
Opening Extract from...

Death and the Virgin

Elizabeth, Dudley and the Mysterious Fate of Amy Robsart

Written by Chris Skidmore

Published by Phoenix

DEATH AND THE VIRGIN

Elizabeth, Dudley and the Mysterious Fate of Amy Robsart

CHRIS SKIDMORE

PHOENIX

I

Rites of passage

Time was precious. The rebels had already defeated an expeditionary party of the king's forces sent to crush them. They had taken Norwich, where, under the direction of their leader, a local tanner named Robert Kett, they had demanded that all 'bond men be made free'. It was reported that some 16,000 rebels had now set up camp on Mousehold Heath, just outside the city. Beneath a great oak they called the 'Tree of Reformation' local gentlemen had been rounded up by Kett and his followers, then put on trial and sentenced to imprisonment, even death.

It was August 1549. The boy king Edward VI had succeeded his father Henry VIII only two years previously. As Edward was too young to govern, his uncle, Edward Seymour, Duke of Somerset, had stepped into the vacuum of power. A man of Protestant leanings who championed religious reform, Somerset had promised a new regime and a 'milder climate' in which men might have freedom to speak their minds without fear of execution. But his leniency had backfired. It was an age of rising prices and high inflation; religious changes during the Reformation had seen the very fabric of medieval Catholicism torn down as saints' images were smashed, and altars and centuries-old shrines were destroyed; unrest and disturbance followed. Somerset had been slow to sense it – and now the country was in open rebellion. In Cornwall, Catholic rebels calling for the abolition of the new church service in English were besieging Exeter, while in York, Essex, Oxfordshire, Suffolk and Norfolk, in what became known as the 'commotion time', revolts erupted, driven by religious reformers who demanded an end to the unpopular enclosures of common land by the nobility.

At court, men were horrified at what seemed to be a breakdown in the social order. The common people, one of Edward's advisers lamented, had 'become a king'; 'Alas! That ever this day should be seen in this time!' The situation was growing out of control. There were fears that the capital might be under threat, and in the atmosphere of instability, rumours that the young king was dead were only dispelled when Edward showed himself in the streets on horseback. The rebellion needed to be

crushed, fast. In desperation, Somerset appointed John Dudley, Earl of Warwick, to defeat the rebels. Travelling up from London with a force of 5,000 men, Warwick was determined to end the rebellion by whatever means necessary.

Both Edward Seymour and John Dudley, better known by their landed titles as simply Somerset and Warwick, had been leading courtiers in the last decade of Henry's reign, but there was now a sense of remarkable transfer in their fortunes. Somerset, the elder brother of Henry's third wife Jane Seymour, had come to be regarded as the more senior, and as uncle of the new king Edward VI, was the natural choice as Protector, the de facto king of the realm. Warwick's background was rather more chequered. His father was Edmund Dudley, a brilliant lawyer who had risen to become one of Henry VII's ministers, and who was deeply unpopular with the nobility as a result of his punitive system of fines and threats. Intending to begin his reign afresh, the young Henry VIII had Edmund executed for treason.

Edmund's son worked hard to restore the family name; his military reputation on land and at sea earned him the king's respect, and by 1542 he had been elevated to the peerage as Viscount Lisle. Both John Dudley and Edward Seymour were proud men, jealous of their reputations. Upon Edward VI's accession to the throne both were given instant promotions, Seymour becoming the Duke of Somerset and the King's Protector, while Dudley was raised to Earl of Warwick and Lord High Chamberlain of England. Almost immediately after Edward's succession, it had become clear they were to be rivals. 'Although they both belong to the same sect they are nevertheless widely different in character,' the Imperial ambassador observed. Warwick, he believed, 'being of high courage will not willingly submit to his colleague. He is, moreover, in higher favour both with the people and with the nobles.'[1] Yet behind his charming and charismatic exterior, Warwick was a ruthless operator. 'He had such a head,' one courtier later recalled, 'that he seldom went about anything but he conceived first three or four purposes beforehand.'

