

Article

Divided Loyalties: Negotiating Marital Separation in the Cavendish-Talbot Family c.1575–90

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Abstract: Bringing together two areas of scholarship on family history—separation and blended families—this article adds a new perspective to our understanding of how kin networks in early modern England were maintained, and on the factors that influenced the ongoing processes of negotiating them. The extensive correspondence of Bess of Hardwick and her children and step-children enables an investigation into what happened when a couple at the centre of a blended family network separated. Despite their unique political circumstances, the Cavendish-Talbot family offer a useful case study to understand some of the factors shaping the lives of separated wives in early modern England. For elite families the success of the house and dynasty could be jeopardized by the breakdown of a marriage, and never more so than if the family was a blended one. While Bess's relationships with and support for her children caused problems with her husband, their invaluable support indicates further strategies that were available to separated wives. Bess's children advocated for her at court, supported her in legal suits and actively negotiated between their parents. The Cavendish-Talbot family relationships were complex and loyalties did not necessarily follow expected patterns. However, in their complexity, and through the large number of letters surviving between the family, they offer a unique opportunity to consider the role of family members for separated wives.

Keywords: family; marriage; parenting; gender; patriarchy; correspondence; networks



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1. Introduction

Conduct literature of the sixteenth century often advised against remarriage, largely because of the detrimental effect it might have on any children (Collins 1997). However, many families forged multiple connections through marriage to solidify dynastic links and political alliances. Bess of Hardwick married four times and ended her life a widow and one of the wealthiest women in England. After she married her fourth husband George Talbot, sixth earl of Shrewsbury, in c.1567 they shortly arranged the marriage of George's second son Gilbert to Bess's youngest daughter Mary, and of Bess's eldest son Henry to George's youngest daughter Grace. When Bess and George's marriage began to deteriorate in the late 1570s this placed pressure on the complex ties in their blended family network. Bess and George brought their responsibilities and each other's failings as parents into the discussion of their marital problems, and their children became personally involved in their parents' arguments and experience of separation. Many of the legal disputes resulting from the separation centred around the rights of the children.

Separation did not just happen in nuclear families, it could further complicate already large, hierarchical blended family networks. Bringing together two areas of scholarship on family history—separation and blended families—this article adds a new perspective to our understanding of how kin networks in early modern England were maintained, and on the factors that influenced the ongoing processes of negotiating them. It also offers a new perspective on Bess's family by analysing their letters for evidence of the complexity of family life in sixteenth century England. It makes a significant contribution to understanding the experience of separated women and their children, and how they

operated in wider familial networks. It also reveals more about the priorities of elite families as they sought to continue political alliances and the success of their dynasties despite fundamental challenges to the marital partnerships that had been chosen to solidify them.

Separated wives were a challenge to the patriarchal standards of sixteenth-century England. Bess used the language of patriarchy to support her own claims, but also had these ideas used against her. She argued that George had absconded from his responsibilities to her as her husband, but he argued that she prioritised her own and her children's economic success over his own, including through co-opting his eldest son and heir to her cause. The flexibility of patriarchal ideology might have contributed to its success but the conflicting loyalties of blended families and episodes of marital crisis also reveal its contradictions. Relationships between step-parents and stepchildren were less rigidly defined in terms of their obligations and care than biological parents and children, thus were often decided by individual personalities and situations. Changing loyalties could shape moments of crisis in a family and the longer-term relationships between kin.

2. Historical and Historiographical Context

Separated wives were a group with a singular experience: women who actively sought to break free from patriarchal structures and in doing so were not considered in the same category as widows or the never married. Although there has been some useful work aimed at seeing marital status as a category of analysis, and acknowledging the fluidity of marriage as a spectrum of identities, there has been little focus on the experience of separated wives (Froide 2005; Mason 2019). Joanne Begiato's recent justification of the 'intellectual value' of exploring the lives of women as wives sees married women as occupying a distinctive position with access to privileges not available to the unmarried (Begiato 2022, p. 4). She describes separated wives in the eighteenth century as the most striking examples of 'patriarchy's victims', although suggests that focusing on patriarchal limitations risks seeing any wife whose actions did not fall into recognisable tropes as anomalous (Begiato 2022, p. 3). The experiences of aristocratic women seeking separation or experiencing marital problems has been more accessible to historians due to the more extensive documentation of their lives, and the central importance of marriage to their, and their husbands', political careers (Friedman 1986; Clark 2018; Harris 2002).

The legal processes of marital separation have received attention from historians as part of the broad historiography of marriage in early modern England (Finch 1993; O'Hara 2002; Kesselring and Stretton 2022). Lawrence Stone's trilogy of monographs on early modern marital discord largely focuses on the period after 1660 when legal separation and divorce became more common following the reestablishment of marital law following the Restoration (Stone 1990, 1992, 1993). Even after this point, legal separation was still only possible for those of elite status. Sixteenth-century England was a society where separation could be difficult to arrange, and undesirable for the couple and their families, even though, as Alice T. Friedman notes, marital disputes were 'endemic' in Elizabethan noble households (Friedman 1986, p. 547). As grounds for legal separation, financial neglect or exploitation were generally more accepted than infidelity, but male views on how much assistance a wife was entitled to were limited. In her extensive survey of the lives of aristocratic women c.1450–1550, Barbara Harris has shown that it was widely accepted that husbands should materially support their wives (Harris 2002, p. 77). However, men who acted in an official capacity as judges on these matters found their wishes as fathers or brothers that their female kin not be exploited by covetous or neglectful husbands conflicted with their status as husbands who might seek to benefit from the income of their wives' inheritance or dowry (Harris 2002, p. 82). By the end of the sixteenth century, Friedman argues that this ideological position had become even more damaging for women who lost significant privileges if they pursued marital separation (Friedman 1986, pp. 547–49). Tim Stretton has drawn attention to the flexibility of options both church and state had when attempting to protect the ideology of marriage by allowing separation in exceptional circumstances (Stretton 2007). However, he also notes the fear common law courts had of

undermining the legal authority of husbands over their wives in sixteenth and seventeenth century England (Stretton 2007, p. 20). These patriarchal structures shaped women's experiences of marital separation.

The complexity of family structures has been investigated more closely in recent years by historians interested in various types of inclusive or blended families (Collins 1991; Warner 2011, 2018b; Wilson 2014; Cannon 2019; Capp 2018). Remarriage and step families were 'ubiquitous' in early modern Europe, and thus marital dispute did not only happen to couples in their first marriages (Warner 2018a). Key themes have been identified that shaped the way blended families negotiated relationships including legal structures, co-residence, and the development of affectionate bonds (Warner 2018a, pp. 233–64). The aim of remarriage and the bringing together of blended families was to solidify a wider kin network, one which could be destabilised if the married couple at their centre separated. Historians have pointed towards the role wider family played in supporting women who were facing difficulties in their marriages (Stretton 2007, p. 38). Nicola Clark has revealed the 'soft' forms of agency women could draw on when facing the obstacles of patriarchal ideology, mainly attempts to secure the support of patrons and kin (Clark 2018, pp. 65–66). These crucial networks could have been made up of step or in-law relations.

The extensive correspondence of Bess of Hardwick and her children and step-children enables an investigation into what happened when a couple at the centre of a blended family network separated. In the case of Bess of Hardwick and George Talbot, both had extensive networks from their previous marriages and careers, and relied on the support of their children, who had also been connected to each other by multiple marriages. In arranging marriages between their children, Bess and George had sought to tie their families more closely together and seek financial security for their children. The success and risks of this plan are revealed in the periods of tension which arose in the 1570s and 80s as Bess and George separated. Blended families generally aimed to foster close familial bonds between step-parents, children and siblings, which can be seen at crisis points where they were tested. Clark notes that familial support for separated wives could be 'conditional, rather than automatic' when they appealed to their natal families (Clark 2018, p. 79). When a natal family was also a blended one, these ties were often more complicated, as can be seen in Bess's relationships with her children during her separation. Thus this article brings together two understudied areas, marital separation and the blended family, to further reveal the complexity of early modern family life.

