

# **Gloriana's First Scandal: The Thomas Seymour Incident**

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Elizabeth Tudor had a turbulent childhood. Constantly having her position in the royal family altered and denied, there was little she could do as the daughter of a father who wanted a son. Throughout her early life, Elizabeth was tested and threatened by those in power or desperate to take hers. She was a bright child and had support from the close relationships she formed with her household, especially her governess, Catherine or “Kat” Ashley. Orphaned in 1547, Elizabeth went to live in London with her stepmother, Catherine Parr. Thomas Seymour, also living with Parr at the time, soon became a guardian of Elizabeth when he married the Dowager Queen. Seymour had his own ambitions and sought to advance his position in court through Elizabeth. The first scandal of Elizabeth’s life occurred when she was thirteen years old and helpless against the advances of an older man. The fallout of the scandal, spread by rumors throughout the court, led to Elizabeth moving into her own household and being accused of improper relations with Seymour, threatening her own reputation. Seymour would also be tried on accounts of treason. Elizabeth was left to defend herself and her honor at the mercy of those in power under her younger brother, King Edward VI. This experience shaped Elizabeth’s ability to handle herself in dangerous situations and her values for herself as a powerful, ambitious woman.

Many scholars have approached the Seymour Incident in their research on Elizabeth. In 1988, Susan Bassnett’s book, *Elizabeth I: A Feminist Perspective*, offers a very standard explanation of the events surrounding Elizabeth and Seymour in 1548. Bassnett discusses the household at Chelsea, where Catherine Parr resided along with Elizabeth and Seymour. Bassnett goes into detail about the role Parr had in the scandal and rumors. Not only did Parr seem to do nothing about her husband’s affections towards Elizabeth for a while, but Bassnett describes a

“bizarre episode” where Parr held Elizabeth down while Seymour cut up the gown the princess was wearing.<sup>1</sup> Seymour’s frequent visits to Elizabeth’s bed early in the morning and his physical flirtations with her are noted both by observers and the 1549 depositions from Elizabeth, Thomas Parry, the comptroller of Elizabeth’s household, and Kat Ashley.<sup>2</sup> Bassnett explains how the stress Parr was under as a Dowager Queen, “pregnant for the first time at age thirty-five”, and her deep love for her husband can explain her odd behavior regarding the incident.<sup>3</sup> Parr, Bassnett believes, ignored her husband’s attentions to the fourteen year old as many women of the time in similar situations did but the author notes that Elizabeth’s departure from Chelsea in May 1548 indicates that tensions between Parr and the Princess may have created “a crisis in the relationship.”<sup>4</sup> The letters between Elizabeth and Parr later on, are noted by Bassnett because Elizabeth signs them “Your Highness’ humble daughter.”<sup>5</sup> Despite the book’s title, Bassnett’s chapter that covers the incident does not stand out among other scholarly discussions of the incident as a “feminist perspective.” Bassnett’s narrative fails to address the sexism present in the incident, even by sixteenth-century standards, and simply describes the facts of the incident.

Julia M. Walker’s 1998 book, *Dissing Elizabeth*, is focused on the negative representations of Elizabeth Tudor throughout her life. The essay by Shelia Cavanagh, titled “The Bad Seed: Princess Elizabeth and the Seymour Incident,” discusses the scandal but focuses on Seymour’s role in the incident. Seymour’s ambition to gain power lead him to marry Parr and, allegedly, plan to marry the Princess Elizabeth when Parr died. Cavanagh’s description of the role both Elizabeth and Seymour had in the incident were, and Seymour is clearly the one in

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<sup>1</sup> Susan Bassnett, *Elizabeth I: A Feminist Perspective* (New York: Berg, 1988), 24.

<sup>2</sup> Bassnett, *Elizabeth I*, 25.

<sup>3</sup> Bassnett, *Elizabeth I*, 24.

<sup>4</sup> Bassnett, *Elizabeth I*, 24.