As he marched out of the capital, Warwick understood the burden placed upon him. He had taken two of his sons, Ambrose and Robert, with him on the campaign. Warwick had thirteen children in total, eight sons and five daughters, though two of his sons and three of the daughters died before the age of ten.[2] Henry, the eldest son and heir to the family, had been killed during the Siege of Boulogne, Henry VIII's last military

campaign, in 1544. When John Dudley had been elevated to the title of Earl of Warwick in 1547, the title of Viscount Lisle passed to his next eldest surviving son, John. Ambrose and Robert were the second and third surviving sons, and while they might not be expected to inherit the family title and the obligations that went with it, Warwick was a devoted father to all his children ('a few children, which God has sent me,' he later confessed, 'also helps to pluck me on my knees').[3]

Born in June 1532, Robert had only just turned 17. He had spent much of his youth at the royal court, having been brought up in the household of the young Prince Edward as one of the 'young lords attendant' who shared his lessons and acted as companions and playmates to their royal friend. It was a position usually reserved for the sons of the ancient nobility, but Warwick's rapid rise through the ranks at court ensured that his sons would receive some of the best education in all of Europe. When not at their studies, the young lords developed their military skills under expert tuition. They learned how to fight with swords and pikes, and practise the novel art of defence, or 'fencing', of which John Dudley had become a strong patron, with the first English school set up at his London residence, Ely Place. He was keen for his sons to be ready to emulate his own success on the battlefield, and to gain the military training and experience requisite for a young nobleman seeking glory and honour in armed combat. The Norfolk rebellion would prove the perfect opportunity to practise what they had learned, a rite of passage that would allow them to witness first hand the experience of the battlefield.

With a mixture of trepidation and excitement, Robert and Ambrose marched with their father into the West Midlands, where they watched 6,000 foot soldiers and 1,500 horsemen amass outside Warwick Castle. Despite his young age and inexperience, Robert himself had been placed in charge of a company of foot soldiers. Tall, with a strong athletic physique and dark good looks, he was already showing signs of the features that would later mark out his attraction at court. Riding in his armour in front of his troops, he was no doubt eager to prove his valour on the battlefield against the rebels.

There was perhaps another reason why Warwick had decided to take his sons with him into combat. The defeat of the expeditionary force led by the Marquis of Northampton had badly shaken the government, especially the news of the death of Lord Sheffield, clubbed to death by

some of Kett's men after falling from his horse. Whereas Northampton had failed to pacify the rebels and had been forced to flee, Warwick was determined to show the necessary courage to succeed. His army was already five times the size of Northampton's, and was soon to be joined by over a thousand troops raised from Lincolnshire. The presence of his sons helped convince his officers and men that their commander had the confidence to defeat the rebels.

Before the royal army reached its destination, it had travelled through Cambridge and on to Newmarket. As it neared where the rebellion was taking place, on the night of 22 August its troops came to rest in the fields outside the town of Wymondham, the home town of Robert Kett. It was here that, as his men bedded down in tents for the evening, Warwick, his sons and their officers lodged in the medieval manor of Stanfield Hall, the home of Sir John Robsart and his wife.

2

A meeting

Sir John Robsart was a powerful local gentleman, who had been a Justice of the Peace since 1532. Knighted upon Edward's coronation, he was the appointed Sheriff of Norfolk and Suffolk from 1547 to 1548. He was also a substantial landowner, owning three manors in the north-west of Norfolk with enough land to graze 3,000 sheep.

Although Sir John owned the manor of Syderstone, the manor house there lay in ruins and had long been uninhabitable. After marrying Elizabeth Appleyard in 1530, he moved into her house, Stanfield Hall. Elizabeth was the daughter of John Scott of Camberwell and had previously been married to Roger Appleyard, an influential member of the landed gentry. His premature death had left Elizabeth a widow, and the heir to his sizeable estate. It was just what Sir John had been looking for: not only was Elizabeth the member of a distinguished Norfolk family like his own; she brought with her a landed estate and house suitable for his means, a great improvement on his ruined manor house at Syderstone.

