



*The King's Pearl:
Henry VIII and His Daughter Mary*

Melita Thomas

Stroud: Amberley, 2017

Review by: Valerie Schutte

The King's Pearl: Henry VIII and His Daughter Mary. By Melita Thomas. Stroud: Amberley, 2017. ISBN 978-1-4456-6125-4. 320 pp. \$28.95.

Melita Thomas's book is a commercial biography of Mary Tudor in the years before her accession. What makes her study innovative, however, is her examination of Mary through her relationship with her father, Henry VIII. Thomas's book stops abruptly at Henry's death, so it does not cover any of Mary's reign. Using this methodology of tracing the lasting impact of Henry on his daughter both during Edward's reign (as a landed magnate), and later as a queen, would make for a rather interesting study of Mary. In addition to the biography, Thomas also includes relevant background information regarding currency and dating; a timeline of events related to Mary and England; family trees; a who's who of people, countries, and kingdoms associated with Mary; as well as a brief bibliography of further reading.

This biography of Mary is comprised of three parts, each made up of four chapters. The first part examines Mary's life from the time of her birth to when Henry sought to obtain an annulment from Katharine of Aragon. These first four chapters only focus on the politics of Mary and Henry's relationship—possible betrothals and the politics that influenced those betrothals. Henry did spend lavishly on his daughter and set her up with many servants, but these chapters are not about interactions with Mary and Henry, but the politics of England, France, and Spain, in which Mary was simply used as a bargaining tool. Thomas does argue, however, that although Mary was never created or invested as Princess of Wales, she was essentially treated as such and was perceived as Princess of Wales, which is why there was so much interest in marrying her to a high-ranking foreign prince.

Part II covers from her father's annulment from her mother to Katharine of Aragon's death in 1536. These chapters outline Henry and Katharine's annulment quite clearly and succinctly, including each party's arguments and justifications, as well as obstacles, such as the reaction of Charles and the Pope. Chapter 5, the first of this section, is better than the four previous in that it summarizes the great matter, rather than giving tedious detail of recorded ambassadorial meeting or offering lists of Mary's attendants. Again, these chapters are all about politics, and we only see bits of information regarding Mary and her father, such as her being at court in November 1527. What is interesting, however, is that even during the early stages of the annulment, Mary was used as a marriage pawn to smooth feelings with Francis in the event that he did not support the annulment. From 1528-1530, life for Mary was relatively the same: she continued her studies, made appearances at court, and kept up her expensive household and

hobbies. It was not until May 1531 that Mary saw less and less of her father, and she saw her mother for the last time in July of that same year. With the birth of Elizabeth, Mary's prospect of marriage was not nearly as important, and Henry chose to keep her single, rather than risk the possibility of foreign support for her. It is not really until Chapter 7 that Thomas gets to the meat of Henry and Mary's relationship. This chapter details how, in 1534, Mary's fate no longer lay outside of England, but rather was tied to her obedience to her father, her willingness to accept Henry and Anne's marriage, and her willingness to give precedence to Elizabeth. She had little personal contact with her father at this time, yet Chapuys, the Imperial ambassador, often served as a go-between for them. Thomas accurately points out that "Henry vacillated over Mary"; he was concerned for her health and always sent physicians to see her, yet punished her for not signing the *Oath of Supremacy* (169).

The third part of Thomas's biography shows that it is only after the execution of Anne Boleyn that Mary's relationship with her father improves. She is not instantly reconciled with her father, yet she received many more visitors, indicating that it had been Anne blocking visitors to Mary, not her father. Less than a month after Anne was taken to the Tower, Mary began writing directly to her father asking for his forgiveness, and often used Thomas Cromwell as an intermediary. Once Mary submitted to him, her household was restored and royal favour returned: by July 1536, even Jane Seymour and Mary wrote letters to each other. Thomas offers no real analysis of Mary's relationships with her stepmothers, but rather details how her father's marriage negotiations had an impact on her own prospects. Though Katherine Parr has long been credited with influencing the succession and Henry's relationship with his children, Mary's place at court, visitations with her father, and possible suitors do not support this: Mary was already on good terms with her father. When Henry died, he and Mary were still on good terms, frequently exchanging gifts, yet she was kept from him at his death, perhaps out of fear that he would name her regent over Edward, or even worse, name her queen.

At times, Thomas's study is bogged down in detail. Frequently, especially in the early chapters of the book when Mary was only a child and not really leaving behind her own letters, Thomas incorporates long lists of information, such as listing every single participant and their clothing for a procession, or listing every member of Mary's household at various times. While the detail is impressive, it is obviously taken straight from a letter, account, or chronicle and repeated by Thomas. However, this level of detail does show that Thomas is proficient in multiple languages, as she incorporates English, Italian, French, and Spanish sources. There are also several

typographical errors that are either the result of a rush to print or poor editing: there are misspellings, and the title of the first chapter (as given in the Table of Contents and on the first page of the first chapter) is not the title of the first chapter as printed in the notes and references section. The first chapter also has two references numbered “1,” the first of which is missing from the endnotes. In the second chapter, the endnotes do not correspond to the references within the chapter.

Thomas’s biography does advance some new interpretations of Mary’s childhood, the most interesting of which is that Mary and Henry had a two-sided relationship—personal and political—and that she was the only person who openly defied him whom he eventually forgave. While the latter portion of that argument might not be true, as Henry eventually forgave his sister Mary for marrying Charles Brandon without permission, this biography does make its reader think about Mary both as a daughter and as the king’s subject. Thomas also portrays Henry in a way that demonstrates while he can be understood to be tyrannical after 1533, he remained compassionate towards his daughter by constantly striving to make her give in to him, rather than suffer the consequences inflicted on those who defied him.

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