<sup>5</sup> Bassnett, *Elizabeth I*, 25.

power. The chapter elaborates on the incident's toll and risk for Elizabeth, "Despite Seymour's central role as target of the investigation, the intense questioning of the princess and her household suggests that Elizabeth's exoneration was not assumed."<sup>6</sup> Cavanagh uses extensive quotes from Elizabeth, Thomas Parry, and Kat Ashley to detail what information was being given during the investigation following the incident. The ultimate result was Thomas Seymour's execution and Elizabeth getting off without any official punishments. Cavanagh explains how the modern observer of the investigations can only draw conclusions from "the sketchiest of information," and then she points out that "It is not apparent that those holding power over Elizabeth, Seymour, and the others had much more solid information to go on."<sup>7</sup> Later authors, such as Gregorio Leti, who wrote about Queen Elizabeth I in 1693, "provided supposed details of the scandal which were reported as factual by numerous subsequent writers over the following centuries," says Cavanagh.<sup>8</sup> The lack of evidence available and the execution of Thomas Seymour despite it all, according to Cavanagh, indicates that the purpose of the investigation was to catch Seymour committing treason and end his ambitions.

Two of the books used as reference for this paper are from the years 2000 and 2003, showing what the current scholarly thought on the Seymour Incident is. David Starkey's 2000 book, *Elizabeth: The Struggle for the Throne*, provides much the same details about the Seymour Incident, drawing on the state papers from the respective years and the depositions of Elizabeth and her household. Starkey's description of the relationship of Seymour and his step daughter explicitly points out how inappropriate it was and how Seymour was the one in control. As a

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<sup>6</sup> Julia M. Walker, ed., *Dissing Elizabeth: Negative Representations of Gloriana* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 11.

<sup>7</sup> Walker, *Dissing Elizabeth*, 23.

<sup>8</sup> Walker, *Dissing Elizabeth*, 24.

young girl, Seymour was probably very attractive to her, “Tall, well-built and with a dashing beard and auburn hair,” Starkey describes him as the “physical prototype” of future Elizabethan favorites.<sup>9</sup> Starkey explicitly states that Seymour made the first move and going after the princess to aid in his ambitions. The flirting and advances made by Seymour placed Elizabeth in a dangerous situation that she had no power in. Seymour was a guardian for Elizabeth and instead of protecting her “he abused his trust; he may have even sexually abused her.”<sup>10</sup> None of the other monographs cited for this paper address the inappropriateness of Seymour’s actions so plainly, defending Elizabeth as a young girl who possibly was attracted to an older man and may have enjoyed some of the flirting, but as a girl who was abused by someone she trusted. In Starkey’s analysis of the events of the scandal, drawn from the state papers relating to the investigation, outline the same stories of Seymour barging into Elizabeth’s bed chambers, and they include details of Elizabeth’s attempt to “seek refuge by retreating to a far corner of the bed,” wanting to get away.<sup>11</sup> Starkey elaborates again on the idea that Elizabeth was the victim of sexual abuse by noting that “it is interesting to consider how these excuses [Seymour’s for his behavior] would play in front of a modern panel of social workers and paediatricians, all sensitized to the faintest hint of child abuse.”<sup>12</sup> When Elizabeth was questioned about the incident, after Kat Ashley and Thomas Parry were put in the Tower of London, Starkey uses Sir Robert Tyrwhitt’s account of trying to question and threaten her, complaining that “she hath a good wit, and nothing is to be gotten from her but by great policy.”<sup>13</sup> This sharp, defensive side of Elizabeth under questioning was not elaborated on by other authors.

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<sup>9</sup> David Starkey, *Elizabeth: The Struggle for the Throne* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2000), 66.

<sup>10</sup> Starkey, *Elizabeth*, 67.

<sup>11</sup> Starkey, *Elizabeth*, 69.

<sup>12</sup> Starkey, *Elizabeth*, 69.

<sup>13</sup> Starkey, *Elizabeth*, 73.

