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Bess of Hardwick: Second Most Powerful Woman of the Elizabethan Age and a Symbol
of Modern Thought

*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....¹*

While not a very elegant representation of Bess of Hardwick, this quatrain nevertheless introduces a striking and unique character of an Elizabethan woman. Many studies on Elizabethan women focus on the subjugated place of females in that society. However, women, such as Bess of Hardwick, existed, and did not fit within these stereotypes, much like the poem by one of Bess' contemporaries indicates. Often, since these women are minorities in sixteenth century England, they are overlooked entirely and not given proper credit for their accomplishments and services to crown and country. This is an ungracious disservice to the women who influenced Elizabethan society, becoming strong leaders. Despite the socio-legal factors working against women in Tudor England, Bess of Hardwick, noblewoman and leader in her own right, defied the odds and held authority often only assigned to men. Not only did she attain considerable wealth, and influence in sixteenth century society, even in the royal succession, but she also broke through the barriers that generally obstructed women of the Elizabethan age, namely inferior position in marriage and society, and confinement to gender stereotypic roles.

There are many modern stereotypes regarding women of the Tudor age: weak, politically subjugated, mentally inferior, socially lower than men, and the list continues. Some of these stereotypes are true, in particular, those relating to their legal inferiority and their lack of rights:

¹ I. Shenker and L. Yerkes, "Bess of Hardwick Was a Woman to be Reckoned With," *Smithsonian* 22, no. 10 (1992): 69.

“public law gives a woman no rights”² in Elizabethan society. A woman had no voice in politics, and was “assumed by law to be under the guardianship of her husband.”³ Her opinion was that of her husband’s, and many of her economic rights arose only after all the eligible male heirs died. For example, Lady Anne Clifford, her father’s only living heir, “was not given the property until 1643, when the male line failed.”⁴ The most disappointing fact about the case of Lady Anne Clifford was the fact that she was her father’s only surviving child, and he was able to circumvent his daughter’s inheritance, because he willed his property to his brother. The property willed to his brother’s family then followed their male lineage, taken out of Lady Clifford’s family entirely. Although the property was legally meant for the heir of the estate, the will of Lady Clifford’s father stripped her of any profitable bequest. It was not until a woman was the last legitimate heir of a man, or a widow, that she received political or economic rights. Considering the psychology of the sixteenth century placed the man at the head of the household as the only suitable and capable gender to fill that role, the usurpation by the perceived “weaker” females happened rarely. If a male heir, no matter how loose the connection existed, men willed their estates to those distant relatives. Until it became clear that no male relatives existed to inherit, any woman’s sex became her undoing.

However, there were ways for a woman to combat these gross inferiorities against women, through position and society. Often, the practice of sending daughters of impoverished or struggling families to noble households would help them make connections with upper classes, and improve their marriage opportunities:

Elite parents regularly placed their children in the homes of wealthier or better-connected friends and relatives to complete their educations and extend their personal contacts.

² Pearl Hogrefe, “Legal Rights of Tudor Women and the Circumvention by Men and Women,” *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 3, no. 1 (1972): 97.

³ Pearl Hogrefe, “Legal Rights of Tudor Women,” 100.

⁴ Pearl Hogrefe, “Legal Rights of Tudor Women,” 99.

Girls thus often entered the service of high-ranking noblewomen or paid them extended visits...helping them find husbands and introduced them at court.⁵

These connections, often arranged by women, the mothers of these daughters and ladies of elite households, gave women social power, and an arena in which to flex it. They decided who travelled to which home, and the influences and opportunities for the young girls. However, the mothers did not exclude fathers in these decisions, making a female area of power not exclusive.

