

# Introduction

*Lisa Hopkins*

IN THE MID-SEVENTEENTH CENTURY Lady Jane Cavendish, daughter of the earl of Newcastle, wrote a poem entitled 'On my honourable Grandmother Elizabeth Countess of Shrewsbury'.<sup>1</sup> It ran as follows:

Madam

You weare the very Magazine of rich  
With spirit such & wisdom which did reach  
All that oppos'd you, for your wealth did teach  
Our Englands law, soe Lawyers durst not preach  
Soe was your golden actions, this is true  
As ever will you live in perfect veiw  
Your beauty great, & you the very life  
And onely patterne of a wise, good wife;  
But this your wisdom, was too short to see  
Of your three sons to tell who great should bee  
Your eldest sonn your riches had for life  
'Caus Henry wench loved more then his wife  
Your second children had, soe you did thinke  
On him your great ambition fast to linke  
Soe William you did make before your Charles to goe  
Yet Charles his actions hath beene soe  
Before your Williams sonn doth goe before  
Thus your great howse is now become the lower  
And I doe hope, the world shall ever see  
The howse of Charles before your Williams bee  
For Charles his William has it thus soe chang'd  
As William Conquerer hee may well bee named  
And it is true his sword hath made him great  
Thus his wise acts will ever him full speak.

In both its accuracies and its inaccuracies, this poem offers a neat summation of what was known and thought about Bess of Hardwick during her own lifetime and in the generation or so after her death. In the first place, the title is incorrect: Bess was not Jane's grandmother but her great-grandmother, since Bess's son Charles was the father of Jane's father William (the 'William Conqueror' of the last few lines of the poem). For Jane, though, Bess looms larger and more immediate than that: she feels close, and she feels important. The reasons for this importance are soon made apparent: Bess was wealthy, had spirit, and knew how to use the law courts. Not until line 7 of the poem do we hear mention of her appearance, so often the first thing one learns about in the case of an early modern woman, and even when it is mentioned, this is no blazon; the poem moves straight on to Bess's safe, solid identity as a wife. That does not last long, though, because we pass on almost immediately to Bess's vast wealth and the question of who should have inherited it, and at this point Jane becomes almost recriminatory as she accuses Bess of lack of discrimination in favouring her middle son William rather than her youngest son Charles, Jane's grandfather.

Jane Cavendish's pen-portrait of her great-grandmother homes in on all the crucial aspects of Bess's image during and immediately after her lifetime. If Bess looms large for Jane, that is not surprising, for she undoubtedly was a formidable personality. This was clear throughout her long life (just how long it was is uncertain: Philip Riden provides reasons for thinking that she was born between 1521 and 1524,<sup>2</sup> but see Alan Bryson's chapter in this volume; however, she was definitely an old lady, especially for the times, when she died in 1608). In 1790 Edmund Lodge castigated her as:

A woman of masculine understanding and conduct, proud, furious, selfish and unfeeling. She was a builder, a buyer and seller of estates, a moneylender, a farmer and a merchant of lead, coals and timber; when disengaged from those employments, she intrigued alternately with Elizabeth and Mary, always to the prejudice and terror of her husband.<sup>3</sup>

In 1813 Jane Austen, who sided with Mary, Queen of Scots, seems to have drawn on Bess for the portrait of Lady Catherine de Bourgh in *Pride and Prejudice*,<sup>4</sup> and in our own century the fantasy writer Susanna Clarke presents her as a potential witch: the story called 'Antickes and frets' in Clarke's *The Ladies of Grace Adieu* has Mary, Queen of Scots, held captive at Tutbury Castle, discovering that Bess's first husband mysteriously died after Bess embroidered him a coat of black and white squares.<sup>5</sup> The most vivid indictment of her comes in the many and bitter complaints made against her by her fourth husband,

George Talbot, sixth earl of Shrewsbury, after the breakdown of their marriage, a process which can probably be traced back to 1568, when Mary, Queen of Scots, was given into the Shrewsburys' custody and stayed for sixteen years, becoming by the end the houseguest from hell. By 1577 Shrewsbury's son was commenting that he had often had to keep peace between the couple; by 1582 there was open war, and in 1583 Bess effectively left him. In 1584 Shrewsbury and some of his men attacked Bess's house at Chatsworth, and at one point he complained to the queen, 'It were no reason my wife and her servants should rule me and make me the wife and her the husband.'<sup>6</sup>

In fact, though, the husband is in many respects exactly what Bess was, in both symbolic and practical terms. Olive Cook notes of Hardwick New Hall that 'Three arms of each of the Greek crosses take the form of immense square towers, at once investing the building with a castle atmosphere,'<sup>7</sup> something that one might expect of a male builder rather than a female one. When her brother got into financial difficulties, 'Bess leased his coal and ore mines', again something one would more readily expect from a sixteenth-century man than a sixteenth-century woman, and one of the things she and Shrewsbury fell out over was who should give orders to the household's servants.<sup>8</sup> Bess bought property independently of Shrewsbury, and though Mary Lovell argues that 'It is clear that what Shrewsbury actually wanted, and believed himself entitled to, was to be rid of Bess, whom he had come to hate, but to keep all the lands and possessions she had brought into the marriage,' Bess herself implicitly rejected his apparent views when she claimed Shrewsbury owed her money,<sup>9</sup> in itself a dramatic and revolutionary statement since not many members of her society would have been capable of thinking that a husband *could* owe money to a wife. She herself could add up better than some of those who served her and seems to have used a sophisticated form of accounting based on cost centres,<sup>10</sup> and she was also actively and purposefully interested in public affairs. James Daybell observes:

With the countess of Shrewsbury ... one detects a very utilitarian attitude towards news. While news reached her in a continuous stream, it was gathered with particular assiduity at key periods, to serve very specific and practical ends. In this way, her activities in acquiring information and in cultivating useful correspondents more closely resemble those of a government official at the heart of an intelligence network than those of a country gentleman distracted by affairs in the capital.