This article uses the case study of the Cavendish-Talbot family to assess the range of factors that could shape the experiences of separated wives and their children. Bess married for the first time c.1543 but the brief marriage ended with the death of her husband in 1544. Her second husband was Sir William Cavendish who she married in 1547. This match was a 'prodigious step up the social and economic ladder' for Bess, and during the marriage she purchased Chatsworth House and gave birth to all eight of her children (Wiggins 2017, p. 14). After William Cavendish's death in 1557, Bess married Sir William St Loe and became a gentlewoman of the Queen's Privy Chamber. Bess married her fourth husband George Talbot, sixth earl of Shrewsbury and one of the wealthiest men in England, sometime before 17 August 1567. George had been married once before to Lady Gertrude Manners and had seven children with her. Bess negotiated keeping control over some of her property, mostly notably Chatsworth, and arranged the marriages of her children Mary and Henry to George's children Gilbert and Grace. These took place in the same ceremony in February 1568.¹

Initially, George and Bess's marriage appeared a happy one. However, their political obligations soon put a strain on their relationship. Biographers and historians agree on the destabilising effect of Mary Queen of Scots on the couple. She was put in their custody after fleeing to England in 1568, which involved managing near constant security threats and treasonous plots requiring cumbersome and expensive moves between their properties. Anger and resentment between the couple was first reported by Gilbert Talbot c.1577. Bess and George began to spend more time living apart and by 1583 Bess had moved to live at

Chatsworth, which angered George even further. Many of their disagreements revolved around George's perception of Bess's overspending, especially on her extensive renovations at Chatsworth, exacerbated by his own ill-health. George launched an armed attack on Chatsworth in 1584 where he removed some of the goods and forced Bess to flee to her other property of Hardwick Hall. Informal attempts by friends and family to mediate between the couple had broken down therefore the Queen and Privy council intervened. Bess was awarded a financial settlement that George refused to pay on the grounds that it did not take into account property he had granted to Bess's children. He continued to hold these lands and take rent from Bess's younger sons. In 1586–1587 the government intervened again and ensured he abided by their decision. After this the couple were somewhat reconciled, although they did not live together again. Bess's separation was never formalised and she remained married to George, by her own desire, and those of the Queen and her councillors. Their marriage ended with George's death in November 1590.²

In some respects, Bess was largely typical of noblewomen in Tudor England, albeit one who achieved the priorities of securing marriage, marriages for her children, and accumulating and building property 'on a more impressive scale than her peers' (Bryson 2019, p. 30; Schutte 2013). However, historians have noted Bess's unusually large amount of control over her assets for a married woman, partly stemming from her status as widow (Bryson 2019, p. 30; Hopkins 2019, p. 4). She also had considerable wealth and political influence by the time she married George Talbot. In the context of the sixteenth century, Lisa Hopkins summarises Bess's exceptionalism thus: 'if Elizabeth was a female king, Bess was in many ways a female earl.' (Hopkins 2019, p. 4) Hopkins goes as far as to suggest that Bess and George's marital problems began because 'in many ways she continued to act as if she still were a widow.' (Hopkins 2019, p. 4). The resources Bess had accumulated across her four marriages both caused disagreement with George, and enabled her to support herself financially when separated from him. Somewhat unusually, Bess occupied the status of married, widowed and separated woman all at the same time.

Elite women were more likely to have powerful relations and independent wealth, however this might be jeopardised by their separation and did not always mean that they were better placed to navigate it. Bess had her own estates and household to go to if necessary, but her contemporary Elizabeth Willoughby, a member of the Nottinghamshire gentry who was also separated in the 1570s/80s, had no financial independence away from her husband (Friedman 1986, p. 547). Conversely, although not of elite social status, the remarried Margaret Percy was able to resist her husband's attempt to isolate and subdue her due to the independent wealth and the social networks she had built up from her first marriage (Hubbard 2015, p. 354). Eleanor Hubbard has shown that for Margaret, these resources were essential in her maintaining a separation that was legally recognised in 1590 (Hubbard 2015, p. 347). For Bess and Margaret, the wealth they had accumulated as widows made them more able to support themselves than Elizabeth Willoughby, who had no such independent wealth. Although Bess's wealth and titles singled her out as one of the most privileged women in her society, perhaps second only to the Queen, her status as a remarried widow enables a comparison to other women in this position at other levels of the social scale.

When considering the lives of ordinary women, historians have naturally focused on separated wives in the legal system due to their survival of their stories in these records (Stretton 2007). It is likely that there were many wives who did not seek legal separation but had more informal agreements. Studying aristocratic women provides examples of wives who did not seek legal separation, often for political reasons. While aristocratic women like Bess had financial means to support themselves, they still reveal some of the concerns around separation. Bess did not want to arrange a formal separation, and neither did her network of friends and patrons. The Queen and her councillors stepped in to offer mediation and arbitration services in an attempt to resolve Bess and George's marital disputes. Francis Calvert Boorman notes that then, and now, these options were effective 'because they responded to wider social pressures and incorporated the individual concerns

and emotions of the participants.’ (Boorman 2016, p. 20). Bess and George were able to have their opinions heard and appeal to social superiors to decide the best outcome for them, their families, and the wider social group they represented. It is possible that ordinary women also made more informal resolutions in their communities but without surviving personal documents it is difficult to access this perspective. Bess’s correspondence offers a unique opportunity to explore this experience.

Bess may have shared some experiences common to remarried and separated women but there is no doubt that the political context of her relationship and family life was unique. The Queen took an interest in the marital arrangements and problems of all of her courtiers but was especially concerned with Bess and George’s separation as a potentially destabilising political situation. Their relationship problems were not just a personal matter. Boorman argues that Elizabeth I’s ‘personal involvement’ makes this a unique case study (Boorman 2016, p. 20). Bess and George had been tasked with the custody of Mary Queen of Scots from 1568 and historians and biographers of Bess agree that this situation put a strain on her marriage (Lovell 2006, p. 301; Wiggins 2017, p. 16; Hopkins 2019, p. 3). Mary S. Lovell goes as far as to suggest that she was ‘at the heart of it all’ (Lovell 2006, p. 301). As well as setting an example for the wider political class of early modern England, Bess and George were also required to maintain a good relationship to manage the constant security threats posed by the Queen of Scots’s presence in England. Elizabeth thus took measures to attempt to reconcile Bess and George that involved seeking the assistance of friends and family with knowledge of the couple. Bess’s children, in particular her youngest daughter Mary and eldest stepson Gilbert (themselves a married couple), were active parts of the negotiations between their parents, sometimes reporting to the Queen directly.

The central role played by Bess’s children and stepchildren is an aspect of her life highlighted by this article which has often been overlooked.³ The role of children as useful members of the social networks of separated wives is another area in which Bess’s experience is comparable to other women. Drawing on the support of adult children was something separated wives could do, especially remarried widows that had children who did not have the same loyalty to their stepfather.⁴ James Daybell has done important work in analysing the extent of Bess’s correspondents at court and reassessing her political networking activities (Daybell 2004). However, Bess’s children became more than intelligence correspondents during her marital separation. They advocated for her at court, supported her in legal suits and actively negotiated between their parents. Bess’s family situation was complex and loyalties did not necessarily follow expected patterns, for example her eldest son Henry generally took the side of his stepfather (and father-in-law), not his mother. However, in their complexity, and through the large number of letters surviving between the family, they offer a unique opportunity to consider the role of family members for women facing marital difficulties. Thus, this article focuses on an aspect of married women’s experiences, and of Bess’s life, that can be explored in greater depth.

3. Methodology

Correspondence was Bess’s ‘modus operandi’ and there is a substantial body of research analysing her letters from different perspectives (Wiggins 2013; Wiggins 2017, p. 28; Hopkins 2019). This scholarship has significantly enhanced our understanding of Bess’s familial and political networks and the rhetoric she used to negotiate and further her interests (Wiggins 2017; Boorman 2016, p. 25). The majority of this work focuses on letters written by Bess herself, or to George, therefore there is scope to consider her familial correspondence network more broadly by analysing letters sent to and from her children. This article deepens our understanding of Bess’s correspondence by considering how she managed her relationships with her children and the role she played in their networks as well as what they could do for her. Although Imogen Marcus identifies that Bess rarely asked direct questions in her letters, Alison Wiggins argues that Bess’s letters were usually ‘goal-oriented’ and not ‘vehicles for uncontrolled emotional catharsis or psychological release.’ (Marcus 2019, p. 91; Wiggins 2017, p. 28) However, the letters Bess requested and

received from her children were often longer in form, containing detailed descriptions of events and conversations. These letters were of great significance to Bess as her children formed crucial parts of her network of news and intelligence gathering (Wiggins 2017, pp. 85–86). Their sometimes lengthy descriptive missives enabled her to compose and direct her own more direct and purposeful correspondence.

