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“A VERY GODDESS OF PERSUASION:”  
MARY DUDLEY SIDNEY AS AN EXEMPLAR OF WOMEN’S POLITICAL  
SIGNIFICANCE IN ELIZABETHAN ENGLAND

By

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“A VERY GODDESS OF PERSUASION:” MARY DUDLEY SIDNEY AS AN EXEMPLAR  
OF WOMEN’S POLITICAL SIGNIFICANCE IN ELIZABETHAN ENGLAND

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University of Nebraska, 2011

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Elizabeth’s England saw the emergence of formal institutions of political power, but the importance of the personal politics, ruled by patronage, reputation, and favor still held. Looking at the ways that women participated in personal politics, through their communication and patronage networks, illuminates how women gained political power in sixteenth century England.

The intersection of personal politics and a female queen allowed women to The intersection of personal politics and a female queen allowed women to maintain significant political power in Elizabethan England. Women at Elizabeth’s court gained great political importance through their proximity to the queen, their ability to direct patronage and their importance as information sources. Mary Sidney’s actions throughout her life exemplify how women used patronage and information sharing to hold political power in Elizabeth’s reign.

Early modern English dependence on personal relationship and patronage allowed women to hold political power and influence despite their absence from the formal structures of political and governmental power. The presence of a reigning Queen only increased the amount of influence and power that aristocratic women held in the sixteenth century. Mary Sidney’s actions and the way that she was represented clearly show that women in Elizabeth’s court controlled real political power.

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## Introduction

In 1586, Thomas Moffett characterized Mary Dudley Sidney as, “surpassing her sex and her generation in excellence of wit and of skill in arts;...she charmed the minds and ears of conversants and to a degree appeared to be the very goddess of Persuasion.”<sup>1</sup> Moffett’s characterization of Mary Dudley Sidney shows a woman of extraordinary intelligence with a skill for maneuvering court politics and persuasion. Mary Dudley Sidney possessed all the characteristics and skills necessary to gain political power and influence at Elizabeth’s court. Mary Dudley Sidney was a member of the noble and politically significant Dudley family, was extremely well educated in the humanist tradition and played a political role to clear her brother’s treason charges. Mary Sidney’s position at court, as a member of Elizabeth’s Privy Chamber, allowed her to take on a political mission and made her essential to her family’s favor and patronage network.

The question of women’s political power and influence in Elizabeth’s court remains one of the few areas of Tudor government and politics that remains undeveloped. This is partially due to the emphasis placed on the formal structures of power that emerged and developed under the Tudor monarchs. But even Geoffrey Elton, the “doyen of Tudor politics,” and champion of placing political power and influence in the formal structures argues that the women of Elizabeth’s privy chamber deserve study as part of the political history of Elizabeth’s reign.<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth’s England saw the emergence of formal institutions of political power, but the importance of the personal politics, ruled by

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Moffett, *Nobilis; or, A View of the Life and Death of a Sidney, and Lessus lugubris*, Trans. Virgil B. Heltzel and Hoyt H. Hudson, (San Marino, Calif.: Huntington Library, 1940), 86

<sup>2</sup> Geoffrey R. Elton, *Studies in Tudor and Stuart Politics and Government, Volume 3 Papers and Reviews 1973-1981*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1983), 53.

patronage, reputation, and favor still held. Looking at the ways that women participated in personal politics, through their communication and patronage networks, illuminates how women gained political power in sixteenth century England.

The intersection of personal politics and a female queen allowed women to maintain significant political power in Elizabethan England. Women at Elizabeth's court gained great political importance through their proximity to the queen, their ability to direct patronage and their importance as information sources. Mary Sidney's actions throughout her life exemplify how women used patronage and information sharing to hold political power in Elizabeth's reign.