For Daybell, 'The correspondence of the countess of Shrewsbury illustrates women's interest in areas of news traditionally viewed as "male": parliamentary

business, war, armed rebellions and naval preparations.<sup>11</sup> (Alison Wiggins notes that ‘Bess of Hardwick’s 242 existing letters constitute the largest and most wide-ranging correspondence for a non-royal woman from Tudor England.’)<sup>12</sup> If Elizabeth was a female king, Bess was in many ways a female earl.

Indeed a posthumous image of Bess openly figures her as male rather than female: Thomas Rogers’s poem *Leicester’s Ghost* has the dead earl of Leicester (who had been a friend of Bess’s) declare:

First I assaid *Queene Elisabeth* to wedd,  
Whome diuers princes courted but in vaine,  
When in this course vnluckely I sped,  
I sought the *Scotts Queens* marriage to obtayne,  
But when I reapt noe profit of my payne,  
I sought to match *Denbigh* my tender child  
To *Dame Arbella*, but I was beguild.

Euen as *Octavius* with *Mark Anthonie*  
And *Lepidus* the *Roman Empire* shard,  
That of the World then held the *Souueraigntie*,  
Soe I a newe *Triumvirate* prepard,  
If *Death* a while yonge *Denbies* life had spard,  
The Grandame, Vncle, and the Father in lawe,  
Might thus haue brought all England vnder awe.<sup>13</sup>

‘Dame Arbella’ is Bess’s granddaughter, Arbella Stuart, so the ‘Uncle’ is Gilbert Talbot, and the ‘Grandame’ Bess herself, who is thus imagined as either Lepidus, Octavius or Mark Antony, meeting after the assassination of Caesar to seize power for themselves and decide which of their opponents should die. Bess also did business as a man might, particularly after the death of her third husband Sir William St Loe. Mary Lovell, who has done much to shed light on the hitherto rather shadowy figure of St Loe, comments that ‘In the normal course of events a man left everything to the nearest male relative, but Sir William left everything he owned to Bess, and, furthermore, following her death, “to her heirs forever”.<sup>14</sup> Though the will was later contested, the attempt to overturn it was unsuccessful. The affair also underlined the clear fact that one of Bess’s most advantageous roles was as a widow, and indeed the trouble in her fourth marriage began because in many ways she continued to act as if she were still a widow.

Jane Cavendish is particularly astute to home in on Bess’s use of the law. She first went to court in her teens to secure her dower from her first marriage

to Robert Barlow (sometimes spelled Barley),<sup>15</sup> and she did so again after the death of William Cavendish even though, as Mary Lovell notes:

Few non-royal women of her era – if any – are known to have fought Parliament. And for a recent widow to be in contact with men outside her family for any reason, let alone on business matters, would have been considered unfeminine and immodest. Bess was aware of it, but did not allow it to hinder her decision to keep her husband's estates intact.<sup>16</sup>

Throughout her long career Bess demonstrated repeatedly that she knew how to use the legal system and understood how important it was to be able to do so.

Above all, Jane is right to stress Bess's status as a wife. A verse attributed to Horace Walpole runs,

Four times the nuptial bed she warm'd,  
And ev'ry time so well perform'd,  
That when death spoiled each husband's billing,  
He left the widow every shilling.<sup>17</sup>

It was her career of marriage that made her 'the very magazine of rich', not least after the death of her third husband, Sir William St Loe. David Durant estimates her income by 1600 as £20,000 per annum,<sup>18</sup> an enormous sum by contemporary standards, and in addition her four marriages took her steadily up the social scale. Her first marriage, to Robert Barlow, ended with the death of her husband on 24 December 1544; it is notable principally for the fact that, as Terry Kilburn has shown, the young bridegroom's status as a ward made him quite powerless in the matter of his own marriage (and thus helps us to understand that Bess's 'bad son' Henry may have felt similarly manipulated when Bess unceremoniously married him off to Shrewsbury's daughter Grace, in whom he appears to have had no interest whatsoever).<sup>19</sup> In 1547 she married again. This time her husband was the much older Sir William Cavendish, who was the father of all eight of Bess's children, and Alison Wiggins's essay here on the account book Bess used during her marriage to him suggests a close and companionate relationship. Cavendish died in 1557, and contrary to Walpole's verse his death left Bess in a very precarious position financially, because he had been accused of embezzling funds from his government employment. Her third husband was Sir William St Loe, whom she married in 1559 and who died in 1565. He was probably closer in age to Bess and seems to have been in love with her: Alison Wiggins notes that he sent her presents including 'lemons, olives, cucumbers, frankincense, virginal wire, canvas and the latest fashion in ladies' headwear, a bongrace', and he

is the only one of her correspondents to address her as 'thou'.<sup>20</sup> Sir William had been a servant of the young Princess Elizabeth and had kept silent when interrogated by supporters of Queen Mary about her irksome half-sister; this secured him the lasting favour of Elizabeth when she came to the throne in ways which meant that he may well have been Bess's most useful husband. As Lady St Loe, Bess waited on the queen,<sup>21</sup> and Philip Riden argues that:

