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# The Truth and Tale of Lady Jane Grey: An Honest Demeanor in the Midst of Ruthless Ambition

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The Truth and Tale of Lady Jane Grey: An Honest Demeanor in the Midst of Ruthless Ambition

Sarah Kim

Western Civilization

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Known as the “Nine-Day Queen,” Lady Jane Grey’s reputation mainly revolves around her brief reign as the Queen of England and her subsequent execution. Her young age at the time of death and the minimal primary accounts of her life have left much of Grey’s life up to speculation and exaggeration. Some historians depict her as a beautiful, intelligent, yet demure woman whose unfortunate circumstances led to her end - as one anonymous author vividly writes, “the soul of Lady Jane Grey passed into its everlasting rest, and the fairest, wisest head in all the English realm fell from under the gleaming axe.”<sup>1</sup> In contrast, other scholars, such as Edith Snooks, portray her as a strongly independent and influential female martyr who “through her writing... fashioned a Protestant identity that inflected religious change with a challenge to gendered structures of power.”<sup>2</sup> While these depictions of Grey’s personality have been concluded by historians, it becomes clear that Grey has stood out in history not because of a strong independence nor a lasting historical influence, but from her respectable response as a victim of a political power play from which could be spun into many interpretations. Lady Jane Grey faced her rise and fall from the throne with humility and dignity, exemplified through her piety, rejection of the throne, and acceptance of her execution. Because of Grey’s stance in her unfortunate circumstances as the object of the royal family’s political ambitions, Grey remains a distinguished figure in English history despite her minimal role and influence.

Growing up in mid-sixteenth century Medieval England, Lady Jane Grey lived a quiet yet moderately luxurious life due to her royal status. Her childhood was not unconventional for a

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<sup>1</sup> “LADY JANE GREY’S LAST HOURS” (Advocate of Peace, 1879), <http://0-www.jstor.org.catalog.multcolib.org/stable/27906035> 16.

<sup>2</sup> Edith Snook, “Jane Grey, 'Manful' Combat, and the Female Reader in Early Modern England” (Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme, 2009), <http://0-www.jstor.org.catalog.multcolib.org/stable/43446134> 59.

child in a strict Tudor family, with a focus on education and marriage. Grey was not particularly talented in any aspect, although she was noted to be a good student: she was recorded by her tutor to have been reading Plato and speaking in eight languages<sup>3</sup> - however these claims may have been exaggerated by her tutor.<sup>4</sup> Although she was considerably far down the line to the throne, she was close to her cousin Edward VI, King of England and the son of the infamous Henry VIII. He was invited to Grey's wedding but was unable to attend due to his deteriorating health. Towards the end of his life, he diverted the succession from his step-sisters Mary and Elizabeth to Jane because of one man's influence: the Duke of Northumberland.<sup>5</sup> The Duke was a man of high ambitions who sought political power for his family. In addition to convincing Edward VI to change the throne, he planned the arranged marriage between Lady Jane Grey and his fourth son, Lord Guildford Dudley- therefore putting Dudley next in line as King upon Edward VI's death.<sup>6</sup> The Duke of Northumberland's scheme failed and Queen Mary assumed the crown after nine days of Lady Jane Grey's reign. Queen Mary promptly executed the Duke of Northumberland, Lord Guildford Dudley, and Lady Jane Grey, who was only sixteen at the time.

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<sup>3</sup> Ascham, Roger, *The Whole Works of Roger Ascham*, volume 1, ed. J.A. Giles, (London: J.R. Smith, 1864), 239, quoted in Wisdom, Rachel, "'God and Posterity Will Show Me Favor': A Search for the Historical Lady Jane Dudley in Light of Her Later Portrayals" (2011). *Undergraduate Theses—Unrestricted*. Paper 50.

<sup>4</sup> Ives, Eric, *Lady Jane Grey: A Tudor Mystery*, (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 63-66.