Through a connection such as this, Bess of Hardwick sought to improve her own standing. The death of her father when she was only one year old, dictated much of the rest of her life. Bess came from the family of an impoverished country gentleman, but not one part of the aristocracy or upper echelons of Elizabethan society. Her father's death left her and each of her female siblings the same amount of money, a typical practice: "daughters shared equally."⁶ While left some little money, Bess by no means inherited a large fortune. Her father's position, although esteemed, in no way positioned him to leave enough money to provide enticing dowries for his daughters. After this typical, equal division of money, many women sought the placements in these households to help elevate their station in life. Such was Bess' childhood; she landed a position as a young, gentle, waiting woman, with the Zouche family in hopes of garnering connections, references, and social introductions. In the service of Lady Anne Zouche, Bess had the task of caring for members of the household. Following tradition, this task put Bess in a position of caring for the young Robert Barlow, a member of the household, elder son, and one of the estate's heirs.⁷ After nursing Robert Barlow back to health, per her duties as a waiting woman for the Zouches, a bond arose between the two teenagers, and a marriage arranged.

Despite this alleviation of economic worry for Bess and her family, it was only temporary. This

⁵ Barbara Harris, "Women and Politics in Early Tudor England," *Cambridge University Press* 33, no. 2 (1990): 263.

⁶ Pearl Hoegrefe, "Legal Rights of Tudor Women," 98.

⁷ Mary S. Lovell, *Bess of Hardwick: First Lady of Chatsworth* (London: Abacus, 2008), 20.

first match to Robert Barlow, made Bess a young bride, but a strikingly young widow. The marriage took place, but Robert Barlow's poor health made a vigorous resurgence and led to his death less than a year after their matrimony. Per Elizabethan customs, Bess returned to her family estate, but with the capital left to her by her deceased husband. However, relatives of the Zouche family opposed the young widow's right to the wealth of her young spouse. By the age of sixteen, Bess and the Hardwick family were hard at work fighting for Bess' widow's jointure upon the death of Robert Barlow.

As was the case with young Robert Barlow and Bess, "if the bridegroom was underage...the father assigned property to him as a jointure for his bride in case she became a widow."⁸ Underage marriages were commonplace in the Elizabethan age⁹ and unlike marriages recognized by modern societies, these alliances had more economic and dynastic motives. These nuptials arose to secure the marriage of children, and ensure their part in the social institutions of the day. Marriages gave and elevated the social standing of partners, and helped more people participate in court life and other social establishments of Elizabethan England. Legally and economically, families united through their children benefitted because they secured family lineages and kept estates within families, often adding to the general wealth of the family. This was the case for the Barlow-Hardwick match. Robert Barlow's father, Arthur Barlow, suffered from an illness, which made him eager to organize a marriage for his son. If Arthur Barlow had died "while Robert was still a minor ... the property and lands at Barlow [could have been] taken over by the Office of Wards," thereby taking it out of the family's control.¹⁰ However, while securing Robert Barlow's future, Bess' prospects remained in the balance after his death. Legally entitled to a widow's dower, the Barlow family fought her right to Barlow's wealth. The

⁸ Pearl Hogrefe, "Legal Rights of Tudor Women," 102.

⁹ Lovell, Mary, *Bess of Hardwick*, 30.

¹⁰ Mary Lovell, *Bess of Hardwick*, 23.

main opposition came from surviving, yet distant, male relatives of Robert Barlow who sought his lands and money. It took over a year and a half for Bess to win her case, fighting the surviving heirs of Arthur Barlow and his family. Having done so, she began her independent and colorful life.¹¹ She fought this legal and economic battle against male heirs, eventually winning, a triumphant feat for women legally “inferior” to men. While the law sided with Bess, oftentimes women faced difficulty appealing legal causes against men. This is a testament to Bess’ perseverance and character; intelligence, charisma, and a vivacious nature often attributed to Bess certainly factored into her successes.