Bess made a great leap in social status in 1547 when, as the daughter of a minor Derbyshire squire and the widow of the son of another, she attracted the attention of a rising civil servant. Twelve years later ... she took another step up by marrying into a long-established Somerset landowning family with good connections at court.<sup>22</sup>

However, St Loe died suddenly in 1565 (Mary Lovell suggests that he was poisoned by his brother Edward), leaving Bess a widow for the third time. Finally in 1567 she married George Talbot, earl of Shrewsbury, a marriage which nominally endured until his death in 1590 but in practice came to an end some years before that. The marriage promised well, and a letter written to Bess by her half-sister Elizabeth Wingfield on 21 October 1567 reports the queen as saying, 'I haue bene glade to se me lady sayntloa but now more dyssirous to se my lady shrewsbury I hope sayd she my lady hath knowne my good opennon of her and thus much I assure there ys no lady y[n] thys land that I beter loue and lyke'.<sup>23</sup> However, the relationship ultimately broke down in bitter acrimony, and after this final foray into matrimony Bess remained a widow until her death in 1608.

She also remained a countess, a title which seems to have been of considerable importance to her. In Lording Barry's *Ram Alley*, William Smallthanks reproaches Taffata, 'to be a Countesse, / Thou wouldst marry a hedgehog',<sup>24</sup> and in George Chapman's *May-Day*, Lodovico's idea of a good *parti* is 'a young gallant in prime of his choicenesse; one that for birth, person and good parts might meritoriously marry a Countesse'.<sup>25</sup> The title of countess was clearly one that was highly valued in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England: Lady Anne Clifford achieved the state of countess for both her daughters and was careful to stress this by giving both her sons-in-law their full titles in her diaries, noting of her elder daughter's marriage, 'This John Lord Tufton came to bee earle of Thanett about two yeares and two monthes and some fowrtene daies after his marriage with my daughter, by the death of his father Nicholas, Earle of Thanett', and of her younger's, 'in 1647, this youngest daughter of myne was married to James Compton Earl of Northampton'.<sup>26</sup> Bess achieved

it with her fourth marriage, and in fact when she married George Talbot, sixth earl of Shrewsbury in 1567 she became not just a countess but the premier countess in England, since Shrewsbury was the premier earl, by virtue of the fact that the earldom of Shrewsbury is the oldest surviving independent creation, dating back to 1442 (that of Chester, which predates it, being granted always in conjunction with the title of prince of Wales, and that of Arundel being held by the dukes of Norfolk).<sup>27</sup> In the same year that Bess married Shrewsbury, the third wife of the duke of Norfolk died and he did not take another, though rumours that he might marry Mary, Queen of Scots, were repeatedly commented on in Bess's correspondence. This left only one surviving duchess in England, the duchess of Suffolk, who lived until 1580; however, she was a friend of Bess's so her rank is unlikely to have irked, and she had in any case sunk in prestige since her second marriage to a man much lower in rank. Since England's only surviving marquess, William Paulet, first marquess of Winchester, was a widower, this left Bess, along with Helena Snakenborg, dowager marchioness of Northampton, as effectively second only to the queen in the ranks of the female nobility of England (Lady Northampton took the role of chief female mourner at the funeral of Elizabeth after Bess's granddaughter Arbella refused it).

Moreover, it was a concomitant of the Shrewsbury marriage that Bess's daughter eventually succeeded her in the title, for as part of the alliance Mary Cavendish, Bess's daughter by her second husband, married Gilbert Talbot, Shrewsbury's second son. One of the primary tasks of a countess was to secure the succession to the earldom, and Bess would in fact have thought that she had done that when the death of his elder brother in 1582 left Gilbert as the heir; she was not to know that neither this marriage nor that of her son Henry to Shrewsbury's daughter Grace would produce surviving male offspring, because 'Henry wenchens loved more then his wife'.

Countess was also the title the new Lady Shrewsbury was specifically concerned to secure for her granddaughter Arbella Stuart, who lived with Bess after the death of her mother, Bess's middle daughter Elizabeth Cavendish, and whose descent from Henry VII (through his elder daughter Margaret, whose daughter Margaret, countess of Lennox, was Arbella's other grandmother) made her a potential heiress to the throne after the death of Elizabeth. Although Philip II of Spain suggested that Arbella should marry the duke of Parma's son and Henri IV of France declared that he was willing to marry her himself if she was named heiress presumptive,<sup>28</sup> all the efforts made by Bess were aimed solely at achieving the estate of countess for her granddaughter. When

Arbella was still only an infant, her other grandmother Margaret Lennox had tried to secure the earldom of Lennox for her after the death of her father, Margaret's son, but 'the Scottish Regent disagreed, responding that the Lennox estates had descended directly to Lord Darnley's son James [Darnley being the brother of Arbella's father], and as a consequence were now the property of the Crown of Scotland'. The battle seemed to have been definitively lost when, 'In May 1578, a few weeks after the funeral of the Dowager Countess, the Lennox title was formally conferred on a brother of the 4th Earl of Lennox, the ageing and childless Bishop of Caithness', but Bess nevertheless commissioned a miniature of Arbella which shows her 'wearing a gold chain and shield containing the motto of the old Countess of Lennox – "I endure in order to succeed"' and which describes her as 'Arbella, Countess of Lennox'.<sup>29</sup> Arbella herself referred to her Lennox inheritance as 'an earldom',<sup>30</sup> but countess, it seemed, was the title that mattered to Bess.