David Loades' *Elizabeth I* addresses the Incident as well, using the same sources as previous authors. Loades also attributes the scandalous behavior on Seymour's part to his wild ambitions and jealousy of his brother, Edward Seymour, the Lord Protector for the young king. He describes Seymour as someone who easily gets "dangerous and irresponsible," a side of him that possibly attracted Parr to him.<sup>14</sup> Seymour's horseplay with Elizabeth was very obvious, not something either tried to conceal, even though both understood how inappropriate it was. Loades believes that Elizabeth encouraged the flirting, "far from objecting, however, Elizabeth clearly found this rough and tumble as enjoyable as it was unsettling," the author claims.<sup>15</sup> When describing the incident where Parr held Elizabeth still so Seymour could cut up her gown, Loades reasons that Parr saw no harm in the game and Elizabeth "probably wasn't struggling very hard."<sup>16</sup> Later, when describing Elizabeth's behavior when the incident was being investigated and Loades explains how helpless Elizabeth was while Kat Ashley and other members of her household were questioned. The questioning of Kat Ashley and Thomas Parry in the Tower was meant to threaten her into cooperation so they would be safe. Seymour's enemies at the time used the scandal to tear him down. Loades states that "Elizabeth was more or less a helpless spectator of these events."<sup>17</sup> Elizabeth following the investigation was frightened. Her reputation had suffered a blow and she complained about the rumors she was still hearing about herself, even after Seymour was executed. Elizabeth, according to Loades, learned from this experience that she had the ability to attract men and also felt guilt. She saw that her worth was in her virtues.<sup>18</sup> Loades noted that Kat Ashley's testimony indicates that the

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<sup>14</sup> David Loades, *Elizabeth I* (New York: Hambledon and London, 2003), 64.

<sup>15</sup> Loades, *Elizabeth I*, 64.

<sup>16</sup> Loades, *Elizabeth I*, 64.

<sup>17</sup> Loades, *Elizabeth I*, 64.

<sup>18</sup> Loades, *Elizabeth I*, 68.

governess behaved more like a “girlish confidante” than a responsible guide for Elizabeth.<sup>19</sup>

Still, she had Elizabeth’s trust and the princess petitioned for Ashley and Parry’s release from the Tower when she could.

When Elizabeth moved to Chelsea in London, following her father’s death, she and Parr had a good relationship. Parr was given Chelsea, her favorite palace in Henry’s will and she invited Elizabeth to join her. Provisions had been made for Henry’s two daughters to each have a separate household following his death, but Elizabeth was younger and lived with her stepmother.<sup>20</sup> Parr and Elizabeth had lived together previously, when Henry was in Boulogne, and they shared interests in learning and religion.<sup>21</sup>

Thomas Seymour was made Lord Admiral and Lord Seymour of Sudeley on 17 February 1547. Seymour was very ambitious, as was his older brother, Edward, who became Lord Protector and the Duke of Somerset on the same day.<sup>22</sup> Thomas Seymour quickly decided to pursue a marriage with Mary or Elizabeth Tudor, placing himself in line to the throne and even closer to the King’s family. The Lord Protector knew better than to allow his brother to marry into the royal family, but Thomas was clever and determined. The Lord Admiral probably envisioned the precedent set by King Henry VI’s earlier reign, where the king’s two uncles divided the power, would suit them well. His scheme, as Starkey explains, was to have Edward control the kingdom, while he became the Governor of the king’s person.<sup>23</sup>

Thomas failed to get permission to marry Mary or Elizabeth, and instead settled for Catherine Parr. Parr was young, but had been married to three much older husbands. There is

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<sup>19</sup> Loades, *Elizabeth I*, 69.

<sup>20</sup> Loades, *Elizabeth I*, 60.

<sup>21</sup> Starkey, *Elizabeth*, 65.

<sup>22</sup> Starkey, *Elizabeth*, 66.

<sup>23</sup> Starkey, *Elizabeth*, 66.

some speculation that she and Seymour had been close to becoming betrothed before Henry stepped in and she became the King's bride. Shortly after the marriage, Parr became pregnant and Seymour's flirting with Elizabeth became glaringly obvious. Parr was under a lot of stress, worried about the pregnancy, her first in addition to her age, and she was frequently ill.<sup>24</sup> Parr's complacency with the behaviour of her husband was not unusual for wives of the time, but seeing his affection for another woman when she loved him must have been a blow.

