

Lady Jane Grey: Her Tragic Destiny  
A Reconstruction of Lady Jane's Life as it Appears in History  
and the Arts

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

Nadia L. Kousari

Dr. Bruce Hozeski

Bruce Hozeski

Ball State University

Muncie, Indiana

May 1998

May 9, 1998

SpColl  
Thesis  
LD  
2489  
.74  
1998  
.868

Purpose of Thesis

This thesis is a discussion of an English queen forgotten by history, but remembered in literature and the arts: Lady Jane Grey. Historians have often overlooked her as she ruled for only nine days in 1553, and thus made little historical impact.

Although seemingly unimportant, Lady Jane Grey has been a wonder to many. Unfortunately, little documentation of her life remains. As a consequence, the responsibility for the reconstruction of her life has fallen upon the shoulders of writers and artists. Even though this can create a fragmented portrait of Lady Jane, it nonetheless shapes the way people have viewed her throughout history. They have created Lady Jane Grey as she is known today.

**"If my faults deserve punishment, my  
youth at least and my imprudence were  
worthy of excuse. God and posterity  
will show me favor."**

Lady Jane Grey's final words in her prayer book as written in  
her own hand.

(qtd. in Luke 404)

In a British library sits a tiny prayer book. Few may notice the minute book, let alone consider who the owner was. Personal notes are written in the margins with neat, tiny script. That prayer book belonged to Lady Jane Grey, known as the nine days queen of England. What follows is a reconstruction of her life as it appears in various works and time periods.

When Charles Grey married Frances Brandon everyone knew they were a fortunate couple. They were both young, healthy and wealthy (Luke 19). On October 12, 1537 their daughter, Jane, was born at the manor of Bradgate in the Leicester hills of England. Her parents, the Marquis and Marchioness of Dorset, had had two previous, unsuccessful births (25).

Jane was born into a time of transition and change. A new world was beginning. People were seeking new intellectual and religious paths. Factors, such as rising population and prices, were also changing the society. Ideologies were being challenged and reformed (Wernick 136).

Lady Jane Grey's story may be the most tragic personal event in Britain's political history. Known as the "traitor-heroine of the Reformation," Lady Jane was a political victim (Prochaska 34). Had she been born in a different age she might have enjoyed a quiet life, reading her books and practicing her religion. But, her family's desire to make her queen had grave consequences (34). To further understand

Jane's position in the politics of her time, one must examine her lineage and family relations.

Jane, as any member of the aristocracy, had a very complicated family tree. She was the daughter of Lady Frances Brandon. She was also the granddaughter of Henry VIII's sister, Princess Mary who later became Mary Brandon, Duchess of Suffolk, with her second marriage to Charles Brandon. Mary was Frances Brandon's mother. Jane was the great granddaughter of Henry Tudor, Henry VII. She was cousin to the children of Henry VIII: Mary I, Elizabeth and Edward VI, who was born on the same day as Jane (*Encyclopedia Britannica* 921).

At the age of nine Jane became the ward of Thomas Seymour and lived with him until the death of his wife. Seymour was the brother of Jane Seymour, Henry VIII's third wife and mother of Edward VI. Seymour's wife, Katherine Parr, was the widow of Henry VIII. After Parr's death, Jane returned to her family (Luke 85). With such strong ties to the Royal Family, coupled with the fact that in Henry VIII's will Jane was listed as fourth in the line of succession, it is no wonder why Jane was so valuable and sought after (Hogg xi).

Besides lineage, the religious conflict of this time is a very important aspect to take into consideration when evaluating Jane's life. Once Henry VIII took the first step

toward breaking away from the Roman Catholic church he went to extreme measures. It was not that he disagreed with Catholic Orthodoxy or ritual, it was the power and influence the church had in his realm that he disagreed with. Step by step Henry VIII had replaced the Pope. By the time Jane and Edward VI were born he had, with help from his Vicar-General, Thomas Cromwell, virtually relinquished all papal loyalty (Luke 29).

The "new religion," brought from the continent, had found willing converts in Britain. The Catholics were facing new challenges with the "protestors" or "new thinkers." These were people who had little need for the Catholic practices and rituals. Like others, they viewed the Pope and the Vatican hierarchy as an endless line of corruption, privilege and abuse (30).