During Bess and George's marital difficulties, their children and step-children were central to the negotiation and information sharing that shaped how the situation played out over several years. Friedman argues that 'the often contradictory accounts of individual couples or commentators defy attempts to generalise' beyond individual experiences (Friedman 1986, p. 543). While it is true that the Cavendish-Talbot family crisis developed from and was shaped by unique family circumstances, there is greater value in analysing this episode. The complexity of this family's relationships reveal some of the many factors that could shape the lives of separated wives. It is also important to consider that, as a prominent aristocratic family, the Cavendish-Talbots would have influenced contemporary discussions and expectations of how families managed marital separation. Wiggins notes that the letters between Bess and George had to 'stand up to the possibility of 'public' scrutiny and judgement' (Wiggins 2017, p. 70). This is also true of the letters of the wider familial network. This article adds to the methodological approach of studying correspondence by acknowledging the wider scope of the 'public'/'private' familial letter to include those beyond a marital partnership.

4. Primary Source Analysis

In order to analyse the range of support roles Bess's children took on during her marital separation, this article considers their correspondence separately, beginning with Gilbert Talbot, then his wife, Bess's daughter Mary, her younger sons William and Charles Cavendish, and finally her eldest son Henry Cavendish. Age, inheritance, marital status and role within the family all shaped the ways in which the children's individual circumstances contributed to the marital separation and mediation attempts.

Gilbert Talbot (b. 1552) was the second son of George Talbot who became heir to his father's titles and estates in 1582 after the death of his elder brother Francis (Hicks 2004). As the husband of Bess's daughter, Mary, who would inherit her mother's title of Countess of Shrewsbury on the death of George Talbot, Gilbert was a crucial link in the Cavendish-Talbot blended family network. He took on a number of roles for Bess, including intelligence contact and, once her marital separation began, one of the primary mediators between Bess and George. It is clear from Gilbert's correspondence with Bess before her marital separation that the two were on good terms. He was an important part of the news and intelligence networks of his father and stepmother, and shared the same information with them both. In May 1575 he wrote to Bess: 'I becum ignorante what to wryte to your Ladyship vnlesse I shoulde declare the same over agayne, and I make none other accoumpte, but wher I wryte to one it is to bothe.'⁵ Gilbert's letters to Bess fit the pattern of 'the predominant mode by which news circulated' described by Daybell as news interwoven with personal concerns (Daybell 2004, pp. 118–19). Wiggins also notes the importance Bess placed on receiving these news letters from all of her children (Wiggins 2017, pp. 85–86). A letter from May 1576 demonstrates that Gilbert was aware of how much Bess valued and expected his correspondence, so much so that he wrote even though he had very little to inform her about: 'All thynges are so well and quieat that truly (as I haue sayde) I know not any thyng wherwith to enlarge this letter.'⁶

It is clear that Gilbert had an independent relationship with Bess and his correspondence with her before his parents' separation set up his role as mediator and trusted advisor. Likely later in 1575, Gilbert wrote to Bess about his 'greife' at witnessing a disagreement between his parents, concluding 'and In all my lyfe I never longed for any thing so muche as to be from hence truly madame I rather wishe my sealfe a plowman then here to continew.'⁷ This was before Bess and George's more lasting separation but indicates how Gilbert had already adapted to form independent relationships with each parent before their separation

was established (Hopkins 2019, p. 3). In 1575 Gilbert was still a young man, but already a husband and father and with experience in parliament and at the royal court.

Due to Gilbert's position in the family hierarchy and his proven ability to supply news and build relationships, it is perhaps inevitable that he became a key mediator between his parents. Bess and George did not fully separate until the 1580s, at which point Bess sought a range of friends at court to advocate for her, but letters from the late 1570s show Gilbert attempting to mediate between his parents in the early stages of their marital breakdown. In a letter to Bess, likely July 1577, Gilbert asked for pardon in 'wrytinge playnely & truly, altho it be bothe bluntley and tediously.'⁸ He acknowledged a break in traditional letter writing style in favour of honest communication that he must have expected would be well received. Wiggins argues that 'plainness' was, for Bess, 'associated with finding the most effective way to present a case or request.' (Wiggins 2017, p. 28). A later letter from Roger Manners, George's brother-in-law from his first marriage, to George included the comment that Roger had 'delt playnly' with Gilbert, again suggesting that he was a man who one could have direct conversation with, a seemingly valued quality at times of relationship breakdown. It also indicates a level of equality between Gilbert and his parents, as their child he was expected to show obedience to them, but as a young adult in their network could also speak truthfully and directly.

Gilbert's letters were often long and detailed, containing a significant amount of reported speech. To Bess, Gilbert was clear in stating exactly what he had told his father about her, and what he had said in return. It is worth quoting at length to show an example of this description:

he sayde it was vtterly vntrewe, & so I wolde have gone on to have toulde the reste, howe your Ladyship willed him to inqyre whether they weare not in this manner kepte oute or no, his procedinge into vehement coller & harde speches, but he cutt me of, sayinge it was to no purpose to heare any resytall of this matter, for if he lysted he sayde he cold remember cruell speches your Ladyship vsed to him, which weare such as, quoth he, I was forced to tell her, she scolded lyke one yat came from the banke, then gilbert sayd he Iudge you whether I had cause or not, well quoth he I will speke no more of this matter.⁹

The construction of his sentences reflected the conversational nature of his interactions with his father and would have indicated to Bess that these were indeed her husband's words, which she could interpret herself in context. This detail, while 'blunt' and 'tedious' would have been valuable information for Bess on how to proceed with her marital problems. At this point, George and Bess seem to have been accusing each other of cruel words, and George noted his discontent with the amount of time Bess spent at Chatsworth, the house she would continue to retreat to over the next several years.

Initially, Bess and George appear to have sought reconciliation and Gilbert's role in managing and reporting these conversations was to reflect and pass on the emotional states of his parents. In the same letter of c.1577 he said that he had described Bess to George 'with as greved a mynde as ever I sawe woman in my lyfe', presumably with the permission, or at the request of Bess herself. Later in the conversation he also described her in similar terms as 'in such perplexitie, as I never saw woman' and that she thought her husband 'moste happye when you were absente from him, and moste vnhappye when you were with him'. At these words Gilbert reported that George 'melted' and professed his love for his wife. Gilbert stated that after these protestations, George went quiet and so he interpreted his emotional state: 'but I know it pynched him & in my conscyence I thynke so, but what effecte will follow (god knowethe)'. Here, Gilbert was an active participant in describing and shaping the emotional states of his parents, with the aim of reconciling them. Gilbert's exchange and interpretation of emotions supported Bess's own letter writing style where emotions had a 'strategic purpose' (Wiggins 2017, p. 28). His description of her grief and confusion had resulted in an emotional reaction that would perhaps lead to a change in attitude and behaviour from her husband. At this point, this must still have seemed like a possibility. She had delegated her own emotional expression to her step-son, who

could then report its reception. It is likely George would have known that Gilbert would be passing his words directly to Bess, further supporting an understanding of these letters as collaborative constructions and sources of the ongoing processes of negotiation.