<sup>5</sup> *The Oxford Dictionary of the Renaissance*, s.v. "Edward VI.," accessed November 11, 2017 <http://www.oxfordreference.com.proxy.lib.pdx.edu/view/10.1093/acref/9780198601753.001.0001/acref-9780198601753-e-1221>.

<sup>6</sup> *The Oxford Dictionary of the Renaissance*, s.v. "Northumberland, John Dudley, Duke of," accessed November 11, 2017 <http://www.oxfordreference.com.proxy.lib.pdx.edu/view/10.1093/acref/9780198601753.001.0001/acref-9780198601753-e-2618>.

<sup>7</sup> In the end, Lady Jane Grey left little historical and political impact in England due to the limited span of her rule.

As the daughter of a Duke, Grey was well-educated in Greek history and philosophy. However, Grey was particularly interested in religion; starting as young as the age of thirteen, she wrote letters to prestigious religious scholars such as Henry Bullinger. In these letters, she details how Bullinger's, and consequently God's, influence has affected her religious views and lifestyle. She states that "Such of my actions as bear the characteristics of virtue, I must ascribe to that great Being who is the author of all my natural endowments."<sup>8</sup> Grey wholeheartedly believes in the righteousness of God and surmises that her devotion to Christianity affected her own virtue. This statement shows how her piety influenced aspects of her life beyond spirituality - her character was shaped by her faith. In addition, Grey's letter to her father a few weeks before her execution shows how her piety shaped her into showing dignity and grace. The Duke of Suffolk, otherwise known as Henry Grey or Jane Grey's father, unintentionally hastened his daughter's execution by involving himself in the unsuccessful uprising Wyatt's Rebellion, which resulted from Queen Mary's unpopular proposed marriage to Philip of Spain. Queen Mary understood this as a demonstrated show of the continued danger of Jane's presence in the court and hastened her execution. It is worthy to note that before this event, Grey's execution date

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<sup>7</sup> *The Oxford Companion to British History*, s.v. "Grey, Lady Jane," accessed November 11, 2017.  
<http://www.oxfordreference.com.proxy.lib.pdx.edu/view/10.1093/acref/9780199677832.001.0001/acref-9780199677832-e-1934>

<sup>8</sup> Nicolas, Nicholas Harris. *The Literary Remains of Lady Jane Grey; with a Memoir of her Life*. (London, England: Harding, Triphook, and Lepard, Pinsbury Square, 1825), 9.  
<https://hdl.handle.net/2027/hvd.hnzusc>

could have been postponed indefinitely. In the aforementioned letter, Jane forgives her father through her strong faith in the afterlife: “Father, although it hath pleased God to hasten my death by you, by whom my life should rather have been lengthened, yet I can so patiently take it, that I yield God more hearty thanks for shortening my woful days, than if all the world had been given into my possession with life lengthened at my own will.”<sup>9</sup> In addition to agreeing to marrying Grey off into the house of the politically ambitious Duke of Northumberland, Henry Grey once more condemned his innocent daughter to the consequences of his ruthless actions with his political ambitions. However, Grey demonstrates grace in her response to her father, showing no signs of resentment and instead, through her confidence in a divine life after death, thanks him. In addition to her response to Henry Grey, Jane Grey exhibits her thoughtful dignity in a conference held with Feckenham, Chaplain to Queen Mary. Sent by Queen Mary with the intention to convert Grey while she was held in the Tower of London four days before her execution, Feckenham questions and debates Grey’s faith. She in response defends her views of Protestantism to the Catholic court. Grey’s account reports that their discussion covered the topics of the way of salvation, the sacraments, transubstantiation, and the church’s authority. Her insightful judgement is displayed in one instance where, when Feckenham asks her about the basis of her faith, Grey replies that “I ground my faith upon God’s word, and not upon the church: for if the church be a good church, the faith of the church must be tried by God’s word, and not God’s word by the church: neither yet my faith.”<sup>10</sup> Grey was well-versed in her views and steadfast in her Protestant claims. She concludes her summary by writing, “My faith had

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<sup>9</sup> Quoted in Nicolas, *Literary Remains*, 47

<sup>10</sup> Quoted in Nicolas, 39

armed my resolution to withstand any assault that words could then use against.”<sup>11</sup> This shows not only her pious nature, but her dedication to her moral values even in the face of a court that sentenced her to death. Lady Jane Grey once again exemplifies her good-nature, humility and quiet dignity through her pious nature despite her unfortunate circumstances.