Not all English people accepted the "new religion" willingly, however. Henry VIII failed to consider that what seemed to be good for the Londoner may not be good for the average country Englishman. They, in fact, fought against it. The new religion had taken away their mass and replaced it with a prayer book which many of them could not even read. Their elaborate, colorful churches were also abandoned. For these reasons the monarchy lost their support (141).

Religious strife also led to economic strife. The dissolution of the monasteries meant that the nobility was able to participate in a land grab. Ecclesiastical properties

became private property at a time when the wool trade was becoming the economic king of Europe. Ecclesiastical lands that had been used for centuries as crop land were now enclosed and converted into pasture for the raising of sheep. This move forced hundreds of farmers and their families, who had depended on church lands for their living, to take to the road, searching for a way to survive. The noted Hugh Latimer said of the economic situation and nobility, "I fully certify you as extortioners, violent oppressors...through whose covetousness villages decay and fall down" (qtd. in Luke 139).

Jane was one of the marvels of her time. Her education and tutors were the finest available. For example, her favorite tutor, John Alymer, would later become Bishop of London. Jane's gift for learning and languages is evident in the fact that she was fluent in Latin and Greek and was knowledgeable in Hebrew, Chaldee and Arabic. Learning was also a refuge from a very unhappy and possibly abusive domestic life (*Encyclopedia Britannica* 921). Her education even allowed her to write books, the last of which was published posthumously. Entitled *The Life, Death and Actions of the Most Chast, Learned and Religious Lady, the Lady Jane Gray, Daughter to the Duke of Suffolk*, it was an admonition to those she left behind and a vindication of her own life (Dudley facsimile).

One refuge for Jane came when she became the ward of Thomas Seymour. Even after Queen Katherine's death he was able to keep Jane under his control by promising to arrange a marriage between her and her cousin, Edward VI. Unfortunately, Lord Seymour was attainted for high treason. He was beheaded in 1549 and Jane was returned to her parents (*Encyclopedia Britannica* 921).

Jane's father succeeded to the title of Duke of Suffolk on the death of his father-in-law, Charles Brandon, and his two sons. This allowed the Greys more frequent appearances at court where they fell in with the Duke of Northumberland, John Dudley. Northumberland saw family alliances as a means of strengthening his political position and arranged for Jane to marry his fourth son, Guildford Dudley on May 21, 1553. Edward VI approved of the marriage so completely that he made her, and any males she might produce, his heir to ensure a protestant succession. Edward VI's will, attesting to this wish, was witnessed and signed on June 21, 1553 (921).

On July 6, 1553 Edward VI died and Lady Jane Grey was informed that she was now the Queen of England. She was just 16 years old. At the news she fainted and refused to accept her new position. Eventually, however, her parents prevailed and she relented. In order to buy time, the king's death was kept secret until Jane was proclaimed queen on July 10, 1553

(*Encyclopedia Britannica* 921).

Edward VI's sister, Mary I, was given advance warning of her brother's death and was able to rally support for her claim to the throne. John Dudley, Duke of Northumberland, attempted to oppose Queen Mary with an army, but his support quickly evaporated as the councilors in London renounced their support for Jane and chose instead to back Mary. Jane was advised to relinquish her crown, which she did willingly. On July 19, 1553, Mary I was proclaimed Queen of England (921).

Jane, her father, husband and others were committed to the tower on charges of high treason on November 14, 1553. Her father obtained a pardon but Jane was sentenced to death. Her sentence was suspended, but her father had participated in a rebellion against Queen Mary, led by Sir Thomas Wyatt. With this, Jane's fate was sealed. Both she and her husband, Guildford, were beheaded on February 12, 1554 (Hogg xv).

On the morning of their executions, Jane was offered the chance to see Guildford, but she refused. She believed that such a meeting would trouble them both as they prepared for death. She saw him through her window only a moment before he was taken to the scaffold (xv). He was crying and pleaded for the onlookers to pray for him (Hibbert 74). At the time of her death, she was not yet seventeen and was the object of great sympathy (*Encyclopedia Britannica* 921). Ironically the

Wyat uprising was actually in response to Mary's marriage to Philip of Spain, not in support of Lady Jane, as Mary believed (Luke 384).