As the situation between Bess and George worsened, Gilbert's close relationship with his stepmother made it increasingly difficult for him to succeed in his mediator role. Their close relationship must have been apparent to George from the early stages of the marital breakdown when Gilbert was engaged in the passing of messages and emotional states but became a more significant problem between them as George came to believe Gilbert was favouring Bess. Gilbert became heir to the Talbot titles and estates in 1582, when George might have expected full support from his heir, but Gilbert did not abandon his stepmother/mother-in-law's cause. In a letter likely from September 1583, Gilbert reported that:

I began many tymes to tell him my greffes & to open my estate but he wolde not suffer me to speke but sayde he loved me beste of all his chyldren & yat I had never geven him cause of offence, but in tarryinge so longe at chatesworthe.¹⁰

Spending time with Bess at Chatsworth meant Gilbert was able to pass messages between his parents but George increasingly saw Gilbert's time there as support for Bess and damaging to his own reputation. Despite George's claim to love Gilbert 'beste' they had ongoing disagreements throughout the 1580s, in large part over the state of Gilbert's finances, but exacerbated by his continued relationship with Bess, whom he believed was encouraging his children's extravagant lifestyles (Lovell 2006, p. 353). Although there were reports that Gilbert had 'so well recovered his favour' with his father in August 1586, the disagreements between father and son were not fully resolved.¹¹ The scenario of a male heir accruing debts that resulted in their father's disapproval was not uncommon in elite society. Friends of the family stepped in as mediators including William Cecil who attempted to intervene by supporting Gilbert in a letter to his father, arguing that he did not have enough to live on as the heir to his line and so was not able to keep out of debt.¹² Sir Christopher Hatton also wrote to George stating that the Queen had a good opinion of Gilbert and encouraged George to 'cherishe and favor such a sone.'¹³

For George, Gilbert's financial problems and his close relationship with his stepmother were closely connected. To resolve Gilbert's financial situation, it appears George had suggested the sale of a property called Sutton which needed approval from Bess as it was in her possession. Bess was unwilling to do this and offered the sale of some other lands that she had planned to give her younger son Charles (Lovell 2006, p. 326). Gilbert's report of Bess's response to his father's request reveals that the nature of their relationship played a role in the conflict. By telling Gilbert that if Bess were to deny him this help, 'the case and difference betwyxte a naturall father and step-moother will then appere' he attempted to destabilise Bess and Gilbert's close relationship by reminding him that she was not his biological parent, and thus would not favour him. Bess's response was to dismiss this argument on practical grounds, stating that 'as your Lordship doth beste know, you are more able to gyve a pounce then she a penny.'¹⁴ The issue of how much money Bess had and how she chose to spend it continued, and was often centred around the couple's children. In a letter of 1587, George wrote that Gilbert needed to provide for himself and pay his own debts and lamented the amount of money spent by Bess and her daughter (Gilbert's wife) Mary in 'sekinge (through malice) my overthrowe', that also required spending on his part to counter.¹⁵ This letter was written by a secretary rather than in George's own hand, perhaps giving the letter a formal quality (although it is also possible that George's poor health prevented his autograph writing).

Gilbert's status in the family as son, step-son and son-in-law meant that he was in a difficult position once his parents had separated. The disagreements between Gilbert and George were described in terms of filial duty, for example Gilbert's plea of 1584: 'please god to alter my l(or)de(s) harte towarde(s) me w(ch) I will endevore to brynge to passe by all y(e) offyses of a dutyfull son(ne).'¹⁶ George expressed displeasure at how Gilbert aimed

to 'deale in lyke tearmes' with him, something he would never have done with his own father.¹⁷ As Gilbert became more and more embroiled in his parents separation, his role as more equal mediator in the situation was less tolerated by his father, and described in terms of Gilbert's credit with him. Gilbert replied to his father's scolding by affirming that he was dedicated to improving his credit with his father through obedient behaviour because of their familial bond. He described this bond as more than 'all other bondes that the worlde can bynde me in', presumably in reference to the non-biological parental bond he had with his stepmother/mother-in-law, and the marital bond with his wife that George criticised him for putting above their own.¹⁸ This negotiation of their father-and-son role continued, as in a later letter of 1587 where George was described to Gilbert as saying 'with more love and obedience yourself . . . your credit will slowly increase.'¹⁹ At this time, William Cecil again intervened to attempt to support Gilbert. He wrote to George that: "You charge him with being in league with his 'fast frend', your wife, but I know that he always laboured for her reconciliation with you. I find that he is willing to observe faithfully any conditions you may make."²⁰

Gilbert's role as a mediator between his estranged parents, and the difficulties associated with this position, were clearly well known at court. However, as is apparent in the June 1587 letter, George believed that Mary and Bess had worked together to plan his 'overthrowe'. Bess had emphasised her connection to George through the marriage of Gilbert and Mary in a letter to him earlier in their separation: 'how can yt in reason be thought I should forgett my selfe so greatly being your wyffe, and my daughter wyffe to your eldest sonne.'²¹ She also defended Gilbert's frequent visits to her at Chatsworth as for the sole purpose of visiting Mary, who was pregnant at the time. She affirmed Gilbert's obedience and duty to his father and expressed surprise that George would begrudge Gilbert these visits, which were central to the continuation of the Talbot dynasty: 'your Lordship I knowe wyll not refuse willingly the fonte of the blessings of God, which is the comfort of your owne flesh and blood, your child and him that must succeed you in your honor and place yf he lyve.'²² While it is likely true that Gilbert wished to see his wife, Bess's defence of his visits on the grounds of his patriarchal responsibilities as a husband and father also enabled Gilbert to stay part of her support network via contact with her daughter. The marriage which had been intended to solidify ties between Bess and George's families and secure their own marriage ironically bound the families too closely together. The situation posed challenges to ideals of filial and patriarchal duty as Gilbert's loyalties were divided between his overlapping familial roles. It was Gilbert's marriage to Mary that especially complicated his relationship with George, as it meant he had a responsibility to advocate for his wife and mother-in-law, even if this caused problems in showing sufficient obedience to his father.

For Bess, Gilbert's partnership with his wife, Bess's daughter Mary, was more beneficial. She relied on both of them for news and intelligence from court, and to advocate on her behalf there. Gilbert's relationship with Bess did not exist in isolation to his relationship with Mary. Surviving letters reveal a partnership in the important aspect of their filial duty to pass on court news to Bess. Some letters were written largely in Gilbert's voice and with only Mary's signature or an added post script, however, it seems unlikely that Mary would not have read the letters she signed and she may have been involved in their composition, even when Gilbert wrote in the first person.²³ Other letters do appear to have been written jointly with a letter of July 1589 written in Mary's hand and using the second person: 'we will labor still by all good menes'.²⁴ Once formally separated from Bess, George apparently saw the danger in allowing Gilbert into close contact with Mary and Bess at the same time. In c.1583 George told Gilbert, who reported directly to Bess, that 'he wolde not have me carry my wyfe to London was for yat he thoughte your Ladyship wolde goe vpp to London & then wolde my wyfe ioyne with you in exclaminge agaynste him, & so make him to Iudge the worsste of me'.²⁵ Gilbert's refusal to leave his wife was based on his patriarchal responsibility to her; he would not leave her 'withoute any provisions'. Gilbert's

relationship with Mary meant that, even without the good relationship he appeared to develop with Bess independently, he would have had some responsibility to advocate for his step-relations/in-laws. Despite claiming him as the child he 'loved best', George found his relationship with Gilbert compromised during his marital separation as he could not comfortably rely on his son's unequivocal support. However, Bess benefitted from the support of her step-son/son-in-law even if his relationship with her daughter compromised his ability to advocate for her.

Mary Talbot had her own relationships with her mother Bess and stepfather/father-in-law George, which played a part in the nuances of their marital separation. Her mother's youngest surviving child, Mary appears to have had a close relationship with Bess. Wiggins asserts that, through an analysis of their 'relaxed and familiar' correspondence, 'We can be confident that their relationship included sustained and genuine emotional bonds.' (Wiggins 2017, pp. 81, 84). However, Mary's role in the marital dispute of her mother and stepfather has not been fully considered, for instance Sara Jayne Steen acknowledges Mary as a significant figure in Bess's life, but spends more time considering both Bess and Mary's relationship with granddaughter and niece Arbella Stuart, a relationship that dominated much of Bess's later life (Steen 2004). During the period of Bess's marital difficulties, Mary's close relationship with her mother, and with her husband Gilbert were central aspects of George's discontent with his wife and son. The disagreements and negotiation were shaped by her influence.