This gave Bess her first taste of economic and legal freedom. A widowed woman had “at least, in theory... almost the same rights as men.”¹² Ranging from inherited lands, woods, and lead mines, Bess had resources from which to draw upon for the rest of her adult life due to her widowhood.¹³ Be it housing renovation or being an architectural maverick, Bess used the capital from her first marriage for later projects. However, Bess did not stop with her first marriage and content herself with the jointure she received. While “historians have shown in great detail how aristocratic men exploited matrimony to forge or strengthen their links to other aristocratic families...the arrangement of marriage was not a male monopoly,”¹⁴ which was expressly demonstrated through Bess’ three subsequent marriages. Bess spent the next five years establishing herself at court, particularly in Queen Elizabeth I’s good graces, and building her matrimonial “portfolio”; her climbing of the social hierarchy helped her orchestrate her multiple marriages. She eventually made her way to London, the place of the monarch’s court, and since “the court was also an important focus of upper-class social life [and s]ome upper-class women

¹¹ Mary Lovell, *Bess of Hardwick*, 26-28.

¹² Pearl Hogrefe, “Legal Rights of Tudor Women,” 98.

¹³ Pearl Hogrefe, “Legal Rights of Tudor Women,” 103.

¹⁴ Barbara Harris, “Women and Politics,” 260.

help appointments in the queen's household,"¹⁵ this is exactly what Bess did. Through this position, Bess was able to orchestrate advantageous marriages for herself.

When William Cavendish, Duke of Devonshire, a well-established member of Elizabeth I's court, proposed to Bess, she made an extremely eligible match. While sources vary about the relative ages of the couple, most agree that he was about twice her age, at forty years old.¹⁶ Considering the socio-economic standing of Cavendish, much debate centered on the marriage contract between the two, as "she must have had a settlement at the church door,"¹⁷ meaning there had to be an advantage, monetary or otherwise, for Bess to marry a man twice her age. Many researchers, while acknowledging the benefit of the match, also concede that this match was one of love. Her own words describe him as her "most dear and well beloved husband."¹⁸ Bess herself described the loving attachment between the two, making the marriage a remarkable success for an Elizabethan woman; not only did she arrange her own marriage, but an advantageous one based on genuine affection. There is no way for modern historians to verify the feelings between the two, but the fact that Cavendish left Bess almost all of his property and belongings is testimony to his feelings for her.¹⁹ Cavendish gave Bess position, money, power, and children, and can be considered the catalyst for the rest of her life.

The marriage with Cavendish gave Bess money and power, but more importantly an economic and financial education. As the woman at the head of the household, Bess began keeping track of the accounts of the estate. Being that she was a woman, this is an interesting position for Bess to hold, and an important one demonstrating the ways in which she broke out of the stereotypical female role in Elizabethan society. Generally, "women were not expected to

¹⁵ Barbara Harris, "Women and Politics," 265.

¹⁶ Mary Lovell, *Bess of Hardwick*, 33.

¹⁷ Mary Lovell, *Bess of Hardwick*, 35.

¹⁸ Mary Lovell, *Bess of Hardwick*, 106.

¹⁹ Mary Lovell, *Bess of Hardwick*, 33.

assert any independent authority but were deemed subservient to male relatives whether fathers, brothers or husbands.”²⁰ The dominance of men translated to all aspects of life, especially in regards to the household finances. However, “the financially prudent Sir William would never have allowed his young wife such freedom had she not proved herself capable.”²¹ Through this position, Bess proved that women of this period could, and indeed did, disprove the social confines trying to constrict them.

However, circumstances endangered Bess’ economic independence through events that would have challenged or destroyed most other Elizabethan women without the cunning, poise, and perseverance characteristic of Bess. Just prior to the death of Cavendish in 1557,²² an audit of the royal accounts, of which he was controller, revealed a deficiency in funds. This discrepancy in accounts turned into a personal debt owed by Cavendish and his family. Upon his death, Sir Cavendish, along with his extensive properties, passed this debt on to his widow.²³ Many Elizabethan women in Bess’ position, if they had no surviving male relatives to support or fight for them, had no way to fight for themselves legally or economically. Often, they reverted to their family homes, living with parents or siblings. Bess, however, again demonstrated her unique strength in her fight against Parliament to diminish the debt. It is notable that “few non-royal women of her era- if any- are known to have fought Parliament.”²⁴ Continuing the theme of Bess’ audacity and groundbreaking behavior, she even made personal appearances in Parliament, an unprecedented act by a female.²⁵ All of this she endured to keep the lands to which she was

²⁰ Susan Doran, “ELIZABETH I GENDER, POWER 7 POLITICS,” *History Today* 53, no. 5, (2003), 29.