The titles of both earl and countess were historically important and also carried practical significance. Sarah Gristwood notes, 'The nobility still attracted to themselves not only troops of lesser men (an earl of Shrewsbury earlier in the century had been able to raise four and a half thousand of his own men), but a satellite horde of client gentry. Many a knight was glad to wear an earl's livery.'<sup>31</sup> If earls were associated with military service, though, countesses had different spheres of influence. Some – most notably Mary Sidney, countess of Pembroke, but also her daughter-in-law Susan Vere, countess of Montgomery – were literary patrons. Some were famous for the way in which they maintained great estates – the countess of Pembroke again, at Wilton, and Barbara Gamage, countess of Leicester, at Penshurst, as *fêted* in Jonson's poem 'To Penshurst'. In Bess's case, her sphere of interest was houses, and she used them to stress her status. In one of the chambers at Hardwick New Hall 'two elaborate fireplaces . . . celebrate the two daughters who achieved places amongst the peerage, Mary, Countess of Shrewsbury, and Elizabeth, Countess of Lennox. It is clear that Bess put enormous value on the acquisition of a coronet and the social power that goes with it'. Similarly in the heraldic plasterwork of the 'Shipp bed chamber', 'precedence on the top line is given to the three members of the family who achieved countesses' coronets, Bess herself, represented by the Hardwick arms alone, and Mary and Elizabeth represented by their married arms', even though, as Gillian White points out, neither of these women was heiress of Hardwick;<sup>32</sup> indeed Elizabeth had been dead since 1582, but Bess had worked hard for her title – she had rather riskily connived at Elizabeth becoming countess of Lennox by throwing her

into the company of the young earl and his manipulative mother – and clearly did not intend it to be forgotten.

The status of countess also brought with it privileges both tangible and intangible. Sumptuary laws allowed duchesses, marchionesses and countesses to wear cloth of gold, tissue, and sable fur, and there were also special regulations for gentlewomen attendant upon duchesses, marchionesses and countesses. While it would obviously be absurd to say that Bess could not have achieved what she did without the rank of countess – for one thing, she would never have risen to *be* a countess in the first place if she had been wholly dependent on title – the attainment of the position was nevertheless of service to her, and she clung to its trappings even in death. Mark Girouard notes that the 1587 directions for the funeral of an earl require the coffin to be shrouded in black velvet;<sup>33</sup> Bess's coffin was draped in black velvet and she lay in state for over two months.<sup>34</sup> The effigy on her tomb has a coronet, as too do her initials, 'ES' for Elizabeth Shrewsbury, proudly displayed above Hardwick. (Another result of Bess's many marriages was many names: she went from Elizabeth Hardwick to Elizabeth Barlow to Elizabeth Cavendish to Elizabeth St Loe to Elizabeth Talbot, countess of Shrewsbury, though the essays in this collection refer to her most often as Bess of Hardwick or simply Bess.)

A countess could also expect to be painted, not least in recognition of her dynastic importance. Barbara Gamage, countess of Leicester, stands among her six children; her aunt by marriage Lettice Knollys, countess first of Essex and then of Leicester, flaunts her family resemblance to Elizabeth I. Bess of Hardwick is no exception, and in her case what is prominent in pictures painted after her marriage to Shrewsbury is the (expensive) black cloth and the way it acts as backdrop for either a long and magnificent string of pearls or a gold chain which accentuates the countess's coronet on her head. This is a marked change from the iconography of her earlier portraiture, where the jewellery is far less noteworthy. Other elements of the iconography connected with Bess, in the shape of the interior decoration of Hardwick New Hall, also stressed her rank. Gillian White points out:

Shrewsbury seems to have been banished from Bess's sense of identity except for one vital detail: Bess's Hardwick arms are topped by a countess's coronet. In strict terms this makes a nonsense of the rules of heraldry since it is not the Hardwick name which makes Bess a countess and she is not a peeress in her own right, but as a message to the world it is clear and unambiguous. Bess is proud to be a Hardwick and proud to be a countess. Her choice of arms, however, also carries a third message. By choosing to emphasise her paternal arms, Bess makes no mention of her children and those who will succeed her.<sup>35</sup>

It is sometimes suggested that Hardwick New Hall might have been conceived as a palace for Bess's granddaughter Arbella and a showcasing of her royal pretensions, but in Arbella's own room, though the arms of Talbot and Hardwick are displayed under one coronet and those of her parents under another, there is no symbol personal to Arbella herself.<sup>36</sup> As Sara French points out in her chapter in this volume, though, there are Cavendish stags on prominent display throughout the house, and these do remind the viewer of Bess's posterity.