Sir John quickly became the adoptive father to Elizabeth's four children by her previous marriage: John, Philip, Anna and Frances. Sir John already had an illegitimate son, Arthur, though naturally he wanted his own heir to inherit his estate. A daughter, Amy, was born to the couple two years later. Any disappointment that the child was not a male quickly evaporated, and Sir John proudly entered her name in his missal:

> *Amea Robsart generosa filia Johno Robsart Armiger nata fuit in vii die Junij in Anno Dom Angelismo ccccxxxii*
> *Amy Robsart beloved daughter of John Robsart Knight was born on the 7th day of June in the Blessed Year of Our Lord 1532.*

If this missal is correct, Amy was almost identical in age to Robert Dudley, who later revealed his own birthday to be on 24 June of the same year.[1]

As a result of his marriage, Sir John Robsart became well entrenched in the Norfolk gentry. He soon married his stepchildren off to other respectable local families: the Bigots, the Huggins and the Sheltons.

Frances had recently been betrothed to William, the eldest son of Sir John Flowerdew of Hethersett, a lawyer and landowner who was also steward of Robsart's Norfolk estates. Sir John's wife brought new, now less welcome, connections: her previous husband's sister, Alice Appleyard, was married to the leader of the rebellion, Robert Kett. For more than a decade the Flowerdews and the Ketts had been in conflict over Sir John Flowerdew's decision to enclose some nearby common land, erecting hedges around it. Kett's decision to become involved with the rebellion was influenced by Flowerdew's offer of 3s 4d to an angry mob to pull down Kett's own hedges. When Kett agreed instead to pull them down himself, he offered to lead them into open rebellion against the 'power of great men' and 'importunate lords'. Sir John Robsart found himself caught in the middle of the conflict between his sister-in-law's husband and his stepdaughter's future father-in-law. Potentially more serious consequences were no doubt pressing upon his mind too: among the gentry that had been captured by the rebels and taken up to Mousehold Heath were his own stepsons, John and Philip Appleyard.

Yet Sir John was determined to stand on the side of the king and the law, against the rebels – no matter what family connections persisted. He was a committed Protestant, and a firm believer in royal supremacy as the natural order of things. When Sir John came to draw up his will in October 1535, he referred to his sovereign Henry VIII as being 'within his realme supreame hede of the church immediately under God'.[2] When the preacher Thomas Beacon dedicated his work *The Fortresse of the Faithful* to him in 1550, he did so in honour of the 'godly affection and christian zeal which both you and . . . your wife have borne toward the pure religion of God these many years'. It is likely that Amy was brought up to share her father's religious views, which happened to chime strongly with Robert Dudley's own religious outlook as a committed reformer. 'I never altered my mind or thought from my youth touching my religion,' he later admitted, 'I was ever from my cradle brought up in it'.[3]

It could have been here at Stanfield Hall on their way to meet Kett's rebels that Robert first set eyes upon Sir John's only daughter, Amy, who had recently turned 17. There is a possibility that Amy and Robert had met before: Sir John Robsart had enjoyed favour with the Howards, the dukes of Norfolk, before the Third Duke's downfall and imprisonment in 1546, alongside his son, Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey. It has been

suggested that Amy may have ended up as a maid or a companion to the Howard children in their house at Kenninghall, and may even have attended the family on their travels to London after the Duchess of Richmond had gained guardianship of the children in 1548. Amy's surviving letters, written in a fine calligraphic hand, attest to the fact that she must have had a good formal education, perhaps the kind received in a noble household. If this was indeed the case, Amy just might have already met or seen Robert at official functions at court, though the evidence is too slim to know for certain.