²¹ Mary Lovell, *Bess of Hardwick*, 54.

²² Mary Lovell, *Bess of Hardwick*, 106.

²³ Mary Lovell, *Bess of Hardwick*, 97.

²⁴ Mary Lovell, *Bess of Hardwick*, 110.

²⁵ Mary Lovell, *Bess of Hardwick*, 110.

entitled from her husband's will intact. This determination and strength became part of Bess' signature in her future endeavors.

Bess orchestrated her other marriages following a similar theme of wealthy husbands, but still maintained authority within the household, economically and legally. Her marriage to William St. Loe, while less of a landmark than her nuptials to Sir William Cavendish, perpetuated her economic independence. Through the marriage to St. Loe, Bess was able to shirk the economic shackles that she inherited from Cavendish. Elizabeth I and her court reduced the fine to a more manageable sum after Bess' determined fights with Parliament, and paid for by St. Loe.²⁶ Bess' third husband added greatly to her economic independence; by removing her debt, the money she inherited on Cavendish's death became hers outright, with no further immediate claim on it. While this economic independence is notable, her means of achieving it were more in line with social norms of this time period. Men of the sixteenth century, while holding the preeminent position in the family, also bore the burden of providing financial security for their wives and family members. In this instance, the stereotypical constricts were followed by Bess; Bess needed St. Loe to help erase the debts and settle her financial stability.

While the marriage with St. Loe initially eased some of the financial burden she suffered, it led to more after his death. Much like Robert Barlow's male relatives trying to thwart the legal and economic rights of Bess after the death of her young husband, St. Loe's brother tried to swindle Bess out of her widow's jointure.²⁷ This hearkens back to her first widowhood upon the death of Robert Barlow. The surviving male relatives of nobles in this society felt entitled to the riches left behind by their kin, even if they were not named in the wills, or were not the closest

²⁶ Mary Lovell, *Bess of Hardwick*, 151.

²⁷ Mary Lovell, *Bess of Hardwick*, 185.

surviving relatives. The will of William St. Loe explicitly stated Bess' right to inherit "all and all manner [of his] leases, farms, plate jewels, hangings, implements of household, debts, goods and chattels, whatsoever, to have, hold, use and enjoy to her own proper use, and behalf."²⁸

Such an explicit statement should have cleared any and all question as to Bess' right to inherit.

However, women were still considered inferior to men, and as such, were often subjected to legal and economic frustrations. Despite these frustrations, Bess, true to form, defied the odds and was able to maintain her autonomy, collecting what was rightfully hers. Not without frustrations and challenges and somewhat unsavory battles with her brother-in-law, Bess endured and persevered after St. Loe's death. Her interminable strength of character led her to survive the death of her husband, but also to achieve yet another.

Her final marriage to the 6th Earl of Shrewsbury, a higher station than her previous husbands, became Bess' crowning achievement, her last marriage and the greatest definition of her achievements. By the time Bess married Shrewsbury in 1567,²⁹ she had been three times married and widowed, owned considerable property and was wealthy in her own right. This connection brought with it perks that emphasized the "dizzying rise from her expectations at birth," making her "one of the most prominent women at Court."³⁰ This position, combined with her lively past, threw her in direct contact with royalty. Queen Elizabeth I herself said about Bess of Hardwick: "I assure you, there is no Lady in this land that I better love and like."³¹ They kept a lively correspondence and established a loving friendship. This very connection to royalty however, led to Bess' ability to flex her muscles of influence. While an overwhelmingly

²⁸ Mary Lovell, *Bess of Hardwick*, 188.