### **Chapter 1: Historiography**

The way that scholars approach the topic of women and politics in early modern England has fundamentally changed in the last 30 years; scholars often take one of two approaches when looking at aristocratic women's political involvement during Elizabeth's reign. Some view politics in a very traditional way, granting power and influence to institutions in the same way that politics and government have been studied under kings. The major work that follows this method is Pam Wright's 1987 article "A Change in Direction: The Ramifications of a Female Household, 1558-1603," the earliest work in the conversation. This structured view severely limits the attribution of power to women. The opposing method of studying women's political involvement finds its basis in feminist history, asserting that politics were personal, looking beyond institutions and

structures to find the personal relationships and networks of influence that affected politics. Once scholars expand the definition of politics and power to include these elements, women's agency and influence greatly increases. This method of studying women in politics has become much more prevalent and the work of Natalie Mears embodies this methodology.

David Starkey, in his introduction to *The English Court*, keeps with conventional court history even though he argues against the most traditional "Eltonian" history. He maintains that the history of the court is the history of the Privy Chamber and that it must be approached as an institution to assess its political importance. Starkey's focus on a rigid separation of public and private and the ceremonial and personal and on the structure and institution of the Privy Chamber, allows him to state that Elizabeth's reign saw no changes to the Privy Chamber, just small tweaks. However, this assertion of the importance of the Privy Chamber does not apply to Elizabeth; in fact, most of what Starkey argues he insists does not actually apply to Elizabeth's Privy Chamber. Starkey goes on to stress that the various characterizations of monarchs do not mean much in regards to female leaders because the nature of leadership and the relationship with the Privy Chamber was so deeply influenced by gender. Starkey argues that Elizabeth's Privy Chamber was a barrier to politics because the sex of its members made them apolitical, further that it was exceptional in that it separated the public and private for the Queen. Throughout his piece, Starkey contends that the Privy Chamber was completely separated from politics, another exception from other Privy Chambers.<sup>3</sup> In many ways Starkey

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<sup>3</sup> David Starkey, "Introduction: Court History in Perspective," introduction to *The English Court: from the Wars of the Roses to the Civil War*, by David Starkey et al. (New York: Longman, 1987), 2, 5, 6, 8, 9.

asserts that Elizabeth's Privy Chamber was the exception, based on the lack of members' involvement in politics, overlap with the council, balance of power between the chamber and the council, separation of public and private, and the list goes on.

Pam Wright asserts that the reign of Elizabeth saw a decline in the power of the Privy Chamber due to the female gender of the majority, the administration and politics of the Privy Chamber declined while the domestic function of the chamber increased. Wright clearly takes a formal, institutional view of the Privy Chamber, using the lack of formal changes to the structure of the council as reasoning for the lack of power of the women. Henry VII formed the offices of the Privy Chamber for political reasons and Wright states that because the Elizabethan Privy Chamber was not political and it did not need to be adjusted. Wright additionally remarks that Elizabeth took over the Queen Consort's Privy Chamber, further suggesting the lack of political involvement of Elizabeth's Privy Chamber. Her review of the formal positions of Privy Chamber women shows the prevalence of domestic titles and the abandon of administrative ones, showing her dependence on institution and structure.<sup>4</sup>

One of Wright's strongest and most influential assertions is that the women of the Privy Chamber were not allowed to act with their own initiative. She allows that women of the Privy Chamber held some power as patrons but insists that any independent patronage was quickly punished, such as with Kat Ashley's involvement in marriage negotiations with Eric of Sweden, which led to house arrest. Wright asserts that the women of the Privy Chamber's patronage was for their own profit and interest and not

<sup>4</sup> Pam Wright, "A Change in Direction: the Ramifications of a Female Household, 1558-1603," in *The English Court: from the Wars of the Roses to the Civil War*, by David Starkey et al. (New York: Longman, 1987), 147, 148, 150.



geared towards public affairs. She also importantly claims that any power the Privy Chamber maintained was in the hands of the few men who held positions in the Privy Chamber. Wright emphasizes the women of the Privy Chamber's political inactivity in other ways, stating that "as women her ladies could not be faction leaders" and that as Elizabeth's "family" they were not even faction followers, as their first loyalty was to Elizabeth, keeping the political upheaval from the Privy Chamber. She stresses the rule Elizabeth put in place banning her women from political involvement and her own resolve not to discuss "business" with her ladies.<sup>5</sup>