What is certain is that Warwick's sudden arrival at Stanfield Hall must have been the most memorable occasion of Amy's life to date. A sea of thousands of men – some estimates put the size of the royal army at over ten thousand – were camped out in the fields adjoining the back garden of her home, while the guest list for dinner that night was far from what a country gentleman like her father was accustomed to: one earl, one marquis and three lords sat around the table in the Great Hall, not to mention the two young sons of the earl. Still, there would have been little occasion for merriment, with the visitors deep in serious discussion about the best tactics for dealing with the growing rebellion. It was later said that while on their journey to Norwich, Warwick and his officers did not once take off their armour, 'remaining still in a readiness, if the enemies should have made any sudden invasion against them'.[4]

Amy might not have spoken to her future husband that night, but she would have noticed him. Clad in a full suit of armour, with his dark hair and features, Robert, the youngest of the earl's sons, would have stood out from his elder brother Ambrose and the rest of the noblemen arguing tactics around the dinner table.

By dawn, however, he was gone, having departed with his company to make the final journey towards Norwich.

3

Carnal marriages

On the battlefield the rebels barely stood a chance. When routed by Warwick's army, many simply fled, including Kett, who was discovered hiding in a nearby barn. His was one of the many executions that followed; hanged in chains off the wall of Norwich Castle, his body was left dangling there until the flesh fell away from the rotten corpse.

Although the rebellions were all eventually put down, Somerset's reputation had been irreparably damaged and he never recovered his authority. Amidst rumours of a plot to have him arrested, he fled to Windsor Castle, taking Edward with him. For a week it seemed that the nation would descend into civil war, with the nobility on one side and Somerset on the other. Armed conflict was narrowly avoided when Somerset was tricked into giving himself up, but both sides had come too close to civil war for the situation to continue.

Somerset was arrested and stripped of his position; in his place, Warwick soon became the leading figurehead as Lord President of the Council. He skilfully outmanoeuvred his enemies, defeating a Catholic faction who wished to make Edward's sister Princess Mary regent, by drawing himself close to the king and embracing his reformed religion. One reason for Warwick's success was that he had refused to have Somerset executed, knowing that the young King Edward was unwilling for his uncle to die. The following spring, Somerset was released from the Tower, and as part of his reconciliation with Warwick, it was agreed that Somerset's daughter Anne would marry Warwick's eldest surviving son, John Dudley, Lord Lisle. Their marriage was celebrated at the royal palace of Sheen on 3 June 1550, in a weekend of festivities attended by the king. Theirs was not the only marriage that had been arranged, for the next day Robert Dudley married Amy Robsart.

Compared to the lavish festivities that had accompanied his brother John's ceremony, Robert and Amy's wedding was a quiet affair. Taking place in front of the same audience, it must have been something of an anticlimax for those who had attended the sumptuous banquet of the night before and were perhaps now feeling somewhat the worse for wear.

The young king recalled in his diary that there had been a 'fair dinner made and dancing' at the former ceremony; afterwards, from a bower of woven branches, Edward watched two teams of six gentlemen take part in a joust. There was no such splendour for Robert and his new bride. The ceremony was once again attended by the king, though the only mention Edward made in his diary refers to the bizarre festivities that had been hastily organised in place of a tournament, in which 'there certain gentlemen that did strive who should first take away a goose's head, which was hanged alive on two cross posts.'[1]

The contrast between John's and Robert's marriages could not have been greater. John had married the daughter of a duke; Robert, the daughter of a Norfolk squire. Of course, Robert was Warwick's third surviving son – he could not have expected to compete with his elder brother in the marriage stakes – but compared to his other brothers and sisters, he had fared badly. His brother Ambrose married the daughter of the Attorney General, William Whorwood, and even his younger brother Henry was betrothed to Margaret, the daughter of Henry VIII's Lord Chancellor, Thomas Audley. His sister Mary would later become the wife of Henry Sidney, one of Edward's gentlemen of the Privy Chamber. There was little doubting that Robert, the son of an earl who had become the most powerful man in the kingdom, had married a woman who was several degrees beneath him in the social hierarchy.

