



MGM-TV "YOUNG BESS"

*My Young Bess*

Deborah had wanted to play the self-willed,  
astute young Princess Elizabeth in this Tudor  
drama Young Bess,  
and a fine one she would have made.  
But MGM gave the part to Jean Simmons,  
and assigned her, instead, Catherine Parr.

Deborah never thought much of that role,  
and later critics ignored it, too.

...But it all depends on your point of view.

If it is the summer you are twelve,  
and you are an intelligent, sensitive girl  
wondering what sort of grownup you will be,  
looking for role models in the small town world  
of 1953, and, with your new hormones, feeling  
the first stirrings of a new kind of love,  
seeing Deborah Kerr play Catherine Parr  
could alter your life.

I know now that the movie I saw was not quite  
the one MGM had in mind: I was too young, then,  
to know what was not possible.

Here is the movie I saw:

For Princess Elizabeth's whole life she has  
alternately been King Henry VIII's favored child,

or banished as  
bastard to hateful  
Hatfield Castle,  
depending on  
Henry's love-life.  
Any bonds she  
made with her  
succession of  
stepmothers were  
broken with the  
King's next whim.

Now, in  
adolescence, she  
has lived for a  
while  
at Hatfield, in self-  
chosen exile.

One day Bess is summoned back to the royal  
palace, to meet the latest queen, who sends as  
envoy

Tom Seymour (Stewart Granger), of great charm,  
who had known and loved Anne Boleyn,  
Bess's mother. And in spite of Elizabeth's  
determination not to lose her heart to another



doomed stepmother, or anyone else, she returns to court.

At the palace, Tom shows her to her rooms, “overlooking the gardens....the nicest rooms in the palace. The Queen wanted you to have them,” he tells her.

“What’s all this?” says Bess defiantly, glaring at the things spread out on the bed; yet she can’t keep a note of hope from her voice.

“Oh,” says Tom, “caps, scarves, gowns. She thought you’d like them.”

“She?” echoes Bess, as if she can’t quite take all this in.

“The Queen,” says Tom patiently, “Catherine.”

“Catherine...” Bess reflects, her voice full of sadness. “There was another Catherine – Katherine Howard.

I’d no sooner grown to love her than my father sent her to the scaffold, and me back to Hatfield.

...It could happen again.”

“It won’t.”

“I could never be happy here.”

“You shall be, this time.”

“How do you know?”

“Because I know the Queen.

She’s the sweetest woman in all God’s world!”



Miklos Rosa's music, which has been telling all along of the rising tumult in Bess's breast, her increasing flutters of hope, now swells onto a serene and royal theme, and there she is, Deborah Kerr in the door, her face haloed in a blue Tudor hood.

She has overheard Tom's fervent tribute, and this powerful Queen enters slightly off balance; still we sense her pleasure at hearing herself so spoken of.

"Welcome home, my child," she begins.

Then, looking again, "How tall you are!

Why, you're almost a grown woman!"

with a warmth that seems to welcome her to womanhood as well.

"I'm so glad to have you with me!

Your tutors tell me you have brains to match your looks."

"That would be a very poor compliment to my brains, Your Majesty," Elizabeth returns.

But Catherine is equally quick with her logic,

"Nonsense, you're going to be beautiful.

...And what's much better, a delightful companion for me.

...And the little Prince of Wales."

He seems almost an afterthought.

“Edward needs a sister. ...And I need...”

suddenly her voice is very real, she does need something from Elizabeth!

She smiles then, bemused, tenderly,

“...what shall we call you? ... a younger sister? ... or a daughter? Would you like that?”

There is clearly no word for who they will be to each other, and it doesn't matter at all.

“Madam, I ...” stammers Elizabeth.

“The chief thing” Deborah croons “is that we've got you, and we're going to keep you.”

So Bess has come home, to love the Queen and be her companion. Clearly, Catherine, who is also a learned woman, and dares to wield what power she has, has much to pass on to the young Princess.

And Elizabeth can give her ... in a way, the closest thing Catherine has to an equal, a friend. They are intelligent women who recognize and are glad of each other's worth, and they will be allies in this world ruled by their despotic King.

“I love the Queen!” Bess tells her young brother.  
“I think we’re going to be great friends!”  
“She won’t last, “ Edward replies.  
“They argue - about religion and the Bible.  
She likes to say what she thinks. She  
contradicts him. And nobody’s supposed to



contradict the King. ...When I am King, if  
anybody contradicts me, I’ll have them executed,  
too.”