Of Bess's four marriages, only the second, to Sir William Cavendish, produced children, eight in total, though only six survived. Her eldest daughter Frances, born in 1548, married Sir Henry Pierrepont; their descendants became dukes of Kingston-upon-Hull. Frances was probably named after Bess's friend and patron Lady Frances Grey, mother of the Ladies Jane, Catherine and Mary Grey, in whose household Bess had served (she kept a picture of Lady Jane in her bedroom throughout her life, and Arbella noted in passing that they also had samples of Lady Jane's handwriting at Hardwick New Hall, presumably in the form of letters). Bess's second child, Temperance, lived only a year; Mary Lovell suggests that her name might have been inspired by Edward VI's nickname for his sister Elizabeth,<sup>37</sup> but Susan Frye points out that Temperance was Bess's favourite virtue, and Alison Wiggins observes the fittingness of the name to Bess's financial circumstances at the time. Her third child, Henry (born in 1550), probably named after Frances Grey's husband, lived to become 'my bad son Henry', while the fourth, William (born in 1552), was Bess's favourite child, who inherited Hardwick and ultimately Chatsworth and became earl of Devonshire. The next, Charles (born 1553), Jane Cavendish's grandfather, built Bolsover Little Castle after buying the lease from his brother-in-law (and best friend) Gilbert Talbot and laid the foundations for his son William to become earl and later duke of Newcastle. Elizabeth, who followed in 1555, was the mother of Lady Arbella Stuart. The last surviving child, Mary, born in 1556, married Shrewsbury's son Gilbert Talbot and eventually succeeded her mother as countess of Shrewsbury. Another daughter, Lucrece, Bess's last child, did not survive, but her name, like that of Temperance, is an interesting indication of the interest in symbols and iconography which was increasingly emerging in Bess's needlework projects. Bess did what she could to found fortunes for all these children. For her daughters she sought titles; to her sons she allotted houses.

Jane's poem uses the idea of the house metaphorically, to refer to the founding of a family rather than the construction of an edifice, but building

was of course the final, hugely important part of Bess's public persona. She always knew the value of land. David Durant notes of the Lennox earldom, 'the title became a prize to be fought for by Bess on her daughter's behalf, not for the sake of the title itself but for the lands that went with it' and that 'By 1584 she was said to have bought lands for William at a cost of £15,900, whilst Charles was apportioned only £8,800-worth: a total of £24,700 invested in land over a period of twelve years, bringing in an income of £1500.'<sup>38</sup> Above all, though, she wanted land for building. Sarah Gristwood notes that Bess had supposedly 'been told in a prophecy that she would never die while she continued her life's great work of building', which was proved true when in the winter before her death the mortar froze at her final project of Oldcotes.<sup>39</sup> She was responsible for reshaping the sixteenth-century version of Chatsworth (unrecognisable now after substantial remodelling in the seventeenth century but still commemorated in a painting in the house), and was so closely associated with it that Sir William St Loe addressed her as 'my sweet Chatsworth'. She rebuilt Hardwick Old Hall, where she had been born, and a newer house at Oldcotes. Above all, she built Hardwick New Hall, the great surviving jewel of the late Elizabethan period.

Jane is also right to identify acrimony as a part of Bess's legacy. Towards the end of her life, her relationship with her granddaughter Arbella Stuart broke down completely; in her instructions to her servant John Doddridge on making contact with the earl of Hertford, whose grandson she hoped to marry, Arbella wrote bitterly that 'my Grandmother [will] be the first shall advertise and complaine to the Queene'.<sup>40</sup> Bess also quarrelled so badly with her eldest son Henry Cavendish that he became for her simply 'my bad son Henry'. Even before that, life in the Shrewsbury household was by no means trouble-free. As long ago as 1937 it was suggested that the playwright Christopher Marlowe was the person meant in Bess's letter to Lord Burghley on 21 September 1592 describing how:

On Morley who hath attended on Arbell & red to hyr for the space of thre yere & a half shoed to be much discontented since my retorn into ye cuntry, in saying he had lyued in hope, to haue som annuitie graunted him by Arbell out of hyr land during hys lyfe, or some lease of grounds to ye value of forty pound a yere, alledging yat he was so much damnified by leuing of ye vniuersitie. & now saw yat if she were wyllinge yet not of abylytie to make him any such assurance. I vnderstanding by dyuers yat Morley was so much discontented, & withall of late hauing some cause to be dobtfull of his forwardnes in religion (though I can not charge him with papistry) toke occasion to parte with him after he was gone from my howse and all hys stuff caried from hence, the next

day he returned ageyn, very importunate to serue, without standinge vppon any recompence, which made me more suspicious & ye wyllinger to parte with hym.<sup>41</sup>