Another lasting legacy of Wright's study of Elizabeth's Privy Chamber is her statement that the most important political actions of women of the Privy Chamber were to be "barometers of the queen's mood," helping privy councilors, ambassadors and other member of court gauge when was the best time to bring issues to the Queen.<sup>6</sup> Her term appears in other works, like Natalie Mears' and Simon Adams, and seems to best explain the relationship between the women of the Privy Chamber and the men of the court who held formal political positions. In the age when personal access to the Queen was key, this seems to be a crucial role, but Wright goes on to state that even this role is not that important in the scheme of male run court politics. Her final assessment of Privy Chamber women's political involvement is, "political involvements happened but they were often accidental, rarely sustained and never pursued to the utmost. Nor frankly were they very important."<sup>7</sup> Wright's insistence on viewing power as formal involvement in

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<sup>5</sup> Wright, 159-160.

<sup>6</sup> Wright, 166.

<sup>7</sup> Wright, 172.

written records leads her to discount Privy Chamber women's power and agency in the politics of Elizabethan England.

To discuss aristocratic women's involvement in politics one must mention the work of Barbara Harris, which is fundamentally different from Starkey's. Her indispensable work on the lives of aristocratic women in Yorkist and early Tudor England focuses on the networks of women's alliances that allowed them involvement in the politics of the era. Many, including James Daybell and Natalie Mears, credit Barbara Harris' work with beginning the trend towards the more inclusive view of politics and the incorporation of women's roles into the realm of political influence and power. Harris' work is foundational because she argues for broadening the definition of what constitutes politics, to acknowledge women's influence and power in politics. She forces a reevaluation of the separation of domestic and political and private and public to argue that women's roles and careers as wives and mothers had political significance.<sup>8</sup> The personal mode of politics, based on relationships and a dependence on unpaid aristocracy in early modern England made networks of family, neighbors, servants, and clients essential. Women's networks of natal and marital families, as well as local connections made the early modern era the height of women's political power. She argues that women's networks were as significant as male networks when it came to a family's political power and that female networks "played an important role in the informal, but essential, dimension of Yorkist and Tudor politics."<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Barbara J. Harris, "Sisterhood, Friendship and the Power of English Aristocratic Women 1450-1450," in *Women and Politics in Early Modern England, 1450-1700*, ed. James Daybell (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2003), 22.

<sup>9</sup> Harris, "Sisterhood, Friendship and the Power of English Aristocratic Women 1450-1450," 22.

In regards to the Privy Chamber, Harris relates the patronage of women at court to that exhibited by aristocratic women in their own homes. She shows the parallels between women letting minors into their homes and the work of women of the court to have daughters of family and friends appointed to the court. This recruitment gave ladies control over important royal patronage and power within the court. In situations of patronage it is important to note one of Harris' other finding, that women's natal kin dominated their female networks and were generally preferred in favors.<sup>10</sup> Harris' work mined a variety of primary sources, particularly wills and letters, to expose women's networks and alliances and examine the ways that women used these contacts to their advantage in material ways such as in childbirth, arranging marriages and placing children in aristocratic households. However, importantly for my work, women used these ties to increase the political power of their families, and thus themselves.

In her 1987 PhD dissertation "All the Queen's Women: the changing place and perception of aristocratic women in Elizabethan England 1558-1620," Joan Greenbaum Goldsmith argues that the women of Elizabeth's Privy Chamber experienced a rise in power and were at the forefront of court politics because Elizabeth ruled through her ladies. Significantly, Goldsmith contends that their domestic positions close to the queen allowed them to influence royal policy and patronage. She affirms that early in Elizabeth's sovereignty, the women of the Privy Chamber were intercessors and mediators but during the course of the reign they moved to hold the possession of real and direct political power. The women of Elizabeth's Privy Chamber held political power

