

Grace Sharington and Anthony Mildmay

Grace Sharington (c. 1552-1620) and Anthony Mildmay (c. 1547-1617). Married 1567.



Grace, Lady Mildmay

Photograph of a painting published in
“The Fanes” by Oswald Barron, *The Ancestor*, vol. 12, 1905, p. 6.
The original painting did not survive World War II.

Grace, Lady Mildmay was a medical practitioner and scholar, and a writer on devotional and medical subjects. As part of one of her devotional writings, she wrote a short autobiography, one of the earliest autobiographies by a woman in English. (Lady Mildmay wrote this out in her own hand; some women’s autobiographies from this period were dictated to a secretary.) Sir Anthony Mildmay was a courtier in the court of Queen Elizabeth and at one point ambassador to France. Her autobiography includes the following short account of how her marriage was arranged.

And further I have thought good to call to mind the extraordinary love and favor of this said worthy person [Sir Walter Mildmay] towards myself in my tender youth which love was such that he desired me of my father to marry with his eldest son. His

son, being then more willing to travel to get experience of the world than to marry so soon, was unwilling to give ear thereunto. But his father told him that if he did not marry with me, he should never bring any other woman into his house. Upon which importunity of his father, he was content and entered into communication with him what jointure he would make me and what allowance he would give for our maintenance in our own time. His father answered him again by earnest protestations and vow in the presence of the lady his good mother saying, ‘Doest thou distrust me Anthony? Here I speak it before God, if thou marry with this woman I will give thee all I have and whatsoever else I can procure, shall be thine. And further, if I do it not, thy mother shall be witness against me in heaven,’ expressing the same with tears which moved the hearts of himself and his mother to weep also. Whereupon he yielded to his father and the marriage was concluded betwixt him and me upon the trust of his fidelity and good hope that he would never alter his mind nor break his said oath and vow, the consummation of that marriage being the seal of that bond.

My father-in-law gave me this posie¹ in my wedding ring ‘*maneant inviolat fides*’ that is to say, ‘Let thy faith remain inviolate’ which in the very instant of our marriage I received most religiously, with a full resolution (by the grace of God) to perform the same unto the end of my life. Wherein he bound me unto his son as he had before bound himself upon him on that condition of our marriage.

After which we lived with him almost twenty years, receiving no more maintenance from him but £130 by year bare pension to pay our servant’s wages and apparel ourselves and to defray all other charges whatsoever, which could not by any means suffice in any competency the least part of our necessities.

From Grace, Lady Mildmay’s *Autobiography*, edited by Linda Pollock and published in Pollock’s, *With Faith and Physic: The Life of a Tudor Gentlewoman*, Collins and Brown Ltd., 1993.

I quote part of Pollock’s account of the marriage in her introductory material, which is much more informative than Lady Mildmay’s own account.

In 1567, Grace was married to Anthony Mildmay, the eldest son of Sir Walter Mildmay, and a young man who had come early to Queen Elizabeth’s attention. . . . Lady Mildmay’s future father-in-law, Sir Walter Mildmay, (born c. 1520) was a younger son of a mercer, albeit a wealthy one, who rose rapidly from a clerkship in the court of Augmentations to be knighted by Edward VI in 1547 . . . finally becoming Chancellor of the Exchequer at the beginning of Elizabeth’s reign. . . .

Sixteenth century parents, particularly those with property, expected to have some say in their children’s choice of marriage partner. A small minority were prepared to force their offspring to comply with their wishes, and some would give into their child’s choice even if it was not entirely desirable. . . . In the case

¹A posie, or poesy, is a motto, often, as here, inscribed in a ring.

of the proposed union between Grace and Anthony, there seems to have been little negotiation. It appears that Grace's opinion in this matter was not sought, although there is no record of parental coercion nor of her dissent. Anthony was much more reluctant ... but his wishes were overridden.

The couple was unusually young: Grace was about fifteen and Anthony twenty at the time of their marriage. At this date the average age for peers and commoners would be the mid- to late-twenties for men and early to mid-twenties for women... Even more peculiarly for an alliance of this type and status in which the transmission of property would be an important element, the financial matters were not properly attended to. There was no marriage settlement. ... [T]he union was concluded on the basis of flimsy promises: Sir Henry Sharington promised that his daughter would inherit certain lands and Sir Walter Mildmay promised his son, 'I will give thee all that I have.' Neither parent actually fulfilled his promises and Sir Anthony and Lady Grace endured considerable financial strain throughout their marriage as well as being embroiled in expensive litigation to gain control of their inheritance.

We have already seen that Sir Anthony was averse to the proposed alliance and after the wedding he spent little time with his new bride. ... For the first twenty years of his marriage, he was absent from home about half that time. ... Not surprisingly, Sir Anthony's continual voyaging precluded the establishment of strong marital bonds, and there are signs that Lady Grace did not find her marriage entirely satisfactory.

...

Sir Anthony and Lady Grace had only one child, a daughter Mary born about 1582. Having no children in the first fifteen years of marriage was unusual, as was a completed family size of one child.