Various objections have been made to the proposed identification on the grounds that Christopher Marlowe is known to have been elsewhere for some of the relevant period, but Sarah Gristwood has pointed out that so too were some known members of Bess's household: she observes, 'There are, in fact, no certain records of Marlowe being in the south when Bess and her family *weren't* in town,' though she concludes that 'The identification is a possibility; no more than that,'<sup>42</sup> as too does Charles Nicholl: 'On internal evidence it is possible – not convincingly probable, but possible – that Arbella Stuart's tutor, who attended on her and read to her, and whose "stuff" was carted away in September 1592, was Christopher Marlowe.'<sup>43</sup> Much attention has been paid to what the possible implications of this might be from the point of view of those interested in Marlowe, but rather less from the point of view of those interested in Bess. What it shows us, though, is that Bess was spied on, and knew it. Shrewsbury, refusing to employ some of the former servants of Bess's late daughter Elizabeth Lennox, complained that 'I have too many spies in my house already,'<sup>44</sup> and one of Arbella's letters to her uncle Gilbert Talbot informs him that 'My olde good spy mr. James Mourray desireth his service may be remembred to your Lordship and my Aunt'.<sup>45</sup> There were spies in the household for two reasons: because Arbella had a potential claim to the throne, and because Shrewsbury was for many years the custodian of the queen's cousin, rival and political prisoner Mary, Queen of Scots, who grew to hate Bess and did whatever she could to foment trouble in the Shrewsbury marriage. Bess and her family were under constant observation, and knew that they were, and there were also times when Bess's magnificent houses functioned as prisons as much as homes, with Mary, Queen of Scots, kept under close guard in Sheffield, Chatsworth and Tutbury, and Arbella physically prevented from leaving Hardwick.

Spies were not the only dangers and inconveniences against which Bess had to contend. Indeed the very title of countess was potentially troubling. *The Insatiate Countess*, a play often attributed to John Marston but in which various playwrights seem in fact to have been involved, hints at a sly pun on 'count'/'cunt', echoing the logic of Raleigh's 'Guiana is a Countrey that hath yet her Maydenhead'<sup>46</sup> and of Hamlet's 'Did you think I meant country matters?'.<sup>47</sup> The opening lines of the play are 'What should we do in this Countess's dark hole? ... what should we unruly members make here?'.<sup>48</sup> The lurking potential pun might well lend an edge to the fact that arguably

Bess's greatest achievement, the construction of Hardwick Hall, both celebrates and sanitises the feminine. Quite apart from the prominence of Bess's initials, both the long gallery and the flat roof were expressly designed for the convenience of women, who could take exercise without leaving the house. There is also, though, a conspicuous emphasis on the upper bodily stratum: the windows grow larger on each successive storey, forcing the eye upwards, almost as if we were literally being forced to dwell on higher matters in the hope that we might do so metaphorically too. No woman could be too careful of her reputation, and Bess was no exception. In her case, she might have been potentially tainted by association by the fact that her sister Alice was unfaithful to her husband; it was in fact the marital breakdown precipitated by this which eventually led to the sale of Chatsworth to Bess and her second husband Sir William Cavendish. In addition, Henry Jackson, a former tutor of her sons, slandered Bess in some way, perhaps sexually; later, Shrewsbury alleged that when he married her, her name was a 'byword'.<sup>49</sup> Bess herself probably sexually slandered Mary, Queen of Scots, who in turn alleged that Bess had sexually slandered Elizabeth, though when Bess's fourth marriage broke down the bishop of Coventry and Lichfield reminded Shrewsbury that she had never been suspected of adultery.<sup>50</sup>

Bess's main defence of her own image lay in iconography. It is suggestive that Bess called her youngest daughter Lucrece, after the famously chaste Roman heroine Lucrecia, and notable too that 'there is a distinct facial resemblance in the faces of Zenobia and Penelope to a portrait of Bess made soon after she became Countess of Shrewsbury'.<sup>51</sup> Penelope would become particularly useful in the context of the Shrewsbury marriage in that she ruled a household and managed for twenty years without a husband. Alison Wiggins, noting that in all her letters to Shrewsbury 'Bess presented herself through the trope of the ideal Renaissance wife: patient, obedient, dutiful and unfailingly loyal to her husband,' cites in this context Bess's 'precise and sustained identification' with Penelope. The association with Penelope could be a double-edged sword, though: in 1584 Shrewsbury turned the mythological tables on his irksome wife by declaring, 'Your letter ... carrying so faire and vnaccustomed shewe of dutifulness & humilyte of spirit commeth now so late and so out of season that makes me suspect it to be a Sirens songe set for some other purpose then it pretendeth'.<sup>52</sup>

There are some things Jane Cavendish does not understand about her great-grandmother. At the emotional heart of Jane's poem lies continuing bitterness about who got what of Bess's Derbyshire estates, but Bess was a woman of much wider connections and interests than just Derbyshire ones. Her second and third husbands both spent time in Ireland; her houseguest

Mary had lived in France and Scotland; and her 'bad son' Henry travelled to Constantinople. Susan Frye evocatively suggests in her chapter here that 'in the staged space of her hanging ... the interior of Elizabethan Chatsworth overlapped the borders of ancient Syria, Arabia, and Egypt', and Durant notes: 'The 1601 inventory of Hardwick ... shows a number of Turkish carpets which may have been brought back by Henry and his party, and two carpets still in the Long Gallery today date from the sixteenth century: one, a Persian woven for Shah Abbas, was commonly placed beside his throne and on it a black cheetah'.<sup>53</sup> Bess is often criticised for having built no library at Hardwick, but nevertheless she was a woman of the Renaissance, and she knew that she was. As Sara Jayne Steen observes, (and as Susan Frye discusses here) one of the Hardwick panels depicted Faith with Mahomet at her feet,<sup>54</sup> showing a far from parochial understanding of the world. Jerry Brotton notes:

By 1601 ... Bess ... had amassed a collection of oriental embroidery, tapestry and needlework of a quality and size to rival those of Leicester and Lumley ... It included forty-six 'Turkey carpets', as well as a remarkable set of three large embroidered wall hangings depicting personifications of the cardinal virtues and their opposites, dating from the 1580s. The first showed Hope triumphing over Judas, the second Temperance prevailing over Sardanapalus (to whom [John de] Cardenas compared al-Mansur), while the final hanging shows Faith subduing her contrary, the 'unfaithful' Mahomet.