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<sup>10</sup> Harris, "Sisterhood, Friendship and the Power of English Aristocratic Women 1450-1450," 26, 36.

in the traditional sense, literally and in importance replacing the men who had surrounded the throne.<sup>11</sup>

Elizabeth's power makes the Privy Chamber women "powerful new pieces on the chessboard of court politics" and that their positions close to the Queen "lent them an authority that rivaled that of male ministers and councilors."<sup>12</sup> Goldsmith's work, contemporary to Wright's, shows women as politically significant in a male framework. It does much to wipe out Wright's assertions that the women's patronage was only for personal material gain, noting that they participated in patronage for state matters. Goldsmith continues to look at the structure of the court as unchanged from previous monarchs and this is representative of the rest of her work where she focuses on institution and structure to give power to women, and I do not think that is where the issues lies.

Many fascinating assertions fill the dissertation, such as Goldsmith's assertion that Elizabeth's reign caused a change in the gender power relationship in aristocratic households but I am not sure Goldsmith has the evidence to back them up.<sup>13</sup> Her work on Elizabeth's ladies depends on generalizations and broad strokes and lacks the specific examples that would really illuminate her argument. Some of this is because the amount of time she devotes to other aspects of studying women in Elizabethan England, such as an immense explanation of the tasks, duties and daily minutia of Elizabeth's ladies. In her study of literature of the era where she looks at prescriptions for and depictions of women

<sup>11</sup> Joan Greenbaum Goldsmith, "All the Queen's Women: the Changing Place and Perception of Aristocratic Women in Elizabethan England 1558-1620" (PhD diss., Northwestern University, 1987), 2, 3.

<sup>12</sup> Goldsmith, 57, 50.

<sup>13</sup> Goldsmith, 3.

and the societal effects of female rule on aristocratic women, she asserts as the real purpose of her study.

Elizabeth Brown is on the path to giving women of Elizabeth's Privy Chamber more political power in her 1999 essay, "Companion Me with My Mistress:" Cleopatra, Elizabeth I, and Their Waiting Women." Brown claims that to strengthen her reign Elizabeth used her Privy Chamber as a strategy for power, echoing Goldsmith's view of these women as chess pieces. As opposed to Wright, Brown argues that the women of the Privy Chamber had politically significant functions, managing of access to the queen and extending the Queen's authority through their own presence. She also contends that others acknowledged the Privy Chamber women held power because of their ability to influence the Queen. Significantly, Brown claims that with a female monarch there is no separation between public and private. The private roles of the Privy Chamber women were inherently public, meaning that the women of the Privy Chamber could not be apolitical, as Wright and Starkey claim.<sup>14</sup> Brown's assertions that Elizabeth consciously used her Privy Chamber women for political gain and that they were inherently political significant counters the views of Wright and Starkey, but unfortunately, without specific evidence presents a weak challenge. With her main focus on literary criticism of the representation of the relationship between Queen's and their waiting women in Shakespeare's *Cleopatra*, Brown, like Goldsmith, makes interesting and important claims but lacks support to back them up.

<sup>14</sup> Elizabeth A. Brown, "'Companion Me with My Mistress': Cleopatra, Elizabeth I, and Their Waiting Women," in *Maids and Mistresses, Cousins and Queens: Women's Alliances in Early Modern England*, ed. Susan Frye and Karen Robertson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 131, 132, 133.

The clearest opposition to Wright's judgment of Privy Chamber women is Natalie Mears' "Politics in the Elizabethan Privy Chamber: Lady Mary Sidney and Kat Ashley" in *Women and Politics in Early Modern England*. Mears asserts, "our conceptualization of Elizabethan court politics remains strongly institutional."<sup>15</sup> She argues that traditional views of Elizabeth's reign have placed too much emphasis on the power and influence of the Privy Council, taking Alymer's emphasis on council and counsel too seriously. Furthermore, the Privy Chamber held a significant place in court politics and that the women of the Privy Chamber should be reexamined under a wider context of political activity. Mears' suggests that the Privy Chamber and its female members could and did have a more significant role in court politics than Wright allowed.