This was Lady Jane Grey's world. It was full of contradiction and family intrigue that affected not only her life, but the lives of the entire nation. When she was forced upon the throne, she also inherited the social, political and economic ills of the nation.

These are the facts of Jane's life. Jane was small in stature and shy. She was fair with reddish hair reminiscent of her Tudor grandmother. Her grey eyes resembled those of her Brandon grandfather (39). She was known for her unwavering devotion to the "new religion." She was a good and obedient daughter. This is the Jane we know even though many of the works by or about Jane were lost or deliberately destroyed. Among these may have been portraits (Prochaska 35). This is the frame upon which myths and legends are built. Within a few years of her death the first ballads extolling her virtues were written. The public Jane we have known may be more to our taste than the true, historical Jane would have ever been (35).

The real Jane tends to be overlooked by historians due to the fact that she contributed little of constitutional value, she simply was not queen long enough and so little documen-

tation exists concerning her life. There have been attempts made by historians to separate fact from fiction, but to create an accurate portrait of Jane is an impossible task because only fragmentary evidence exists. What makes Jane such an intriguing figure to study is that artists and creative writers have played an important part in reconstructing her life (Prochaska 35).

As early as 1558 Jane was the essence of what it was to be anti-Catholic. Even after Protestantism was firmly established in England she was still playing the role. The idea that a last minute conversion would have saved her from her sentence has been dismissed. To Protestants, Jane died "for faith and purity" (35). To them, she took on a "Christ-like holiness" (35).

What remains of Jane's letters suggest that she was "academically gifted." No one seems to have been more influenced by her than Roger Ascham. In his work, *The Schoolmaster*, Ascham writes about their meeting at Bradgate. People, however, fail to recognize that he wrote about the event ten years after it occurred and that it was used as an argument for education (35). He writes of a girl who was threatened and abused by her parents and whose love of learning was an escape:

...I am so sharply taunted, so cruelly threatened,

yea, presented sometimes with pinches, nips and bobs, and other ways (which I will not name for the honor I bear them) so without measure misordered, that I think myself in Hell, 'til the time comes when I must go to Mr. Elmer, who teacheth me so gently, so pleasantly, with such fair allurements to learning, that I think all the time nothing while I am with him. (qtd. in Luke 135)

Perhaps one of the most important poetic works praising Jane is Sir Thomas Chaloner's *Elegy*, written in the early 1560's, in which he describes Jane as above all in "learning, soul or beauty" (Prochaska 35). He even compares her to Socrates for her bravery as she faced death. Although one does not usually expect historical accuracy from poetry, it is important to note how many of Jane's supporters stood by the work as their truth (35).

Jane's life has been highly romanticized in the arts. The first play to turn her into a romantic heroine was *Lady Jane* written by John Webster and Thomas Dekker. Published and produced in 1607, it exists only in fragments. What has survived suggests that they were not writing with history as their main objective. The trial scene is a good example of this. It is highly dramatized with Jane and Guildford pleading for each other's lives (36).

John Banks published his *Innocent Usurper: or, the Death of Lady Jane Grey* in 1694. In his play he presents a more sensual couple. Says Guildford of Jane: "To see her is the blessing of the eyes..." (qtd. in Prochaska 36). With equal softness, Jane says of Guildford: "The rose of youth/ the majesty of Kings/...and fondness of Lover, are all Angelically mixt in him" (qtd. in Prochaska 36).

Nicholas Rowe's play, *The Tragedy of the Lady Jane Gray*, was written to serve two purposes. His first purpose was to create a believable Protestant character who was willing to sacrifice her life for her religion and the good of her country. His second purpose was to create a character who was a victim of her power hungry mother and father-in-law. Rowe's Jane must choose between her own happiness and the good of her country. Rowe makes her a representative of man's universal condition. He did not use her solely for propaganda, but rather made her a tragic character (Hogg vii).

Sometimes, in order to improve his story, Rowe ignored historical fact. The most important example of this is the Pembroke - Jane - Guildford love triangle he imagined which has no historical value whatsoever. Rowe conjured up the role of The Earl of Pembroke to create rivalry between the two men. In actuality, William Herbert, whom the character of Pembroke is based upon, was absolutely not a rival for the

Jane's hand. The conceived rivalry was used to add action and complexity to an otherwise unexciting plot line (Hogg xvi).