It is only too true. It turns out that when Henry  
was in France and Catherine briefly held the



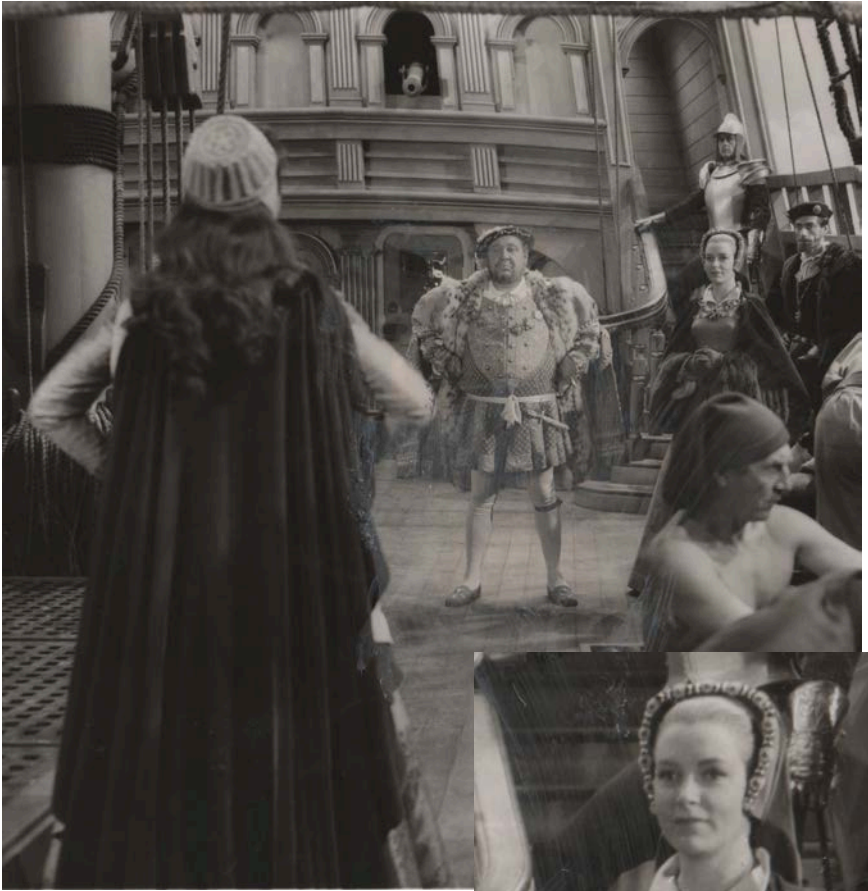
power of Regent, she allowed the Bible to be translated into English, so everyone could read it for themselves, knowing full well this was not her husband's wish. He's turned against her, only looks for the right moment to accuse her of heresy.

I will not tell the story of how Elizabeth, by her terror and her quick wits,



saves the Queen's life;  
you can see the movie.







Nor how after King Henry's death  
Tom arranges things so Bess can live  
with Catherine in her house in Chelsea.