When viewed in a wider context, the actions of Privy Chamber women gain more political significance. Mary Sidney, Kat Ashley and Dorthey Broadbelte, three of Elizabeth's most trusted Privy Chambers, are the clearest examples of the way that Privy Chamber women could be involved in diplomatic relations and policymaking in their roles in the Archduke Charles and the Eric of Sweden match, but Mears argues it was not unique. Elizabeth used her Privy Chamber women for political causes, such as Mary Sidney's discussions with the Spanish Ambassador, but that the Queen became angry when others, particularly men, interfered and tried to force her into decisions and action. Mears opposes Wright's view that women used patronage and the little influence they had for their own monetary gain and states that they did use their patronage for familial

<sup>15</sup> Natalie Mears, "Politics in the Elizabethan Privy Chamber: Lady Mary Sidney and Kat Ashley," in *Women and Politics in Early Modern England, 1450-1700*, ed. James Daybell (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2003), 68.

interest but the women also showed an interest in state and European issues as well as a commitment to ideological issues.

Following her own suggestion to look beyond the surface of political actions, Mears argues that the administrative changes that Wright makes so much of are less important than the Privy Chamber women's role as 'barometers of the Queen's mood,' which Wright dismissed as insignificant. She believes that the women's roles as points of access and barometers were crucial to the running of politics and court. Getting information or opinions to Elizabeth when she was in the right mood could be the difference between a favorable decision and her ignoring the topic entirely. Though the Privy chamber women did not achieve the formally recognized importance of men, they were not confined to domestic roles, as they were involved in diplomatic or important state issues.

Mears' most notable assertion is that Elizabeth functioned with an informal network of individuals that she favored and trusted. Mears questions the power and influence that has been ascribed to the Privy Council and instead places it with individuals of the court.<sup>16</sup> Her reallocation of power allows Elizabeth's relationships with the Privy Chamber to become more important because she placed the most importance and gave power to individuals and not institutions. Mears asserts that Elizabeth was able to utilize the women's female networks that Harris describes to communicate her wishes easily and informally, just one example of how deinstitutionalized power made its way into female hands.

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<sup>16</sup> Mears, 69, 71, 73, 75, 77.

James Daybell in “Introduction: Rethinking Women and Politics in Early Modern England” in *Women and Politics in Early Modern England* argues that historians are too hesitant to attribute power, influence and agency to women and too quick to leave women marginalized in the domestic sphere. Like Harris, whom he attributes with creating the framework for the study of women’s political involvement, he states that history must be reconceptualized to account for the more personal nature of early modern politics.

Daybell has a few opinions on the best ways to study women’s political involvement in early modern England. He asserts that the interdisciplinary study is crucial to finding women in politics in early modern England. Additionally, simply recovering women’s roles in formal, traditional political history will only lead to further belief in women’s incapacity, but if an emphasis is placed on the non-institutional, personal nature of patronage, women’s networks of marital alliances, kinship and social contacts show how central women were to early modern politics. Women’s history should not just be tacked on to men’s history but should challenge traditional narratives.<sup>17</sup>

Daybell acknowledges that it can be difficult to find women’s political power in the archives but that rereading traditional documents with a broader definition of politics can usually expose women’s political activities. He notes the centrality of letter writing to women’s political involvement and, in fact, states that “there is a correlation between a woman’s languages and her self-perception of power.”<sup>18</sup> Daybell concludes by affirming

<sup>17</sup> James Daybell, "Introduction: Rethinking Women and Politics in Early Modern England," introduction to *Women and Politics in Early Modern England, 1450-1700*, ed. James Daybell (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2003), 1, 2,4,8, 9.

<sup>18</sup> Daybell, Introduction: Rethinking Women and Politics in Early Modern England, 13, 14.



that redefining politics to recognize women's roles and activities as political will be key to future study.