The anti-Catholicism presented in Rowe's play is subtle. His Jane abandons her books and takes on the duty of queen only to save English Protestantism. At the end of the play Mary offers to save Jane and Guildford's lives if they were to renounce their faith. Instead, they accept their faith and death with joy (Prochaska 36).

Rowe wrote at a time that saw problems similiar to those of Jane's time. The succession to the throne was in question and there was the foreign threat of the Jacobites in Scotland. There was also the conflict of Protestant and Catholic. English Protestants felt threatened once again. Complicating the issue was suspicion that Lutheranism might be an added threat to the Church of England. Although the play is anti-Catholic, it is not as virulent as previous writings on the subject of Lady Jane Grey. All in all the play ends on a note of tolerance (Hogg xliii).

The most probable dramatic source for Rowe's work is more likely than not John Banks' *The Innocent Usurper*. Both plays are similar, sometimes even sharing the same scenes which also include verbal similarities. The most dramatic difference between the two works lies in characterization. The playwrights seem to have different goals for their characters

(Hogg xx).

In Banks' version, Northumberland makes only one attempt to justify his claim of the crown for Jane. Her arguments, however, outweigh his. But her family pressures her, claiming duty until she accepts her crown. Rowe's approach to the question of legality is not so quickly dismissed. The question resurfaces several times throughout the play. But, as with Banks' Jane, she is eventually won over by emotion rather than logic. In the end, Rowe's heroine is aware of the necessity and the legality of her just rule (xx).

The conclusion of the plays presents a very different interpretation of Jane's life. Banks states that no cause, not even Protestantism, overrules the heredity right to the throne. Essentially, he presents a pro-Catholic stand. This may be why it was never performed (xxiii).

Rowe takes an entirely different stand at the conclusion of his play than does Banks. Banks wrote his play in 1683. In 1715, when Rowe wrote his work, a Protestant monarchy was in power. He no longer employed Protestant villains, in fact he features Stephen Gardiner as a Catholic villain. It should be noted, however, that Banks follows history here whereas Rowe takes liberties with it (xxiii).

Rowe's play is truly unique. It is different than chronicle histories or Banks' other works of the same story. Rowe's Jane is at the same time patriotic and religious which

differs from the chronicles' interpretation. Politically, Rowe viewed his Jane differently than the real Jane. His view of her was at least accepted, if not welcomed by the public, as it was somewhat popular in the eighteenth century (Hogg xxxv).

The subject of Lady Jane Grey was also popular on the continent. In Paris the *Tragedie de Jeanne, Reine d'Angleterre*, was performed in 1748 and again in 1777. In 1790, author Mme. de Staël's Jane was added to the list of dramas dedicated to the tragic queen. In Germany, C.M. Weiland published his *Lady Johanna Gray, oder Der Triumph der Religion*. Although he claimed to have based the work upon Banks' *The Innocent Usurper*, the evidence indicates that it is probably closer to Edward Young's 1714 poem, *The Force of Religion* (xxxvi).

At the end of the eighteenth century works about Jane began to multiply. There is no doubt that the combination of anti-Catholicism, cheap print and many female readers all played a part in her popularity. Jane appeared in magazines, "histories," religious works, children's books and countless more works. As with the other plays, these works lack historical accuracy. Many follow the tradition of Ascham's *The Schoolmaster*, Chaloner's *Elegy* or works by partisan churchmen. One biographer even referred to Rowe as a "Jane

expert" (Prochaska 36).

Creative writers were not the only ones responsible for the creation of the mythic Jane, historians also had a hand in the creation. In his *History of the Reformation*, Bishop Burnet calls Jane "the wonder of her age" (qtd. in Prochaska 36). In his *History of England*, Oliver Goldsmith says of her: "All historians agree that the solidity of her understanding, improved by continual application, rendered her the wonder of her age" (qtd. in Prochaska 36). The Catholic historian, John Lingard, has the audacity to find fault in Jane's character saying that she over-dressed and pointing out that she was only sixteen when she died (37).

In the decades following the French Revolution, in England, Jane was embraced by the Evangelicals. Evangelical Jane is different than the other Janes. They saw her as a figure of encouragement to piety rather than that of a scholar. This Jane is not seen much on the stage or in drama (37).