²⁹ I. Shenker and L. Yerkes, "Bess of Hardwick," 72.

³⁰ Mary Lovell, *Bess of Hardwick*, 200.

³¹ Mary Lovell, *Bess of Hardwick*, 200.

beneficial match for Bess, her ambition almost led to her downfall, and she placed herself in a dangerous position.

One of Bess' daughters with Sir Cavendish, named Elizabeth Cavendish, married a royal, Charles Stuart, heir to the Scottish throne. The marriage of any member of the royal family required royal sanction, without which the individuals marrying (and the family attached to them) endangered their lives. While a match unconsented to by Queen Elizabeth, Stuart and Cavendish still married and produced a child, Arbella Stuart. This daughter, granddaughter of Bess, was an heir to the Scottish throne, with a claim to the English throne. It is very clear to modern scholars that this was Bess' intent. She raised Arbella after the death of the young girl's parents, and fostered hopes of her ascension to the throne. The rest of her long life, until her death in 1608,³² was a protracted struggle to control Arbella and place her on the throne. Any woman other than Bess would have been tried for treason had they interfered in such a way with the royal succession. Indeed, "others of lesser importance had been incarcerated in the Tower for years for similar conduct,"³³ and even though Elizabeth ordered Bess' appearance in London, there is no indication of any sentencing or jailing at the Tower.³⁴ However, Bess' economic strength, legal voracity, respect, and prominence as court made her a terrifying opponent. Her high-ranking social position and great accumulation of wealth made Bess extremely influential in aristocratic circles, in addition to her close personal friendship with Elizabeth, dissuaded any serious action against Bess. Usually, men carried a connotation of fear and respect, however, Bess proved herself yet again to be a noteworthy Elizabethan female who assumed male authority. It is interesting to note that "next to Queen Elizabeth herself, that Bess was now the

³² Mary Lovell, *Bess of Hardwick*, 447.

³³ Mary Lovell, *Bess of Hardwick*, 245

³⁴ Mary Lovell, *Bess of Hardwick*, 249

richest – and therefore the second most powerful - woman in England.”³⁵ With great power, however, comes great responsibility, and abuse of that power through the indirect facilitation of her daughter’s marriage almost cost Bess all her wealth and influence. Characteristically, Bess embraced the challenges that arose before her and proved her prowess in socio-legal matters.

Bess’ determination and successes in defying the stereotypical role for Elizabethan women was an inspirational and fierce accomplishment of her day. Despite the ways in which the legal system subjugated women, Bess was able to attain economic freedom, and independence all around, beginning at the age of sixteen. The financial freedom Bess garnered at such a young age allowed her independence not typically enjoyed by Elizabethan women her age. Her marriages later in life helped perpetuate the position Bess established earlier in life, and added to her wealth. Through accounts of her personality and her successes socially and legally, Bess’ personality as a charismatic, intelligent, and ambitious woman granted her the confidence and grace to arrange beneficial marriages for herself. The relationships between Bess and her husbands demonstrate the trust they invested in her, and the way she took control of her household, finances, and familial matters, all of which stereotypically belonged in the male realm. Outside of the home, Bess faced economic troubles that arose from legal complications, such as the royal audits, and from social sources, namely the surviving males in her husbands’ families. Occasionally receiving aid from her spouses, much of the responsibility fell to Bess, and her perseverance demonstrated to her contemporaries, but also to modern scholars, that women could take control of their futures, without overwhelming guidance from male supporters. Bess truly broke out of her assigned gender role, becoming one of the most fascinating, yet underappreciated, women of the Elizabethan age.

³⁵ Mary Lovell, *Bess of Hardwick*, 364.

Appendix 1: Portrait of Bess of Hardwick.³⁶



³⁶ Anniina Jokinen. ““Bess of Hardwick’: Elizabeth Talbot, Countess of Shrewsbury (1518-1608).” *Luminarium: Encyclopedia Project*. Last modified April 15, 2009

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