In her 2007 Ph.D. dissertation, "Busy Bodies: Women Power and Politics at the Court of Elizabeth I, 1558-1603," Catherine Howey argues that the women of the Privy Chamber's service of Elizabeth's bodily needs allowed them to participate in politics. Like Daybell, Mears, and Harris, Howey makes a case for a broader understanding of politics that permits women's actions to be viewed as political. Howey examines the patronage system of Elizabeth's court and contends that the Privy Chamber women's constant access to the Queen as well as her councilors made the Privy Chamber women important figures in Elizabethan patronage. Additionally, she argues that women's inclusion and use of men in the patronage networks does not lessen their political significance, it only shows that the women were politically perceptive and used many channels to benefit their clients.<sup>19</sup>

In addition to looking at patronage to explain the Privy Chamber women's political involvement, Howey asserts that the women of the Privy Chamber acted "as an extension of the queen, relaying her pleasure or displeasure with a subject" which was "one of their most important political roles."<sup>20</sup> She suggests that Elizabeth used her Privy Chamber women to act as her eyes and ears, as well as her "mouthpiece."<sup>21</sup> Additionally, Howey argues that the Queen used her Privy Chamber women as "surrogates who extended her authority to places outside the palace" with their presence at special events like weddings and

<sup>19</sup> Catherine Howey, "Busy Bodies: Women Power and Politics at the Court of Elizabeth I, 1558-1603" (PhD diss., Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, 2007) 19, 18, 22, 27, 73.

<sup>20</sup> Howey, 22.

<sup>21</sup> Howey, 70.

christenings and some state functions.<sup>22</sup> In her examination of the Privy Chamber women as representative of Elizabeth's authority, Howey includes many fascinating sections on the importance of dress and other physical ways that the women represented Elizabeth's authority.

Like Mears, Daybell, and Harris, Howey's emphasis on the informal role women took in Elizabethan politics illuminates the possibilities for women to gain political significance. Howey's work is useful in understanding the importance of the patronage system to women gaining political importance. Howey's focus on women's political role as representations of Elizabeth's authority strongly shows women's political involvement in Elizabeth's court but does not address women's political agency. Additionally, Howey's focus is rather broad, encompassing all of the women of the Privy Chamber throughout Elizabeth's forty-five year reign.

There are many conclusions to draw from the work that has been done on women's political involvement in early modern England, but the central element is the importance of looking past the top layer of women's lives and broadening the definition of politics to encompass women's activities. Multiple authors address Elizabeth's policy that her women not be involved in politics and many note that taking it too seriously makes it too easy for historians to ignore women's political involvement. It seems that the role of women of the Privy Chamber, thought not political in title, was essential to politics of the Elizabeth's reign.

Wright's work constantly brings up questions about her conclusions and assumptions. Wright's focus on looking at what was formally established leaves many

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<sup>22</sup> Howey 1

things unexamined because it just looks at the surface of women of the Privy Chamber's political involvement. She actively denies women power and agency in the politics of Elizabeth's court, repeatedly stating that women were less influential than the few men of the Chamber and that they were merely acting for their male family members. One of the most lasting impacts of Wright's work has been the view of the Privy Chamber women as "barometers of the Queen's mood," which she argues was unimportant, but I believe it to be a crucial role for politics in Elizabeth's court to function.

Feminist inspired scholars address similar questions to what I asked of Wright. Mears' work, unfortunately, takes so much time directly addressing the issues in Wright that she lacks a cohesive statement of Privy Chamber women's political involvement. She makes some sweeping and exciting assertions about the importance of the Privy Chamber in relation to the Privy Council but does not have the space to flesh out her argument. Mears' argument that Elizabeth ruled based on personal connections and preference and not institutional authority is crucial to understanding and allowing women to hold political power.

Barbara Harris' work is foundational. Understanding the nature of women's networks is crucial to comprehending the way women functioned politically and how their political roles stemming from the Privy Chamber were similar or different to the ways other aristocratic women functioned.