The Evangelical's version of Jane's marriage presented her as a pretty housewife, devoted daughter, obedient to her in-laws and committed to her local community. They seem to have overlooked the fact that she and Guildford were mismatched, and that Jane contracted a skin disease as a result of her fear that her mother-in-law was trying to poison

her. The image they prefer to present is the young couple in prayer (Prochaska 38).

Jane served not only dramatists and historians, but she also played muse to poets. In 1809, Frances Hodgson, a well known poet of the nineteenth century, chose her as the subject of a long poem, *Lady Jane Grey*. Being a devout churchman, Hodgson, of course, used Jane as an example of virtue for others to follow. In his introduction, he makes it clear that he has not been true to history but that he expects the reader to know the true story well enough to have no problem telling fact from fiction (Hodgson 7).

Hodgson spends many stanzas extolling the wonderful education Jane received and the illustrious men who were her tutors:

Wisdom has spoken with the voice of Fame,  
And scattered wide her Ascham's learned name.  
Well may old Granta glory in her son,  
And this exulting verse more musically run. (7)

He credits John Alymer, Jane's primary teacher with educating her in the proper way to live (11). His Jane is the Jane of Ashcam's Schoolmaster who lives only to learn (48).

Philosophers even joined in the praise for Jane. Under the pseudonym Theophilus Marcliffe, William Goodwin wrote a hagiography of Jane for children. He saw Jane as the utmost

perfect female in history. He contributed to the image of Jane as a role model for young ladies (Prochaska 37).

*The Tower of London*, written by William Harrison Ainsworth, is a novel that goes beyond any others written about Jane. He includes giants, spies and various villains, real and imagined. Ainsworth's Jane is glamorous, tall, wise, majestic and "passionately attached" to her handsome Guildford (38). In reality Jane was so short that at her coronation she wore three inch clogs for otherwise no one would have seen her (Hibbert 67). Her emotions are more balanced as all was not happy in her household. His treatment of her and her story is fantastic and highly romanticized (Prochaska 38).

In this novel, Jane has some courage to stand up to her in-laws. When Guildford expresses his desire to claim the crown and rule beside her as King she answers back undaunted: "The step you propose is fraught with danger. It may cost me my crown, and (I) cannot ensure one to you" (Ainsworth 56). After this response, he accepts her decision with little protestation (56).

Ainsworth reinterpreted and rearranged history. At one point in the novel he even implicates Guildford in the Sir Thomas Wyatt rebellion against Queen Mary. In his version Guildford participates in the attempt to restore Jane to the throne. By doing so, Jane is seen as a threat to the crown,

and as a consequence, is sentenced to death. Yet, after his betrayal, Jane still forgives Guildford. This, of course, is simply fiction at its finest (Prochaska 39).

Some of the most interesting characters Ainsworth created are those who live in the Tower of London. One crone warns Jane of her imminent betrayal. She tells her to beware. Jane tells her not to fear as she accepts her fate as a responsibility of not only the crown, but also her faith (Ainsworth 143).

Ainsworth's young couple is not always happy, either. In one scene Guildford reproaches Jane for the decisions she made while on the throne and for trusting the wrong people. She rebuts, defending herself. Jane's meekness is gone:

...disguise is useless now - I am satisfied that your father aimed at the crown himself, - that I was merely placed on the throne to prepare it for him, - and that when the time arrived, he would have removed me. (157)

Perhaps the most striking difference in *The Tower of London* is Ainsworth's treatment of Mary. He is fair and more generous than most historians. His Mary, in fact, pardons the couple and allows them to live in retirement at Sion House until Jane's father betrays them. She is more sympathetic and shows concern for Jane (Prochaska 39). Mary's treatment here

differs greatly than that which she receives in other works.

Ainsworth offers a new and unique interpretation of Jane and her world. Although it is a purely a work of fiction it is nice to think of the characters as true people. The story is exciting and the characters are intriguing. Perhaps the finest quality of the work is the fact that one can easily sort fact from fiction.

In the 1880's Jane was once again a popular subject for dramatists. Although *A Tragedy for Stage and Closet* by Scriptor Ignotus was never performed, it is an important work to note when examining Jane's life as it appears in drama. It is important because the play is not a narrative of Jane's life, but rather a defense of Mary. Ignotus' Mary is caring and tolerant. At the end of the play, when Northumberland is executed, the question of Mary's responsibility for Jane's death is not even explored. Mary is complex rather than the two-dimensional character of others' works (Prochaska 39).