It points to one conclusion: Robert married Amy for love. A crucial piece of evidence exists to support this. Years later, musing on Robert and Amy's marriage, Cecil wrote the telling words in a memorandum: '*Nuptii carnales a laetitia incipiunt et in luctu terminantur*' – 'carnal marriages begin in joy and end in weeping'.[2] With the knowledge of events later to unfold, these words have been frequently mistranslated to imply that Robert and Amy's marriage was an unhappy one, with the force of the '*à* being taken to mean 'without', yet this is both incorrect and presses the case too far. Evidence from Amy's own letters several years into their marriage, with her being 'not altogether quiet' upon Dudley's 'sudden departing', suggest otherwise. As do Cecil's words '*nuptii carnales*', which suggest that Robert and Amy had a healthy sex life. Certainly when Robert was placed in the Tower three years later, Amy and other wives were 'to have access unto their husbands, and there

to tarry with them so long and at such times, as by him shall be thought meet'.

Cecil, who despite his relative youth would shortly be appointed Principal Secretary to the Privy Council under Warwick's government, most likely attended Robert and Amy's wedding at Sheen, where he would have had the opportunity of meeting the young couple. It must have been their youth that first struck Cecil. Both were still 17, though Amy's eighteenth birthday was just four days away. The couple were remarkably young to be getting married. In Tudor England, the average age for a first marriage was 27 for men and 25 for women. In particular, it was widely believed that young men were unsuited to settling down so soon: 'until a man grow into the age of twenty-four years', wrote one author, 'he is wild, without judgment and not of sufficient experience to govern himself'.

Amid the muted wedding celebrations, it is almost possible to imagine the young couple, anxious on beginning their new life together. Through surviving portraits and descriptions Robert's features are well known to us. According to the historian William Camden, he was 'a man of tall personage, a manly countenance, somewhat brown of visage, strongly featured, and thereto comely proportioned in all lineaments of body'. His facial features were 'of sweet aspect, but high-foreheaded, which was of no discommendation'. His large pupils, piercing in gaze, appear almost black in portraits of him. Later he would grow a reddish moustache and forked beard, but probably for the moment we should imagine him as an unshaven youth, yet to reach his full maturity. He had a large, strong-bridged aquiline nose, matched with an angular jutting chin. But it was his athletic physique, honed through regular exercise – Dudley was a keen horse rider, tennis player and jouster who had a celebrated reputation on the tiltyard – that drew the attention of onlookers, combined with a lofty stance, his shoulders raised back and his head held high, a pose barely short of arrogance.

With Amy it is a different story. No picture of her is known to have survived, though according to the Imperial ambassador Caspar Bruener, writing in 1559, she was 'a very beautiful wife'. We can also get a sense of the clothes that Amy wore from her tailor's bills, which include payments for scarlet petticoats, loose gowns of russet taffeta or damask, 'laced all thick overthwart the garde', a 'round kirtell' of black velvet, white satin sleeves and a bodice of crimson velvet.

Yet there is a possibility that a portrait miniature painted by the Flemish artist Lavinia Teerlinc, and traditionally dated to around 1550, might be of Amy. The sitter, whose identity has long remained a mystery, wears a black bodice, squared across the shoulders. She has a nose slightly too large for her face, her pursed lips seem too small, while her pale features redden around the cheeks. Her light auburn hair is parted in the middle, beneath a headdress of white and black, fringed with gold. Her eyebrows are faint, almost wispy; her eyes are pale blue. Rather than stare directly at the viewer, she looks outwards, as if in contemplation. Significantly, set against a background of azure blue, typical of a Teerlinc miniature, there is a Latin inscription 'An[n]o XVIII' denoting the sitter's age: 18 – Amy's age just days after her marriage.