As Gilbert had developed an independent relationship with Bess, Mary had also developed a relationship with George prior to the marital separation. George invited Mary to join her husband when George called him away in June 1575 and offered blessings to her during a pregnancy of 1580.²⁶ In this letter it was George who advocated for the comfort of his stepdaughters asking Bess to grant Elizabeth Cavendish's wish to be with her sister at this time: 'it semyd to greve hur che shuld nott cum to the brengeng to bedd of hur cystar wych I Infeere you doo hur wrong therein for it were nott Amysse che shuldbe with hur now.'²⁷ However, as George's separation from Bess continued, George became more hostile to Mary and the influence he believed she had over his estranged wife and his son. In 1583 he told Gilbert that he did not want him to bring Mary to London because she would join with Bess 'in exclaminge agaynste him' and the following year he told Robert Dudley that Mary had persuaded Gilbert to disobey his orders not to see Bess.²⁸ He clearly viewed Mary as a significant influence on Bess and as instrumental in maligning him. In a letter to Gilbert in September 1585 he accused Bess and Mary of hoping to outlive him and revealed to Gilbert that his suggestion of selling the Sutton land was 'but to trye the cankerednes my wife and yours beares me, which is manifest, and forsooth to bleare your eyes', thus attempting to force Gilbert to acknowledge their behaviour.²⁹ A year later, after some negotiation, George agreed to see and speak to Bess, but still refused to see Mary.³⁰ It is, of course, difficult to ascertain the relationship between Mary and Bess solely from the perspective of an embittered estranged husband, but George's accusations do indicate the role Mary played in the family. She seems to have regularly seen and corresponded with Bess and the two women were deemed to be of similar opinions on this family matter.³¹ In his descriptions, George suggests Mary as a significant source of support to Bess, in many ways her equal in assessing the situation.

One episode of April 1587 reveals the central role Mary had in the negotiation of her parents' marital difficulties, especially in advocating for her mother. In a letter to his uncle, Gilbert reported a meeting at which he was not present but that Mary must have described to him, where she was asked to speak on behalf of her mother to the Queen and her most senior advisors. Elizabeth had known Bess and George for many years and thus was well placed to assess their ongoing problems (Wiggins 2017, p. 16; Boorman 2016, p. 20). She was certainly invested in ensuring the social order of her court was upheld, but was also more personally invested in this marriage (Boorman 2016, pp. 20–21). Gilbert detailed the events of the day at some length:

she had my wife called in to the withdrawing chamber where no one by the Queen, my lord, and Secretary Walsyngham were. The Queen then commanded her to say what her mother desired of my Lord, which she did, whereat my Lord grew impatient and spoke of his great offence against her. My wife answered that she knew that it was not becoming in her to withstand his Lordship in any place, still less in her Majesty's presence, but that being commanded to do so and as it concerned the utter destruction of her old distressed mother she hoped his lordship would pardon her if she spoke the truth, tending to no end but the effect her mother's wish of cohabiting with him. The Queen liked this speech but it did not calm my Lord. They abode together about an hour during which time my wife was often sent out and called in again, and at last it was concluded that my Lord should take order for my Lady's honourable conveyance to Wingfield where they shall keep house together and my Lord shall allow her 300l. yearly and certain provisions for housekeeping.³²

Mary acknowledged that, according to the patriarchal rules of society, she should have been obliged to support her father, but her mother's situation was such that she needed to be truthful about her distress. The length of time Mary was kept for interrogation by the Queen shows how valued her testimony was. She must have been considered knowledgeable about Bess's situation and state of mind and trusted sufficiently by the Queen herself. By this point, George had been refusing the terms agreed by earlier arbitration for almost a year, hence the lengthy meeting required to address his grievances. Ultimately the Queen was satisfied with Mary's account and agreed to the terms she negotiated for her mother. George was required to join Bess at their house of Wingfield and provide her with a yearly payment of £300 plus maintenance expenses (Boorman 2016, p. 35).

Mary's adherence to patriarchal ideals supports Tim Stretton and K. J. Kesselring's observation that Queen Elizabeth intervened in the marital breakdowns of her courtiers 'in the belief that social order more generally relied upon the moral order' of these families (Kesselring and Stretton 2022, p. 35). As has been noted, although husbands and fathers were expected to be obeyed, they also had the responsibility to maintain their wives, and the Queen and her councillors were apparently keen to ensure these values were upheld. The social status of the Cavendish-Talbot family made their separation a public concern (Wiggins 2017, p. 70). Boorman has highlighted the significance of honour to the arbitration of George and Bess's separation, summarising that George 'failed to negotiate the difficult ideal of an early modern married man: keeping his wife subordinated and under control, whilst fostering mutuality and leading by example.' (Boorman 2016, p. 21). His analysis only briefly mentions the role Mary played in this particular negotiation but does hint at her reasons for success. George 'was unwilling or unable to take into account the honour of the arbitrators, which was also at stake' whereas Bess was more successful (Boorman 2016, p. 38). Indeed, both Bess and Mary drew on examples of their own honourable conduct with the aim of reconciling their family. Bess largely did this through her writing of petition letters meant for public scrutiny, but Mary was in a position to model these values in person (Boorman 2016, p. 39; Wiggins 2017, p. 70). In August 1586, Bess wrote to George, 'I assure you my Lord my meaning ys not to molest or greue you with demanding nether I trust yt can be thought gredynes to demande nothyng for I desyar no more then her magestys order genetli and wyshe your happy days to be many and good./'.³³ She anticipated his criticisms of her greediness and sought to remind him that it was not her, but the Queen, who required him to support her financially and respect her land rights. Mary's interpretation of her mother's emotional state the following year was also deployed with the effect of convincing others of the righteous and honourable nature of her mother's requests, requests supported by the Queen as well as tied to the success of her own family and dynasty.

The actions of Mary Talbot in supporting her mother and ensuring the success of her natal family, alongside her marital one, clearly did not endear her to her father-in-law/stepfather who continued to publicly express his dislike for her. Returning to the

linked issues of Gilbert's conduct and financial situation, George suggested that Gilbert would be able to manage his allowance better, if he 'hadde that government over yor wife as her pompe and courtelike manner of lief' should be moderated and that one reason he could not assist him was the amount he had spent on defending himself against accusations from Mary and Bess.³⁴ He also accused Gilbert of being 'over awed by others' thus criticising his masculine capabilities at home and in his public life.³⁵ As late as 1588 when George was reconciled with Gilbert and his children, the 'little ones', he still refused to see Mary since 'her sight can not as yet content me.'³⁶ Lovell suggests that George was especially hostile to Mary once she became the likely inheritor of her mother's title of Countess of Shrewsbury, after Gilbert became heir to the dynasty in 1582 (Lovell 2006, p. 301). Again, Bess and George's efforts to tie their families so strongly together meant that Mary would see her mother's success as part of their success of her own family and children, even without the close bond they shared as mother and daughter. Bess's strategy of bringing her daughters into successful marriages had ended up with her daughter in line to take up her title of Countess of Shrewsbury. This strategy had contributed to the problems with her husband and much of their dispute was framed around Bess being emboldened by the support of her daughter against him—the current and future countesses. Not long before his death in 1590, George did write a 'surprisingly kind' letter to Mary, suggesting that perhaps he came to accept her role in furthering his own family line once the heat of the arbitration had passed (Lovell 2006, p. 361).

Lisa Hopkins summarises Bess's ambitions for her children as: 'for her daughters she sought titles; to her sons she allotted houses.' (Hopkins 2019, p. 10). In addition to the marriage of her daughter into the Shrewsbury house, Bess's strategy of securing property for her younger sons was another element of the marital problems she faced in the 1580s. Her second and third sons, William and Charles Cavendish appear to be the sons she had the closest relationships with, and disputes around their inheritances dominated the correspondence between George and Bess when they were separated (Lovell 2006, pp. 318–19). Before the separation, there is no evidence that William or Charles had a problematic relationship with their stepfather. There was an episode with Charles c.1575 where he was involved in a violent incident with a companion injured during sword practice. After this incident Charles appealed directly to his stepfather to ask him to appeal to his mother on his behalf. He stated that only George would be able to advocate for him since his 'wisdom I know can temper this conceot of hers.'³⁷ In a letter to Bess, from likely around the same time, George described Charles as 'esely ledd to folly' and suggested Bess should advise him to avoid future mishaps.³⁸ So it appears that, prior to his marital disputes with their mother, George was an attentive stepfather with knowledge of his stepsons' behaviour and characters.