Jane was immortalized not only by dramatists. In Victorian times she was a popular subject for artists and painters. One of the most famous paintings of her is the *Execution of Lady Jane Grey* by the artist Paul Delaroche (1759-1856). It now hangs on the walls of the National Gallery In London. In the painting, Jane's death is glorified. Blindfolded, she awaits her execution. Her hair

is long and flowing. She wears a pure white, satin dress. The dress may be accurate since, in reality, she removed her sober black dress before the execution. True to life, her nurses, Mrs. Ellen and Mrs. Tynley, who had been with her since birth, weep for their queen. A man, presumably Dr. John Feckenham, stands beside her, touching her gently. During the execution he prayed for her (Luke 403). The executioner is properly depicted as a large man dressed in red pants (402).

Jane was introduced to the modern world through film. The first display was *Tudor Rose*, called *Nine Days Queen* in the United States, in 1936. Directed by Robert Stevenson, *Tudor Rose* starred John Mills as Guildford and Nova Pilbeam as Jane. Critics praised the film for its beauty, poetry, superb acting and artistic endeavour. Surprisingly there is some history in the film with the focus centering on the politics of the time of 1547 to 1554. There is more historical accuracy in the movie than in many of the plays. Also, Jane and Guildford take on the persona of the ill-fated lovers (Prochaska 40).

Jane is, again, the subject of another film in the 1980's. In 1985 Trevor Nunn directed *Lady Jane*. Helena Bonham-Carter took on the role as Jane. Cary Elwes played Guildford. This Jane resembles the Jane of the early eighteenth century. As with the other film, attention was

paid to detail. The costumes are elaborate and accurate. But, Nunn points out that this Jane is the legend. The film is an examination of Jane's psyche. In this respect, history is a secondary goal. It follows Jane's destruction by forces she could not control. The portrait of this Jane may be more psychologically complete than any other (Prochaska 40). She uses her charm and her sexual attraction to gain attention from her husband. She also realizes her power as the queen and plans to reform her kingdom. She wants to take charge of her kingdom and strives to be a good queen. For the first time in her life she feels she is in control. This is a woman for today's modern world.

The many faces of Lady Jane Grey, nine days queen of England, reveal a portrait that, sadly, can never be verified. Her life, from cradle to grave, was tragic. She was truly an innocent girl who fell victim to the political ambitions of her time.

Through the centuries she has been transformed to meet the needs of each generation. She has embodied the virtues of a devout Protestant for the religious turmoil of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. She then became the model for the properly educated woman. To the Victorians she was the perfect, obedient daughter and meek, loving wife. In this age she is an abused, misunderstood girl who realized the power that she gained when she inherited the crown and wanted to use

it for reforms to help her people. She is a lady for all time and her small prayer book remains a testament to her faith and tragic destiny.

## Works Cited

- Ainsworth, William Harrison. *The Tower of London*.  
Philadelphia: George Barrie and Sons, 1840.
- Dudley, Jane. *The Life, Death and Actions of the Most Chast,  
Learned, and Religious Lady, the Lady Jane Gray, Daughter  
to the Duke of Suffolk*. London: G. Eld, for John Wright,  
1615.
- Encyclopedia Britannica*. 1793 ed. S.V. "Grey, Lady Jane."
- Hibbert, Christopher. *Tower of London*. New York: Newsweek,  
1980.
- Hodgson, Francis. *Lady Jane Grey*. New York: Garland  
Publishing, Inc., 1977.
- Hogg, James, ed. *Poetic Drama and Poetic Theory: The Tragedy  
of the Lady Jane Gray*. Salzburg, Austria: Institut für  
Anglistik Universität Salzburg, 1980.
- Luke, Mary. *The Nine Days Queen: A Portrait of Lady Jane  
Grey*. New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc.,  
1986.
- Prochaska, Frank. "The Many Faces of Lady Jane Grey."  
*History Today* 35 (1985): 34-40.
- Wernick, Robert. "Book Review: *The Beggar and the Professor*  
by Emmanuel LeRoy Ladurie." *Smithsonian* 29 (1998): 135-  
139.