In particular, attention has focused upon the intricate oval brooch worn by the sitter. A black classical face is centred in the middle of the brooch, typical of the kind of jewellery worn by many ladies at court during the period. What makes its design so unusual, however, is the foliage on either side of the brooch; to the right is a spray of yellow flowers, identified as gillyflowers, and to the left are acorns and oak leaves. The gillyflower was also a well-known symbol representing marriage, betrothal and fidelity, yet it is difficult to understand why the lady in the portrait would wish to be pictured with acorns and oak leaves pinned to her breast, unless the device was part of some wider symbolism privately understood by the sitter. There is good reason to suggest that this might indeed be the case. The acorn and the oak was a symbol taken up by Amy's husband Robert when he was later imprisoned in the Tower. There, into the sandstone wall of his cell, as a pun on his own name, similar to the Latin for an oak tree, *robur*, he carved acorns and oak leaves. The combination of this symbol, together with the gillyflowers symbolising marriage, is highly suggestive. Was the miniature painted to mark the occasion of a wedding? If so, the face that stares out at us might just be the only surviving likeness of Amy.[3]

4

My father's heart

Robert and Amy may have married for love; but, in the sixteenth century, marriage could rarely be a matter of love alone. Considerations of wealth and politics were simply too great for that. It was particularly common among landowning families for fathers to decide who their children might marry, especially when the family inheritance was at stake. Robert and Amy would have had little choice but to dutifully obey their parents' wishes, as countless other sons and daughters of nobles and gentlemen had done for generations before them. When Sir Walter Mildmay, Chancellor of the Exchequer under Henry VIII, insisted that his son Anthony marry the fourteen-year-old girl he had chosen for him, Anthony initially resisted, demanding to know more about the world before he settled down, but he soon relented and gave in to his father's demands.

For women the choice was perhaps more stark. Entirely dependent on their parents, few ever thought to disobey their commands; Amy would have been no exception. When Joan Hayward was chosen as the wife of the heir of Longleat, John Thynne, she was told that she could meet the young man, her future husband, if she wished, but it was still expected that she marry him, whether she liked him or not. In response, Joan's answer was typical of the age: 'I do put my trust in God and in my good father that God will put into my father's heart to choose me such a one as God will direct my heart not to dislike.'[1] Certainly for Sir John Robsart, his daughter Amy's marriage to the son of an earl must have been beyond his wildest expectations; he had everything to gain and nothing to lose.

Could Robert's marriage to Amy have been an arranged one? The fact that it came so soon after his elder brother John's arranged marriage to Somerset's daughter, certainly suggests that Warwick had meticulously planned his sons' wedding arrangements in advance. It may have been that Robert's union with Amy was part of a series of alliances that Warwick had been making at that time, strengthening his own base of political support. Sir John Robsart was a key ally of his in Norfolk, and through his marriage to Elizabeth Appleyard had

established a strong series of connections amongst the Norfolk gentry, built upon intermarriage, that might prove politically valuable to the earl, who was especially keen to avoid any repeat of Kett's rebellion the previous year. Amy also had the benefit of being Sir John Robsart's only legitimate heir, and would therefore inherit his Norfolk manors. She may not have been able to compete with the rich heiresses Robert's brothers John and Ambrose had wed, but she might provide Robert with enough land to establish himself as a wealthy country gentleman. Few could have predicted that Robert's aspirations would one day reach far higher.

The clearest sign that Robert and Amy's marriage would need to address more temporal concerns appears in the marriage contract drawn up by Warwick and Sir John Robsart, a fortnight before the wedding, on 20 May 1550. The details had obviously been pored over by both fathers for some time, each seeking the best deal for his child. For Sir John, the problem also lay with how his wife Elizabeth might receive an income after his death. Reluctant for his entire estate to pass to his daughter and her husband immediately after his death, he managed to ensure that a clause was added to the marriage contract stating that Amy and Robert would only inherit the Robsart estate of the manors of Syderstone, Newton and Great Bircham in north-west Norfolk after both he and his wife were dead. For Warwick, while sympathetic to Sir John's obvious concerns, this was insufficient. He needed to ensure that the young couple would have enough to get by on. In return for a down payment or dowry of £200, it was agreed that Sir John was to pay Robert an annual allowance of £20. To complement this, Warwick added another £50, provided from the rents of some land of his in Leicestershire. Since the couple were unlikely to inherit Amy's family estate in the near future, Warwick also provided them with the lands of the priory of Coxford, close to her parents' estate, in the hope that one day they would be amalgamated.[2]