Although Grey’s adherence to religion displays her humble nature, her virtue was truly tested when she came across and then initially rejected the opportunity to become the most powerful figure in England as Queen. After Edward’s death, Grey’s succession to the throne was revealed to her Northumberland. Upon hearing the news, Grey is accounted to have fainted and wept, claiming, “The crown is not my right and pleases me not. The Lady Mary is the rightful heir.”<sup>12</sup> This response to her enthronement showcases her humble nature; knowing that it was not her place to acquire such power, she denied her ascension to power. Northumberland said her unusual reaction was shameful to her dignity and her household. Her husband attempted to comfort and convince her to take the crown with “prayers and caresses.”<sup>13</sup> Despite her family’s namesake and image at stake, Grey believed that her personal incapability should prevent her from seizing power. Rather than rashly seize power, she knew the correct hierarchy of the power and the consequences of her power and her reaction showcases her devastation. Her dignity did not derive from upholding the political ambitions of her family, but rather a quiet personal dignity in knowing her limits and goals. In a letter to Queen Mary following Grey’s

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<sup>11</sup> Quoted in Nicolas, 39

<sup>12</sup> Quoted in Ives, Eric, *Lady Jane Grey: A Tudor Mystery*, (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 187

<sup>13</sup> Quoted in Ives, *Tudor Mystery*, 187

imprisonment in a tower following the queen's coup, she recounts her displeasure in her nine days of reign. Grey emphasizes her self-criticism from seizing the power, recounting an instance with the Treasurer, who immediately "without my asking him or others asking him in my name... [Treasurer] wanted me to put the Crown on my head, to see if it fitted or not. I refused to do it, resorting to a number of excuses."<sup>14</sup> Despite the allure of crown fittings and jewels, Grey cannot help but feel conflicted about taking up the actions and roles of Queen especially when she sought the complete opposite of a powerful lifestyle, thus proving her innately humble and mild nature. While these accounts may have been embellished by her fear of execution, her accounts are backed by the Duke of Northumberland. Right before the Duke was executed, he says that Lady Jane herself was so far from aspiring to the Crown, "that she was by enticement and force made to accept it."<sup>15</sup> This proves that her motives to reject the throne listed in her letter to Mary were not out of fear of Mary's response but originated from her genuine discomfort at the idea of leaving her quiet life. Despite the opportunity to grab power, one that few could resist, Grey nonetheless still shows her true characteristic as a humble character from her denial to the crown.

Lady Jane Grey again exemplifies her quiet dignity through her final moments alive. Although she assumed an enormous amount of power as the Queen of England, she was still grateful when it was revealed to her that Mary had won the rebellion against her reign. According to historian Nicholas Harris Nicolas, Grey responded to losing her roles as Queen

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<sup>14</sup> Quoted in Facciotti, Guglielmo. In *L'Historia Exxlesiastica della Rivolvzion*, quoted in James D. Taylor, *Documents of Lady Jane Grey : Nine Days Queen of England 1553*. (New York: Algora Publishing, 2004), 95.