Brotton observes that Bess 'wanted to display her wealth by acquiring expensive and elaborately crafted Turkish rugs and carpets, but she also wanted to show off her Christian piety'.<sup>55</sup>

Bess's most exotic connection was of course Mary, Queen of Scots, who had been queen of France as well as of Scotland, and who was Shrewsbury's prisoner from 1569 to 1584, with only short breaks in between. Relations between Mary and Bess were initially friendly, helped by a shared interest in needlework, but soured dramatically, with Bess accusing Mary of an affair with Shrewsbury and Mary accusing Bess of making malicious remarks about the queen (a serious charge). Mary seems to have been particularly affronted by Bess's plans for Arbella. Charles Stuart, earl of Lennox, Elizabeth Cavendish's husband, was the brother of Mary's second husband Darnley, so that Bess's daughter shared a mother-in-law with the Scots queen, and the little Arbella posed an even greater threat to the previously unique status of Mary and her son, since the royal blood of England flowed in her veins too. Although fond of the child, Mary was always anxious to insist on her own royal status and presumably had no wish for a rival, and in some ways Arbella was to her

what she herself was to Elizabeth – a younger, still marriageable alternative. Perhaps it was at least partly as a result of this that the relationship between Bess and Mary ended in hatred and recrimination. Nevertheless, the long years of Mary's captivity connected Bess to the wider world in multiple ways and made Chatsworth, Sheffield Castle and other Shrewsbury properties (though never Hardwick New Hall because building did not commence until after Mary's death) political centres and potentially quasi-courts as well as family homes. Bess was not just Jane Cavendish's great-grandmother and the founder of the Cavendish dynasty; she was also a political figure and a pioneer of female self-fashioning.

The essays in this collection illuminate those aspects of Bess's personality and achievements of which Jane was aware, and also those which she omitted. Alan Bryson's account of Bess's life reveals both some ways in which she is normative for Tudor aristocratic women and others in which she was exceptional. Alison Wiggins describes her essay as 'an exercise in pragmaphilology' and traces Bess's importance as 'matriarchivist'; she examines what account books can tell us, while Imogen Marcus sheds light on Bess's character through analysis of her letters, illuminating broader aspects of female literacy in the process, and Felicity Maxwell looks at the loyalties of Bess's and Shrewsbury's servants. Jessica Malay, Sara French and Susan Frye all consider various aspects of Bess's crowning achievement, Hardwick New Hall, and finally Sara Jayne Steen writes about Arbella, the granddaughter around whom so many of Bess's hopes revolved. Collectively, these essays reveal Bess as both extraordinary in her own right and as central to the founding of an extraordinary family.

### Notes

- 1 Jane Cavendish, 'On my honourable Grandmother Elizabeth Countess of Shrewsbury', in *Early Modern Women's Manuscript Poetry*, edited by Jill Seal Millman and Gillian Wright (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), p. 92.
- 2 Mary Lovell argues that Bess probably moved into Hardwick on 4 October 1597 because that was her seventieth birthday, giving a birthdate of 1527 (*Bess of Hardwick: First Lady of Chatsworth* (London: Abacus, 2006), p. 427). However, see Philip Riden, 'Bess of Hardwick and the St Loe inheritance', in *Essays in Derbyshire History Presented to Gladwyn Turbutt*, edited by Philip Riden and David G. Edwards (Chesterfield: Derbyshire Record Society, 2006), pp. 80–106, at p. 97, n. 3.
- 3 Edmund Lodge, *Illustrations of British History* (1790), cited in Mark Girouard, *Hardwick Hall* (London: National Trust, 1989), p. 1.
- 4 See Lisa Hopkins, 'Jane Austen and Bess of Hardwick', *Notes and Queries*, 249 (June 2004), p. 134.