## **Chapter 2: Early Modern English Aristocratic Women's Political Involvement**

The politics of early modern England were governed by a system of personal politics, which allowed aristocratic women to be involved in politics on a local and national level. Many factors came into play to allow women political influence in a patriarchal world, the most important being the lack of a separation between public and private allowing the domestic to become political and a political system based on relationships.<sup>23</sup>

Politics in pre-modern England was based on personal relationships and connections alongside newly formed institutions of government. The closest men to the monarch were the most trusted and most loyal, these men by extension were the men who held the most political power. The personal aspect of politics allowed women to gain and access political power because when politics are personal they are based on reputation and relationships, something that women as wives as mothers can influence. Scholars, like Barbara Harris, have shown that although women, particularly noble women in pre-modern England, are thought to have no access to real political power, through their actions in typically feminine roles in connection with male kin, women could affect political discourse and change.

The importance of personal politics is essential to seeing women's influence on politics. Despite the formalization of structure of the English government in the sixteenth century, government still depended on the nobility to carry out policies locally, this local management allowed women to play a role in politics. Aristocratic women's roles as

<sup>23</sup> Daybell, "Introduction: Rethinking Women and Politics in Early Modern England," 2, 3.

wives allowed women political influence. The majority of pre-modern noble wives were in charge of managing the family estate and finances.<sup>24</sup> Noble women were instrumental to their husband's political power because while men were away at court or war, the wives had to keep the estate running. This entailed not only taking care of the land but also arbitrating disputes and making sure the dependants on the estate were taken care of.<sup>25</sup> In this way, women could have a great influence on local politics when they took over for their husbands. This was particularly true for women like Mary Sidney, whose husbands held government offices that kept them away from the family estate. There were many times when Mary took over in Henry's absence during his various postings to Ireland, the Welsh Marches, and France. Mary detailed her accounts related to running the estate in her *Ladyes Book* and the accounts of the family estate, *Penshurst* show money was paid to her to pay the employees of the estate.<sup>26</sup>

Through their relationship with their husbands, women could also become influential in politics on a larger scale. The dependence of the government on unpaid aristocracy to represent the government and carry out its policies away from London allowed women, through the men in their families, to exert political influence.

Additionally, the rise in education for aristocratic women after 1500 gave women the same intellectual tools as men and helped women to gain a better understanding of

<sup>24</sup> Barbara Harris, "Space, Time and Power of Aristocratic Women in York and Early Tudor England," in *Time, Space and Women's Lives in Early Modern Europe*, eds. Anne Jacobson Schutte, Thomas Kuehn, Silvana Seidel Menchi, (Kirksville, Mo.: Truman State University Press, 2001), 247, 253, 264.

<sup>25</sup> Sharon Michalove, "The Education of Aristocratic Women in Fifteenth Century England," In *Estrangement, Enterprise and Education in Fifteenth Century England (Fifteenth Century Series)*, ed. Sharon Michalove and A. Compton Reeves, (Stroud: Alan Sutton Publishing, 1999), 118.

<sup>26</sup> Great Britain Royal Commission on Historical Manuscripts, *Report on the manuscripts of Lord de l'Isle & Dudley preserved at Penshurst*, (London, H. M. Stationery Office, 1925), 258, 260.

politics and the issues of the era, such as religion and government.<sup>27</sup> Their humanist education also allowed women to have the same cultural references as their husbands, making the discussion of current events easier. As women were trusted partners in running estates and maintaining families it should not be too surprising if men viewed their wives as helpmates in their political careers as well. The well-educated Mildred Cooke Cecil, known as one of the two best-educated women in Elizabeth's era, was viewed as so influential to her husband William Cecil's political decisions that contemporaries like the Spanish ambassador De Silva lamented the hold she had on her husband's actions.<sup>28</sup>

In an era of personal politics based on relationships, women's networks of kin and neighbors were an essential part of their political influence and involvement. Many scholars, most centrally Barbara Harris but also Sarah Mendelson and Patricia Crawford, have examined the female networks that encompassed English women's lives. Central to women's networks were kin groups made up of both natal family and marital family. As members of a patrilocal society women were surrounded by their husband's family upon marriage, creating the need to form bonds with local, marital kin, but evidence of patronage shows that natal kin was most important to women's networks.<sup>29</sup> The addition of women's natal kin networks widened spheres of influence for their husbands and sons and the expanse of women's networks allowed the political influence of their husbands to

<sup>27</sup> Pearl Hogrefe, *Tudor Women: Commoners and Queens*, (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1975), xiii.