Still, there are accounts of her aiding in her husband's advances on Elizabeth. In one incident, Catherine held Elizabeth in place while Seymour cut her gown into a thousand pieces.<sup>25</sup> Parr's participation in these attacks on her young step-daughter may have been a way for her to act out in her jealousy or a way to keep her husband's interest.

The inappropriateness of Seymour's advances on Elizabeth were obvious to all. Kat Ashley provided many detailed accounts of Seymour's actions. In one, she describes how he would burst into the princess's bed chamber early in the morning:

He wold come many Mornyngs into the said Lady Elizabeth's Chamber, before she were redy, and sometyme before she did rise. And if she were up, he wold bid her good Morrow, and ax how she did, and strike hir upon the Bak or Buttockes famylearly, and so go forth through his Lodgings.... And if she were in hir Bed, he wold put open the Curteyns and bid hir good Morrow, amd make as though he wold come at hir: And she wold go further in the Bed, so that he could not come at hir.

And one Mornyng, he strave to have kissed hir in hir Bed: and this Examine was there, and bad hym go away for shame.<sup>26</sup>

This account, from Ashley, shows how the young princess tried to get away from him. He entered her room and she sent him away "for shame" when he advanced on her. Elizabeth was an intelligent girl and had seen how important it was for her virtue to be known. Seymour's

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<sup>24</sup> Bassnett, *Elizabeth I*, 25.

<sup>25</sup> Samuel Haynes, *A Collection of State Papers* (London, 1740), 99-100.

<sup>26</sup> Haynes, *A Collection of State Papers*, 101.

actions threatened her good reputation. Therefore, however attractive her step-father was, Elizabeth was likely doing all she could to fend him off without offending him. As Starkey explains, she was young and at the mercy of her guardians, she had little power to stop Seymour: “Reproved for her behavior by Kate Ashley, Elizabeth said simply that ‘she could not strive with all’, with both her step-parents.”<sup>27</sup> Eventually, tensions between Parr and Elizabeth heightened and she later moved away to her own house, though they stayed in contact. Elizabeth returned to Parr around the time that the baby was expected, but Parr died shortly after giving birth.

The Lord Protector became tired of Thomas Seymour’s ambitions, flirting with the king’s sister after he had married the Dowager Queen behind her back. Now a widower, Seymour sought a new bride and a way to retain the extensive household that Parr had left behind. On 17 January 1549, Seymour was arrested. There were many accounts of potential treason that the King’s council was threatened by. His scandal with Elizabeth was just a tipping point. The princess was intensely scrutinized, if she posed any threat to the king or seemed complacent enough in her step-father’s actions, she would be subject to punishment as well. Kat Ashley and Thomas Parry were questioned in the Tower. Kat Ashley’s testimony revealed that the governess was aware of Seymour’s intentions with Elizabeth and supportive of his plan, seeing that it could benefit Elizabeth. Elizabeth also revealed in her testimony that she was aware that Seymour was interested in marrying her, based on his actions and what Kat Ashley had told her. Kat Ashley does not hide her knowledge during her testimony:

I do remembre also, she [Ashley] told me, that the Lord Admirall loved her but to well, and hadd so done a good while; and that the Quene was jelowse on hir and him, in so moche that, one Tyme the Quene, suspecting the often Accesse of the Admiral to the Lady Elizabeth’s Grace, cam sodenly upon them, wher they were all alone, wherfore the Quene fell out, both with the Lord Admiral and with her Grace also.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Starkey, *Elizabeth*, 69.

<sup>28</sup> Haynes, *A Collection of State Papers*, 101.

This scandal shook Elizabeth and was the first time her virtue was put to the test. Through the experience, she learned what her effect could be on men, whether they were attracted to her beauty or her status. Elizabeth's later life would see her in similar positions, but she would be more capable. The Seymour Incident is the best known part of her life from this time. Elizabeth's legacy as the Virgin Queen often ignores these instances that would have ruined that title for her.

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