As with her other children and step children, William and Charles played important roles in Bess's news and business networks. William, described by Lovell as Bess's favourite son, also acted as her personal assistant, writing and sending letters on her behalf (Lovell 2006, p. 318). Correspondence to William and Bess appears to have been interchangeable, for example a letter from Bess to William Cecil in October 1587 opens with Bess thanking Cecil for his letter sent to her son, which she then goes on to reply to.³⁹ In the same letter she mentions that she has heard news of her estranged husband from Charles, indicating his role in gathering intelligence for her. It perhaps refers to a letter of court news sent by Charles which he ended with the post script: 'This messenger is in such hast as I haue not tyme to reed over my letter.'⁴⁰ Similarly to Gilbert Talbot, who wrote lengthy letters that eschewed convention based on the knowledge that Bess would prefer all the information, Charles prioritised sending information to her quickly over a more formal, edited composition.

As established correspondents with close familial bonds, it is not surprising to find that William and Charles continued to support their mother during her marital separation. While the stresses of managing the custody of Mary Queen of Scots might have initiated bad feeling between Bess and George, and the beginning of financial difficulties, disputes around Bess's management of her land, and the lands of her younger sons, became central

to their ongoing disagreements in the mid-1580s. Marriage was a financial partnership both for George and Bess, and for their children. Bess's lands from her previous marriage had been given to William and Charles in return for agreement that George would not be responsible for Bess's debts or paying William and Charles large sums of money when they came of age. During their separation in the 1580s, George accused Bess of selling this land without his permission and buying lands in the name of her sons to keep it from him. His response was to charge rent and claim revenue on Bess's lands (Boorman 2016, p. 22). George was critical of William's conduct as early as 1583 and their disputes escalated over the following years.⁴¹

Bess's personal relationships with her younger sons were linked to her economic concerns and central to her disagreements with her husband and the nature of these disputes. As has been discussed above, in 1584 Gilbert Talbot was criticised by his father when asking for financial support, partly on the basis of his support for his stepmother. This episode also closely involved Gilbert's step-brothers. Bess wrote to Francis Walsingham in April 1584 to describe her distress at how her sons' livelihoods were being restricted by George, asking for them to be granted deeds in 'some other place'.⁴² She wrote to William Cecil later that year with a further petition for him to intercede on their behalf. George planned to take Bess's property of Chatsworth, despite having not financially supported her for many months. Her main concern was for the wellbeing of her sons who she did not want to have to enter legal proceedings against their stepfather. She framed this in terms of concern for him: 'yt wyll not be honorable for hym, to doe contrary to hys owne hand and sealle, and to deale so hardly with me and them.'⁴³ In this petition, where she used the rhetoric of describing her own distress and sorrow, she positioned herself as an honourable widow seeking to maintain the reputation of her family. Going back on his word, at the expense of his own stepsons, would be damaging to George's reputation, in addition to her, and her son's, financial security. George rejected these claims and accused Bess of pretending to be dependent on her son William and hiding the true collective income she shared with her two younger sons.⁴⁴

Bess's response to this criticism was a letter which almost solely outlined her concerns about the financial stability of her children. She drew on George's accusations of his own house being 'overthrown' and again, appealed to his responsibilities to her as his wife. She claimed that his behaviour 'wyll force my chyldryn to sell all they haue for my meantynance, and to pay my debts.'⁴⁵ This supported her previous characterisation as a suffering wife who was not being dealt with honourably by her husband. It was against the order of society that her children should support her, when she had a husband who should shoulder this responsibility. George responded by asserting that he believed she was financially secure, proven by her buying of lands for her sons, and accusing her of debts resulting from 'your wilfulnes & their pride'.⁴⁶ Early biographers of Bess largely drew on these kinds of comments as evidence of her as a 'shrewish, nagging wife' and other negative, gendered stereotypes (Wiggins 2017, p. 11). Bess's justifications of her ongoing requests for financial support, for her and her sons, drew more on ideals of honour and duty than pure financial need. She described herself that, 'I am assured, that non leueing, could be more dutyfull, trew, faythfull, and carefull to a husband, then I haue euar ben to you' and her words and actions throughout the 1580s argued that George had a duty as a husband to support her, as she attempted to continue to be a dutiful wife to him.⁴⁷ Whether she needed the money or not was not the most important point for her, or for others invested in the success of the marriage. Although they were living apart, Bess continued to express her desire to reconcile with her husband and did not accept that their marriage could not be restored.

Bess claimed that her efforts to remain a dutiful wife were her primary concern, but her responsibilities to her children were central to her marital difficulties and could put her in a difficult position. They reveal how blended families could struggle in times of crisis. Bess refused to support Gilbert at the expense of her own sons, seeing Gilbert's finances as George's responsibility. George was indeed concerned about the impact of their

disagreements to his own dynasty, writing to Bess: 'it can not be but you must favoure your children, therfor howe dangerous it wher of me to be compassear about with you & them when after me you shall leape into my seate.'⁴⁸ Their previously harmonious family life had been destroyed by their separation, and the way in which their children's wellbeing conflicted. Bess clearly used her children as sources of support, advocacy, and worked in partnership with them to further all of their financial security. When separated from her husband, these decisions looked, to him, at odds with his own future success.

During this period, George went as far as to launch an armed attack on Bess at Chatsworth in an attempt to take the property. William Cavendish was briefly imprisoned over this altercation in August 1584 (Lovell 2006, pp. 308–12; Wiggins 2017, pp. 16–17). George justified his actions on the grounds that he had maintained Chatsworth 'for their saks who are to succeed vs. therein' even though his stepchildren had joined with Bess in publicly denouncing him.⁴⁹ Others attempted to intercede, for example, the earl of Leicester who appealed to George that his wisdom enabled him to deal with the lapse of his stepson's 'reason and dewtye'. In this letter he reminded George that his wife and stepchildren 'be within the lymytts of your authoritye'.⁵⁰ The complex blended family of the Cavendish-Talbots meant that patriarchal codes of honour could be applied in different ways. Bess and George's marital separation was underpinned by discussions around honour and reputation that could not easily be resolved when each family member had conflicting responsibilities.

George saw William and Charles as heavily influenced by Bess in their actions against him. He described on separate occasions William and Charles as using 'evil speeches' and 'slanderous speaches and sinister practises to dishonour me' after being encouraged by Bess.⁵¹ He also described the rumours that had been spread by them and the 'malicious mindes' they had towards him.⁵² As noted above, George believed his stepdaughter/daughter-in-law Mary was instrumental in slandering him but gave her more credit for influencing her mother, or at least joining with her on a more equal basis. For her sons, George accused Bess of influencing their thoughts and behaviours against him. Others certainly saw the dispute between George and Bess as clearly divided with her and her sons on one side, and George on the other. William Cecil and Francis Walsingham described the situation in this way during the dispute of the mid-1580s.⁵³ The terminology used by Bess, George and their network of friends at court makes it very clear that William and Charles Cavendish were Bess's sons.⁵⁴ The convention of stepfamilies referring to all stepchildren as simply son or daughter was not applied in this case where the distinction mattered in a material way. The legal suit was settled by the Queen in 1586 where she ordered George 'the Earl' to pay William and Charles 'the Cavendishes' and drop his assize case against them.⁵⁵ She had advised George that his credit would not be affected if he agreed to begin mediation.⁵⁶ As noted above, the settling of legal proceedings did not heal the rifts in the family. As well as continuing to refuse to see Mary, George also refused to welcome Charles into his house, even on the request of the Queen (Boorman 2016, p. 33).