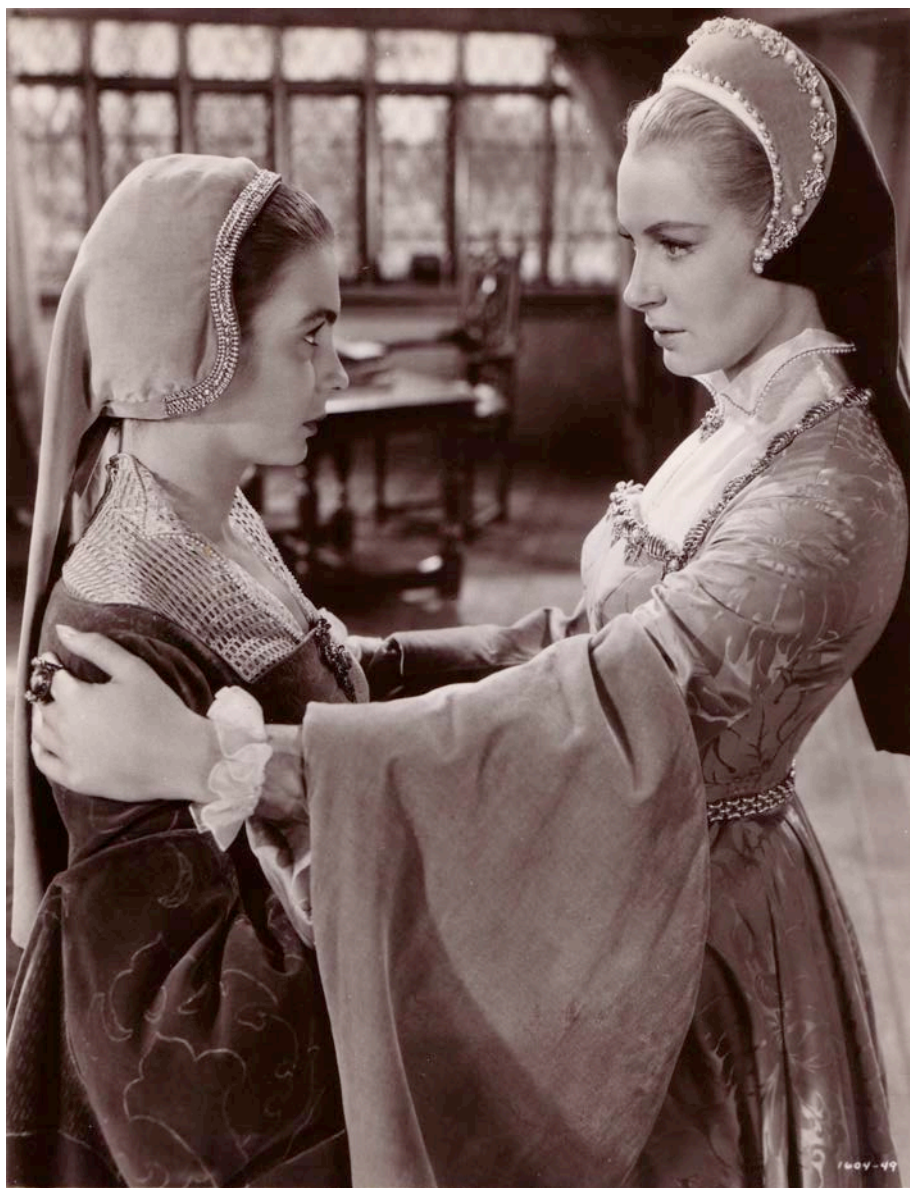
Nor of how her heart nearly breaks to learn  
that Tom and Catherine are secretly lovers.

Still, Bess loves them both  
enough to maneuver it so  
that they are able to  
marry.

But, oh, when this news  
arrives, and Catherine,  
after her first celebratory  
joy, begins to realize it  
must be Bess who  
gave the new king the  
idea,  
oh, when Catherine starts  
to thank her with grateful  
endearments, that is more  
than Bess can bear, and  
she runs from the room.  
Catherine follows, seeing she is upset,  
and caring why.







"Madam," says Bess, "I shall leave the day before the wedding."

"Oh, now I understand!" Catherine cries, relief breaking in her voice. "You thought you'd have to

leave! And that's wrong. This is your home.”  
Catherine doesn't quite understand, she speaks  
as if to a child.  
But not when she says, next, simply, “I love you,  
Bess.... You know that, don't you.”



Not when, whispering “Bess!”, she takes her in her arms.

From there on, the movie made less and less sense. I was stunned when Catherine died, and the story kept going. ...It turned out MGM thought the important love in Bess’s life was Tom!

I’d understood Bess loved him: much was attractive about him, and besides, he, too, appreciated and befriended Catherine Parr. But Elizabeth’s great love? He had never occurred to me.





Afterwards, I couldn't stop thinking about this soul-stirring movie, and about Deborah Kerr.

Within a few days I told my mother,  
"I'm in love with Deborah Kerr!"

"But a woman can't be in love with a woman,"  
she demurred.

There was no note of disapproval, or fear:  
neither of us had ever heard of dread  
"homosexuality". It was rather as if  
she'd voiced a logical truth.

"But what's the difference?" I persisted.

"Why isn't this being in love?"

I think about her all the time. I feel  
*just* the way they say in all the songs."

Mom didn't have an answer; I believe we both  
felt I had made my case.

Before long my whole family knew I loved  
Deborah Kerr. They teased me, as they teased  
about everything. I was odd in many ways, and  
this was just one more.

My mother did wonder if she should be  
concerned. But when she said so

I answered, “You should just be glad it wasn’t Marilyn Monroe!”

She laughed, admitted the sense in that, and decided not to worry.