- 5 Susanna Clarke, *The Ladies of Grace Adieu* (London: Bloomsbury, 2006). As I write there is also news of a forthcoming film about Mary, Queen of Scots, in which Gemma Chan will play Bess, and Kevin Fegan's play *Bess: the Commoner Queen* is about to open in Derby.
- 6 Sarah Gristwood, *Arbella: England's Lost Queen* (London: Bantam, 2003), p. 63.
- 7 Olive Cook, *The English Country House* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1974), p. 85.
- 8 Lovell, *Bess of Hardwick*, pp. 231 and 271.
- 9 Lovell, *Bess of Hardwick*, pp. 304, 308 and 332.
- 10 Lovell, *Bess of Hardwick*, pp. 391 and 371.
- 11 James Daybell, "Suche newes as on the Quenes hye wayes we have mett": the news and intelligence networks of Elizabeth Talbot, countess of Shrewsbury (c. 1527–1608)', in *Women and Politics in Early Modern England, 1450–1700*, edited by James Daybell (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), pp. 114–31, at pp. 122 and 127.
- 12 Alison Wiggins, *Bess of Hardwick's Letters: Language, Materiality and Early Modern Epistolary Culture* (London: Routledge, 2017), p. 2.
- 13 Thomas Rogers, *Leicester's Ghost*, edited by Franklin B. Williams, Jr (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), p. 45.
- 14 Lovell, *Bess of Hardwick*, p. 168.
- 15 Lovell, *Bess of Hardwick*, pp. 26–7.
- 16 Lovell, *Bess of Hardwick*, p. 110.
- 17 Cited in Lovell, *Bess of Hardwick*, p. xiv.
- 18 David N. Durant, *Bess of Hardwick: Portrait of an Elizabethan Dynast* (London and Chester Springs: Peter Owen, 1977), p. 182.
- 19 Terry Kilburn, "The wardship and marriage of Robert Barley, first husband of "Bess of Hardwick"", *Derbyshire Archaeological Journal*, 134 (2014); addendum 136 (2016).
- 20 Wiggins, *Bess of Hardwick's Letters: Language, Materiality*, p. 15.
- 21 Lovell, *Bess of Hardwick*, pp. 132–3 and 148–9.
- 22 Riden, 'Bess of Hardwick and the St Loe inheritance', p. 105.
- 23 Elizabeth Wingfield to Bess of Hardwick, 21 October [1567], online at [www.bessofhardwick.org/letter.jsp?letter=96](http://www.bessofhardwick.org/letter.jsp?letter=96) (accessed 12 June 2018).
- 24 Lording Barry, *Ram-Alley* (London: G. Eld for Robert Wilson, 1611), sig. F4r.
- 25 George Chapman, *May-Day* (London: William Stansby for George Browne, 1611), sig. C2r.
- 26 D. J. H. Clifford, ed., *The Diaries of Lady Anne Clifford* (Stroud: Alan Sutton, 1990), pp. 88 and 96. Martin Holmes notes that Lady Anne would not marry her younger daughter to Pembroke's younger son and that her Great Picture shows both her mother's two sisters and her father's two sisters, all four of them countesses (Martin Holmes, *Proud Northern Lady* (Chichester: Phillimore & Co., 1975), pp. 132–3).
- 27 The earldom of Arundel was briefly separated from the dukedom of Norfolk after the execution of the fourth duke for intriguing with Mary, Queen of Scots.

- Bess's granddaughter Alatheia Talbot, daughter of Bess's youngest daughter Mary, married Norfolk's grandson and became the countess of Arundel.
- 28 Lovell, *Bess of Hardwick*, pp. 352 and 405.
  - 29 Lovell, *Bess of Hardwick*, pp. 260, 276 and 278.
  - 30 Gristwood, *Arbella*, p. 210.
  - 31 Gristwood, *Arbella*, p. 47.
  - 32 Gillian White, "that which is needful and necessary": the nature and purpose of the original furnishings and decoration of Hardwick Hall, Derbyshire', unpublished PhD thesis, University of Warwick, 2005, pp. 195 and 196.
  - 33 Mark Girouard, *Life in the English Country House* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980), p. 90.
  - 34 Lovell, *Bess of Hardwick*, p. 471.
  - 35 White, "that which is needful and necessary", pp. 188–9.
  - 36 White, "that which is needful and necessary", p. 194.
  - 37 Lovell, *Bess of Hardwick*, p. 64.
  - 38 Durant, *Bess of Hardwick*, pp. 89 and 113.
  - 39 Gristwood, *Arbella*, p. 313.
  - 40 Sara Jayne Steen (ed.), *The Letters of Lady Arbella Stuart* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 120.
  - 41 Bess of Hardwick to Lord Burghley, 21 September 1592, online at [www.bessofhardwick.org/letter.jsp?letter=163](http://www.bessofhardwick.org/letter.jsp?letter=163) (accessed 12 June 2018).
  - 42 Gristwood, *Arbella*, pp. 459 and 461.
  - 43 Charles Nicholl, *The Reckoning: The Murder of Christopher Marlowe* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1992), p. 341.
  - 44 Lovell, *Bess of Hardwick*, p. 299.
  - 45 Steen, *Letters*, pp. 208–9.
  - 46 Walter Raleigh, *The Discoverie of the Large, Rich and Bewtiful Empyre of Guiana*, edited by Neil L. Whitehead (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), p. 196.
  - 47 William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, edited by Harold Jenkins (London: Methuen, 1982), III.ii.115.
  - 48 William Barksted and Lewis Machin, *The Insatiate Countess*, in *Four Jacobean Sex Tragedies*, edited by Martin Wiggins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), I.i.1–4.
  - 49 See Lovell, *Bess of Hardwick*, pp. 67 and 197–8.
  - 50 Lovell, *Bess of Hardwick*, pp. 303, 314 and 362.
  - 51 Lovell, *Bess of Hardwick*, p. 221.
  - 52 Wiggins, *Bess of Hardwick's Letters: Language, Materiality*, pp. 74 and 77.
  - 53 Durant, *Bess of Hardwick*, p. 154.
  - 54 Steen, *Letters*, p. 26.
  - 55 Jerry Brotton, *This Orient Isle* [2016] (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2017), pp. 211 and 212.