Bess's younger children were united in support of her and it is clear how much she relied on them to advocate for her. However, her eldest son Henry Cavendish took a different position and largely supported his stepfather. In some ways he held a similarly conflicted position to Gilbert Talbot as he was married to his stepsister Grace, and thus doubly bound to George as his stepfather and father-in-law. As the eldest son of his deceased father, his inheritance was not at risk from the marital disputes so he was not reliant on his mother to secure his future financial stability. Wiggins identifies the 'widely varying relationships' that Bess had with her sons and it appears that Bess had a poorer relationship with Henry before her separation (Wiggins 2017, p. 83). Biographers agree that Henry sided with his stepfather because of the way Bess had expressed her disappointment about his character and behaviour (Bryson 2019, p. 26; Lovell 2006, pp. 317–18). George's relationship with Henry was already positive and he relayed to Bess that Henry had maintained his honour during the early part of their separation, unlike William.⁵⁷ He was

also happy to criticise William and Charles's conduct in letters to Henry, stating that Bess thought William to be more effective in supporting her than Charles but that he thought 'them both alike'.⁵⁸

After the attack on Chatsworth in 1584, George went further in defending Henry, criticising Bess for harming the prospects of 'your sonne and heire . . . to satisfie the insatiable covetousenes of that your other sonne.'⁵⁹ George hoped to further discredit Bess by demonstrating how her treatment of her eldest son damaged the prospects of her house, which was of course bound with his own. During his period of legal action against the Cavendishes, Henry was involved in delivering letters from George to Bess, demonstrating to her how far her son was 'united against her' with her husband (Wiggins 2017, p. 71). Bess did appear to keep on good terms with Henry's wife, her stepdaughter Grace, who she informed about Henry's travels in a letter of 1589.⁶⁰ By the late 1580s, Bess and George were also on better terms but her relationship with Henry remained difficult (Bryson 2019, pp. 28–29). Bess commented in a letter after George's death that, 'I hope [. . .] that all disagreement (in this famely) died with him', however, her relationships with her children did not remain as supportive and united in Bess's widowhood either.⁶¹ It is beyond the scope of this paper to detail the complex negotiations of inheritance and familial obligations of the Cavendish-Talbots after George's death in 1590 but a focus on the various ways she maintained relationships with her children during the period of marital separation is revealing about the dynamics of complex families and relationships. Various factors shaped the ways in which children and stepchildren either supported their mother, like Mary, William and Charles, opted to support their stepfather like Henry, or found themselves caught in the middle like Gilbert.

5. Conclusions

Separated wives posed a threat to the patriarchal ideals underpinning society. Bess had largely protected herself from becoming one of 'patriarchy's victims' through managing the independent wealth she had built up in her previous marriages and widowhoods, but marital separation did pose challenges for her. Despite having independent wealth, she was not able to comfortably live as a separated wife. Her honourable reputation was at risk, as was the economic success of her children. In this way, separated wives can be seen as having a singular experience as neither wives nor widows and thus a problem to be solved. Across the familial and political network Bess had built up over her life, individuals took different perspectives on how her marital separation should be managed and negotiated. However, all agreed that a solution needed to be found.

Despite the unique political circumstances facing Bess of Hardwick and her family, her life offers a useful case study to understand some of the factors shaping the lives of separated wives in early modern England. For elite families, the success of the house and dynasty could be jeopardised by the breakdown of a marriage, and never more so than if the family was a blended one. The Cavendish-Talbots were joined together by multiple marriage partnerships but the harmony between the two components of the family was undermined by the breakdown of the central partnership that had brought them together. Marital separation could be disastrous for the ongoing success of an aristocratic line. However, for the separated wife, being part of a blended family could increase her range of support options.

Bess was able to draw on support from friends and family built up over her life time and her multiple marriages. Her children were crucial parts of her support network as they were in the unique position of knowing her and their stepfather well. Their correspondence demonstrates how valuable they were in supporting her own claims and mediating on her behalf. However, her relationships with her children were complicated by dynastic priorities, for example, the lack of support she received from her eldest son who saw supporting his stepfather as the wiser choice. Henry's independent wealth made him less invested in his mother's financial success than his younger brothers whose lands and estates were tied up in their mother and stepfather's marriage contract. Even as his father's

heir, Gilbert Talbot offered support to his stepmother, perhaps because of his closer familial connection as husband to her daughter, but also because of her political connections. As a courtier and future earl, Gilbert shared the opinions of the Queen and her advisors that his parents' marriage needed to be reconciled.

The sources considered in this article highlight this as many letters were semi-public documents where disputes and negotiations played out across the familial network. Correspondence and news-sharing between family members was the process by which these relationships with far-reaching political impact were negotiated. The challenges posed by Bess's separation from her husband demonstrate how crucial family members were to social, economic and political networks, and the challenges and opportunities that could result from living in a blended family. While Bess's relationships with and support for her children caused problems with her husband, their invaluable support indicates further strategies that were available to separated wives.

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Notes

- ¹ Bess's life has been the subject of numerous biographies including: (Durant 1977; Lovell 2006; Bryson 2019; Wiggins 2017, pp. 11–22; Goldring 2004a, 2004b).
- ² In addition to the above biographies, the mediation and arbitration of Bess and George's separation has been detailed at length by Boorman (2016).
- ³ For example, Steen (2004) focuses largely on Bess and Mary's relationships with Arbella Stuart.
- ⁴ Hubbard (2015) also shows this for Margaret Percy whose son testified for her in her separation case.
- ⁵ ID 081, Gilbert Talbot to Bess of Hardwick, 14 May [1575]. In *Bess of Hardwick's Letters: The Complete Correspondence, c.1550–1608*. Ed. by Alison Wiggins et al. <http://www.bessofhardwick.org/letter.jsp?letter=081> (accessed on 18 March 2022).
- ⁶ ID 082, Gilbert Talbot to Bess of Hardwick, 28 May 1576. In *Bess of Hardwick's Letters: The Complete Correspondence, c.1550–1608*. Ed. by Alison Wiggins et al. <http://www.bessofhardwick.org/letter.jsp?letter=082> (accessed on 18 March 2022).
- ⁷ ID 218, George Talbot to Bess of Hardwick, June 19 [c.1575]. In *Bess of Hardwick's Letters: The Complete Correspondence, c.1550–1608*. Ed. by Alison Wiggins et al. <http://www.bessofhardwick.org/letter.jsp?letter=218> (accessed on 18 March 2022).
- ⁸ ID 084, Gilbert Talbot to Bess of Hardwick, [July 1577?]. In *Bess of Hardwick's Letters: The Complete Correspondence, c.1550–1608*. Ed. by Alison Wiggins et al. <http://www.bessofhardwick.org/letter.jsp?letter=084> (accessed on 18 March 2022).
- ⁹ See note 8 above.
- ¹⁰ ID 086, Gilbert Talbot and Mary Talbot to Bess of Hardwick, [19 September 1583?]. In *Bess of Hardwick's Letters: The Complete Correspondence, c.1550–1608*. Ed. by Alison Wiggins et al. <http://www.bessofhardwick.org/letter.jsp?letter=086> (accessed on 18 March 2022).
- ¹¹ *HMC Report on the Manuscripts of His Grace the Duke of Rutland, C. G. B.* preserved at Belvoir Castle (London: 4 vols, 1888–1905), vol. 1, p. 195 (17 June 1586).
- ¹² *HMC Calendar of the Manuscripts of the Marquis of Bath preserved at Longleat, Wiltshire* (London, 5 vols, 1904–1981), vol. 5, pp. 81–82 (23 June 1587) and pp. 87–88 (6 March 1587/8).
- ¹³ HMC Bath, vol. 5, p. 65 (1 January 1585/6).
- ¹⁴ HMC Bath, vol. 5, pp. 57–58 (17 September 1585).
- ¹⁵ Shrewsbury Papers MS 3198 Volume 7, f. 357 (17 June 1587).
- ¹⁶ BL Add MS 34079 ff. 17–18 (8 July 1584).
- ¹⁷ HMC Bath, vol. 5, pp. 58–59 (24 September 1585).
- ¹⁸ HMC Bath, vol. 5, pp. 59–60 (12 October 1585).
- ¹⁹ Shrewsbury MS f. 363 (13 August 1587).
- ²⁰ HMC Bath, vol. 5, pp. 87–88 (6 March 1587/8).

