, and mend (or else cause to mend) the words (or rather the order of my writing) the which I know in many places to be rude, and nothing done as it should be. But I hope that after to have been in your grace's hands: there shall be nothing in it worthy of reprehension and that in the mean while no other (but your highness only) shall read it, or see it, less my faults be known of many MS Cherry 36, fols 2r-4v, reproduced in Mueller & Marcus, 1992, pp. 6-7)

Once the work was completed, as was common practice among learned women, Elizabeth embroidered the book cover with forget-me-not motifs, the corners being adorned with tri-color pansies embroidered with purple, yellow and green silk thread. In the center the initials 'KP' are clearly visible (Davenport, 1899, p. 33). As Jane Donawerth points out, Elizabeth selected strong and convincing symbols as a manner of showing her recognition and attachment to her stepmother by choosing pansies, which symbolized the concord and harmony Katherine had brought within the royal family (Donawerth, 2000, pp. 3-18; Perry, 1990, pp. 31-32). This translation is an undeniable mark of respect, affection and, more importantly, an affirmation of Parr's influence on the young princess. It may also be the starting point of Elizabeth's deep interest in translation and intellectual work in general.

One year later, Elizabeth completed her translation of Katherine Parr's first devotional manual, *Prayers stirring the mynd vnto heauenly medytacyons*. Originally published in June 1545, it consisted of a reformulation of Book III of Thomas à Kempis's *De Imitatio Christi*. The princess produced a trilingual version in Latin, French and Italian, and offered it as a gift to her father in celebration of the new year 1546. Her heritage came to the fore; her efforts forged strong connections with her great-grand-mother Margaret Beaufort and her stepmother, both of whom contributed to devotional literature. In so doing, Elizabeth also contributed to the circulation of ideas, as is evidenced in a passage from the only surviving letter from Elizabeth to her father, dated December 30, 1545. Not only does she recognize Katherine Parr's extraordinary talent as a translator, but she also expresses gratitude to her father, the King, for willing her the required qualities and skills for achieving such a task:

Which work, since it is so pious, and by the pious exertion and great diligence of the most illustrious queen has been composed in English, and on that account may be more desirable to all and held in greater value by your majesty, it was thought by me a most suitable thing that this work, which is most worthy because it was indeed a composition by a queen as a subject for her king, be translated into other languages by me, your daughter. May I, by this means, be indebted to you not as an imitator of your virtues but indeed as an inheritor of them. (MS Royal 7.D.X. sigs, 2r-5r, reproduced in Marcus, Mueller & Rose, 2000, p. 10)

This period marked the beginning of a long-standing translation practice in Elizabeth's life, as she produced several translations of devotional texts, continuing Parr's legacy and marking her own as one of the first English Protestant women of letters.

6. Conclusion

Through her works and translations, Katherine Parr undeniably succeeded in becoming a respected member of the intellectual sphere of her epoch. She acted as a link between the scholarly world and the royal family and participated in the religious debate at a time when women were not only forbidden to read the Bible by the Act of Advancement of True Religion but prohibited to do so because of the traditional Paulinian reading of the Scriptures on the

basis of the apostle's statement "Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but they are commanded to be under obedience, as also saith the law" (King James Version, 1 Corinthians 14:34). The queen understood the power of words and found an opportunity to engrave her name and that of her entourage into posterity. Furthermore, her correspondence reveals a strong awareness of the impact of intellectual scholarship. Her commitment to the Reformation was acclaimed by her contemporaries and, as Nicholas Udall once wrote, Katherine Parr remains one of those who "edif[ied] the faithful congregation" (Mueller, 2011, p. 162) as she paved the way for other women to follow.

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