What about the soon-to-be married couple? There is little evidence of their participation in any of the finer details of the contract, which would have been ironed out between the two fathers. Only a final clause in the contract, coming almost as an afterthought, indicates that there were two other parties in the arrangement; the marriage, both Sir John and Warwick agreed, should only take place 'if the said Robert and Amye

will thereunto condescend and agree'. At this stage, one suspects, they were hardly likely not to.[3]

Through his son's marriage to Amy, it was clear that Warwick intended to establish Robert as the most influential landholder in north-west Norfolk. Possibly he considered that his son might one day be able to supplant the dormant power of the Howard family in the county, whose downfall in the final months of the reign of Henry VIII had left Norfolk without a resident magnate – a dangerous vacuum of power and authority that needed to be filled, as Kett's rebellion had sorely proved.

In the years that followed Robert was introduced gradually into local county administration, first becoming joint Steward and Constable of the castle and manor of Castle Rising in December 1550, together with his new father-in-law. The following year, in autumn 1551, he was appointed an elected knight of the shire and went on to share the Lord Lieutenancy of the county with his father-in-law in 1552. He soon ingratiated himself with the local gentlemen; the preacher John Aylmer later wrote how 'your Lordship's name is in Norfolk of some authority and your person well beloved.'[4] In February 1553, Warwick granted Dudley the manor of Hemsby near Great Yarmouth, 'so his son might be able to keep a good house in Norfolk', and in July he received a grant of Saxlingham Manor near Holt.[5]

As a son of the most important nobleman in the land, Robert Dudley knew that his real future lay at court. It was here that he and Amy spent most of their time, lodging at his parents' home at Ely Place in Holborn. In August 1551 Dudley was made a gentleman of the Privy Chamber, giving him privileged access to the young King Edward. The appointment was also a sign of his father's increasing control of the king's person. Two months later Warwick moved against Somerset, who was arrested suddenly at court and executed the following spring for his role in a putative and somewhat suspect assassination attempt against his rival.

Around the same time Warwick also awarded himself a dukedom, becoming the Duke of Northumberland. It was the highest rank a nobleman could achieve. The significance of Warwick's elevation should not be underestimated. Henry VIII only created two dukedoms during his reign, including one to his illegitimate son Henry Fitzroy, while Elizabeth I never created any dukes: Warwick's elevation was the first outside the royal family since the Wars of the Roses.

As his father's star continued to rise, Dudley's career also prospered. A skilled horseman, he now took a regular part in the royal jousts, tilts and barriers, commonly termed 'triumphs'. In December 1551 he ran six courses at the tilt as part of the Christmas festivities, reappearing on Twelfth Night and once more eleven days later, when his team was defeated by his brothers John and Ambrose, who won by '4 taints'.*

Dudley's activities at court extended beyond mere entertaining. Where there were lucrative positions on offer, he filled them. He was appointed to the office of Master of the Buckhounds in September 1552, a role which entailed organising the king's hunting parties, breeding the royal hounds and ensuring that there was a steady supply of deer in the parks and chases. It also brought Dudley the not insignificant salary of £33 6s 8d per annum.[6] In February 1553, he was given the honorary position of chief carver.

With higher office came the prospect of material reward. At the end of December 1552, Dudley was appointed keeper of Somerset Place, the magnificent newly built palace on the banks of the Thames, the finest renaissance building in London, designed by Warwick's rival the Duke of Somerset before he was executed. For the rest of Edward's reign Dudley and his wife lived in these splendid surroundings, undoubtedly the most sumptuous private residence in the capital. It was also during this period that Elizabeth agreed to exchange her London residence at Durham Place for Somerset Place. Although she never visited while Robert Dudley was living there, the fact that he had been chosen to be the keeper of the princess's official home would bring the pair even closer.

* Broken lances