- 21 ID 116, Bess of Hardwick to George Talbot, sixth earl of Shrewsbury, 26 August [1584]. In *Bess of Hardwick's Letters: The Complete Correspondence, c.1550–1608*. Ed. by Alison Wiggins et al. <http://www.bessofhardwick.org/letter.jsp?letter=116> (accessed on 18 March 2022).
- 22 As reported by Earl of Leicester; HMC Bath, vol. 5, pp. 25–27 (26 June 1580).
- 23 ID 085, Gilbert and Mary Talbot to Bess of Hardwick, 1 August 1577. In *Bess of Hardwick's Letters: The Complete Correspondence, c.1550–1608*. Ed. by Alison Wiggins et al. <http://www.bessofhardwick.org/letter.jsp?letter=085> (accessed on 18 March 2022).
- 24 ID 088, Gilbert and Mary Talbot to Bess of Hardwick, 1 July 1589. In *Bess of Hardwick's Letters: The Complete Correspondence, c.1550–1608*. Ed. by Alison Wiggins et al. <http://www.bessofhardwick.org/letter.jsp?letter=088> (accessed on 18 March 2022); ID 087, Gilbert and Mary Talbot to Bess of Hardwick, [February 1589]. In *Bess of Hardwick's Letters: The Complete Correspondence, c.1550–1608*. Ed. by Alison Wiggins et al. <http://www.bessofhardwick.org/letter.jsp?letter=087> (accessed on 18 March 2022).
- 25 ID 086, Gilbert Talbot and Mary Talbot to Bess of Hardwick, [19 September 1583?]. In *Bess of Hardwick's Letters: The Complete Correspondence, c.1550–1608*. Ed. by Alison Wiggins et al. <http://www.bessofhardwick.org/letter.jsp?letter=086> (accessed on 18 March 2022).
- 26 ID 074, George Talbot, sixth earl of Shrewsbury to Bess of Hardwick and The Peak's Men, 7 June 1575. In *Bess of Hardwick's Letters: The Complete Correspondence, c.1550–1608*. Ed. by Alison Wiggins et al. <http://www.bessofhardwick.org/letter.jsp?letter=074> (accessed on 18 March 2022); ID 078, George Talbot to Bess of Hardwick, 21 June 1580. In *Bess of Hardwick's Letters: The Complete Correspondence, c.1550–1608*. Ed. by Alison Wiggins et al. <http://www.bessofhardwick.org/letter.jsp?letter=078> (accessed on 18 March 2022), although her surname is not stated, the date indicates that this letter refers to Mary as she was the closest sister in age to Elizabeth and does seem to have often resided at Chatsworth with Bess.
- 27 ID 078, George Talbot to Bess of Hardwick, 21 June 1580. In *Bess of Hardwick's Letters: The Complete Correspondence, c.1550–1608*. Ed. by Alison Wiggins et al. <http://www.bessofhardwick.org/letter.jsp?letter=078> (accessed on 18 March 2022).
- 28 See note 25 above.
- 29 See note 17 above.
- 30 Shrewsbury MS, f. 337 (20 September 1586).
- 31 Mary also corresponded with other family member to pass on news of her parent's separation, for example her brother Charles Cavendish in 1586; HMC Bath, vol. 5, p. 73 (27 September 1586).
- 32 HMC Rutland, vol. 1, pp. 212–13 (6 April 1587).
- 33 ID 202, Bess of Hardwick to George Talbot, sixth earl of Shrewsbury, 4 August 1586. In *Bess of Hardwick's Letters: The Complete Correspondence, c.1550–1608*. Ed. by Alison Wiggins et al. <http://www.bessofhardwick.org/letter.jsp?letter=202> (accessed on 18 March 2022).
- 34 Shrewsbury MS f. 357 (17 June 1587).
- 35 See note 19 above.
- 36 Shrewsbury MS f. 386 (15 July 1588).
- 37 HMC Bath, vol. 5, p. 22 (? Before 1577).
- 38 ID 074, George Talbot, sixth earl of Shrewsbury to Bess of Hardwick and The Peak's Men, 7 June 1575. In *Bess of Hardwick's Letters: The Complete Correspondence, c.1550–1608*. Ed. by Alison Wiggins et al. <http://www.bessofhardwick.org/letter.jsp?letter=074> (accessed on 18 March 2022).
- 39 ID 156, Bess of Hardwick to William Cecil, Lord Burghley, 6 October 1587. In *Bess of Hardwick's Letters: The Complete Correspondence, c.1550–1608*. Ed. by Alison Wiggins et al. <http://www.bessofhardwick.org/letter.jsp?letter=156> (accessed on 18 March 2022).
- 40 ID 209, Sir Charles Cavendish to Bess of Hardwick, [1587]. In *Bess of Hardwick's Letters: The Complete Correspondence, c.1550–1608*. Ed. by Alison Wiggins et al. <http://www.bessofhardwick.org/letter.jsp?letter=209> (accessed on 18 March 2022).
- 41 See note 25 above
- 42 ID 149, Bess of Hardwick to Sir Francis Walsingham, 6 April 1584. In *Bess of Hardwick's Letters: The Complete Correspondence, c.1550–1608*. Ed. by Alison Wiggins et al. <http://www.bessofhardwick.org/letter.jsp?letter=149> (accessed on 18 March 2022).
- 43 ID 150, Bess of Hardwick to William Cecil, Lord Burghley, 2 August 1584. In *Bess of Hardwick's Letters: The Complete Correspondence, c.1550–1608*. Ed. by Alison Wiggins et al. <http://www.bessofhardwick.org/letter.jsp?letter=150> (accessed on 18 March 2022).
- 44 HMC Bath, vol. 5, p. 52 (20 August 1584); pp. 58–59 (24 September 1585).
- 45 ID 229, Bess of Hardwick to George Talbot, sixth earl of Shrewsbury, 14 October [1585]. In *Bess of Hardwick's Letters: The Complete Correspondence, c.1550–1608*. Ed. by Alison Wiggins et al. <http://www.bessofhardwick.org/letter.jsp?letter=229> (accessed on 18 March 2022).
- 46 ID 117, George Talbot, sixth earl of Shrewsbury to Bess of Hardwick, 23 October 1585. In *Bess of Hardwick's Letters: The Complete Correspondence, c.1550–1608*. Ed. by Alison Wiggins et al. <http://www.bessofhardwick.org/letter.jsp?letter=117> (accessed on 18 March 2022).
- 47 See note 45 above.
- 48 See note 46 above.

- 49 ID 119, George Talbot, sixth earl of Shrewsbury to Bess of Hardwick, 4 August 1584. In *Bess of Hardwick's Letters: The Complete Correspondence, c.1550–1608*. Ed. by Alison Wiggins et al. <http://www.bessofhardwick.org/letter.jsp?letter=119> (accessed on 18 March 2022).
- 50 HMC Bath, vol. 5, pp. 50–51 (2 August 1584).
- 51 HMC Bath, vol. 5, p. 54 (after 8 February 1584/5); Shrewsbury MS f. 124 (2 July 1583).
- 52 See note 45 above.
- 53 HMC Rutland, vol. 1, p. 186 (21 December 1585).
- 54 Cecil Papers vol. 164 (23 May 1586); ID 202, Bess of Hardwick to George Talbot, sixth earl of Shrewsbury, 4 August 1586. In *Bess of Hardwick's Letters: The Complete Correspondence, c.1550–1608*. Ed. by Alison Wiggins et al. <http://www.bessofhardwick.org/letter.jsp?letter=202> (accessed on 18 March 2022); ID 151, Robert Dudley, earl of Leicester to Bess of Hardwick, 12 July 1585. In *Bess of Hardwick's Letters: The Complete Correspondence, c.1550–1608*. Ed. by Alison Wiggins et al. <http://www.bessofhardwick.org/letter.jsp?letter=151> (accessed on 18 March 2022); ID 152, Bess of Hardwick to William Cecil, Lord Burghley, 6 October 1585. In *Bess of Hardwick's Letters: The Complete Correspondence, c.1550–1608*. Ed. by Alison Wiggins et al. <http://www.bessofhardwick.org/letter.jsp?letter=152> (accessed on 18 March 2022).
- 55 HMC Bath, vol. 5, pp. 69–70 (8 May 1586).
- 56 HMC Bath, vol. 5, p. 67 (5 March 1585/6).
- 57 See note 25 above.
- 58 HMC Rutland, vol. 1, p. 187 (7 January 1585/6).
- 59 See note 49 above.
- 60 ID 008, Grace Cavendish to Bess of Hardwick, 27 June [1589]. In *Bess of Hardwick's Letters: The Complete Correspondence, c.1550–1608*. Ed. by Alison Wiggins et al. <http://www.bessofhardwick.org/letter.jsp?letter=008> (accessed on 18 March 2022).
- 61 ID 231, Bess of Hardwick to William Cecil, Lord Burghley, 19 December 1590. In *Bess of Hardwick's Letters: The Complete Correspondence, c.1550–1608*. Ed. by Alison Wiggins et al. <http://www.bessofhardwick.org/letter.jsp?letter=231> (accessed on 18 March 2022).

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