<sup>15</sup> Quoted in Ives, *Tudor Mystery*, lxxi



with apparent joy and “infinitely more pleasure than she felt when she assumed them, and which she never would have done, but in obedience to the commands of her mother and himself [Duke of Suffolk].”<sup>16</sup> While the rest of the royal family was devastated at their loss of power and possibly their punishments, Grey found happiness in finding freedom from the political plans her family set for her. Her first intentions were never to assume power, but rather she fell victim to the pressure from her family. Freed from her duties as Queen and the face of her family, she then shows her true nature to the world. When Feckenham tells Grey about her upcoming execution, she is recorded to have retorted, “You are much deceived if you think I have any desire of longer life, for I assure you, since the time you went from me, my life hath been so tedious to me, that I long for nothing so much as death, and since it is the Queen’s pleasure, I am most willing to undergo it.”<sup>17</sup> Her spiteful words resonates a sense of indignation from her - Grey is above the actions of the Queen or any other relative and is instead in the hands of God. She again puts her faith into God when she refuses to see her husband Guildford before his execution. In *The Literary Remains of Lady Jane Grey; with a Memoir of her Life*, Nicolas captures Grey’s logic behind avoiding an interview with Guildford:

“Her strong judgement at once dreaded the effects of an interview, that was likely to overwhelm them with unavailing sorrow, and thus to destroy that firmness which was so necessary to enable them to bear the trying scene with composure: she reminded him that their separation would be but for a moment, and that they would soon rejoin each other,

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<sup>16</sup> Quoted in Nicolas, *Literary Remains*, lxxii

<sup>17</sup> Quoted in Nicolas, lxxx

where their affections would be united for ever, and where neight misfortunes, disappointments, nor death could reach them, but where their felicity would be eternal!”<sup>18</sup>

By purposefully avoiding contact with her husband to avoid showing her fear and emotions, Grey exemplifies her strong faith in the afterlife and her dignity to keep face and composure even in her husband’s final moments. Notably, Grey was still only sixteen at the time and maintaining such composure underscores the extent of self-control she exemplified. This is once again exemplified in her execution speech where she professes her faith in her religion to take her into a better afterlife. “Lord, into thy hands I commend my spirit.”<sup>19</sup> Her complete faith in her religion, despite all circumstances disfavoring her, shows her stubborn resilience and strong grounds to her morals. Her actions and emotions right until her execution display a quiet toughness and pride. These characteristics helped to create her admirable portrayal throughout history.

Through her piety, rejection of the throne, and acceptance of her execution, Lady Jane Grey proves herself as a humble and dignified character in the midst of the cutthroat Tutor family. Many scholars have closely studied Grey and her letters and have independently come to a wide array of different conclusions, emphasizing different aspects of her character such as her independence, intelligence, or helplessness. Yet analyzing the limited sources on Grey reveals little about her true nature besides her quiet yet honorable disposition. This pattern of good-natured and humble characteristics, in combination with her unique and tragic

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<sup>18</sup> Quoted in Nicolas, lxxxvii-lxxxviii

<sup>19</sup> “LADY JANE GREY'S LAST HOURS” (Advocate of Peace, 1879), <http://0-www.jstor.org.catalog.multcolib.org/stable/27906035> 16.

circumstances, has created a foundation for historians, authors, playwrights, and artists to romanticize Grey and her legacy into a variety of tales. Librarian Elizabeth Smither's poem on Grey and how her bumbling hands in her final moments of death were a sign of her purity and the "truest part of her"<sup>20</sup> demonstrates the romanticization of her life. William Lane's fictional Gothic letters written from Grey's perspective were published in the nonfiction book *Documents of Lady Jane Grey: Nine Days Queen of England 1553*.<sup>21</sup> This underlines the limited field of scholarship on Grey and the wide number of interpretations of her legacy accepted in society. Her story, albeit obscure and historically insignificant, has been given new light and purpose through the imaginations and furnishings in the minds of various people. Grey's steadfastness and mild character gave her an influence throughout history unlike that of any other member of the Tudor family that still remains to this day: reverence and sympathy.

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<sup>20</sup> Elizabeth Smither, "The Hands of Lady Jane Grey" (Harvard Review, 2001), <http://0-www.jstor.org.catalog.multcolib.org/stable/27568546> 12.

<sup>21</sup> Lane, William. In *Lady Jane Grey: An Historical Tale in 2 volumes*, quoted in James D. Taylor, *Documents of Lady Jane Grey : Nine Days Queen of England 1553*. (New York: Algora Publishing, 2004)

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