<sup>28</sup> Mary Ellen Lamb, "The Cooke Sisters and Attitudes Toward Learned Women in Renaissance England," in *Silent but for the word: Tudor women as patrons, translators, and writers of religious works*, ed. Margaret P. Hannay (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1985) 111.

<sup>29</sup> Barbara Harris, *English Aristocratic Women, 1450-1550: Marriage and Family, Property and Careers*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 175.

increase its reach. Women also formed local non-kin networks with women within their social status and outside of it. These networks functioned independent of men and allowed women to aid each other in day-to-day tasks, as well as major life events. They also acted to tie men to the local nobility and reinforce their role in local politics.

Women's networks influenced politics in a few ways. Women were instrumental in arranging marriages for their children and generally worked within their established networks to do so.<sup>30</sup> These marriages had political significance, particularly if they aligned two important families. Women's networks also acted as information hubs, transferring political information from court into the countryside.<sup>31</sup> Women's support for members of their networks appears in cases of contested dowries and inheritance, the strongest supporters of aristocratic women in legal fights were their female kin.<sup>32</sup> These fights could have political significance, women who were at court were particularly important to their female networks, as they commonly intervened in legal and other matters at the court for their kin.<sup>33</sup>

The tradition of aristocratic women's political involvement in early modern England allowed women like Mary Sidney to exert political power and control political influence in Elizabeth's court.

<sup>30</sup> Harris, "Sisterhood, Friendship and the Power of English Aristocratic Women," 22, 41, 25.

<sup>31</sup> Harris, *English Aristocratic Women, 1450-1550*, 176.

<sup>32</sup> Mary Ellen Lamb, "The Cooke Sisters and Attitudes Toward Learned Women in Renaissance England," 121.

<sup>33</sup> Harris, "Sisterhood, Friendship and the Power of English Aristocratic Women," 39.

### Chapter 3: Women's Talk

The combination of personal politics and women's networks allowed women to gain political influence in early modern England; one of the important ways that these two aspects interact to influence politics was through women's talk. Much of women's talk has been deemed insignificant and the term gossip denotes this, which is unfortunate and incorrect. Gossip and women's talk is crucial to studying political power in early modern England due to the importance of reputation.

Gossip's bad name began during Elizabeth's reign. Gossip derives from the term God Sibs, those who would stand with the parents during a child's baptism. By the mid sixteenth century, it became related exclusively to women, referring to the women present at the birth of a child. Gossips were the closest friends a woman had. The first negative appearance of the word shows up in 1567 referring to a woman who "delights in idle talk" but also refers to her as a newsmonger, which will prove significant later.<sup>34</sup> However the new, rather negative, meaning of the term may not have been widespread until after Elizabeth's reign, as an English to Spanish dictionary from 1599 lists three different words that translated into gossip, all involving a type of friend.<sup>35</sup>

Scholars, like Patricia Meyers Spacks, Bernard Capp, Harold Love and Kevin Sharpe, debate what constitutes gossip in both the modern world and a historical sense.

Gossip in its broadest sense can mean idle talk, the basic giving and receiving

<sup>34</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (Oxford University Press, 1989), s.v. "Gossip," [http://0-dictionary.oed.com.library.unl.edu/cgi/entry/50219874?single=1&query\\_type=word&queryword=gossip&first=1&max\\_to\\_show=10](http://0-dictionary.oed.com.library.unl.edu/cgi/entry/50219874?single=1&query_type=word&queryword=gossip&first=1&max_to_show=10) (accessed November 20, 2010).

<sup>35</sup> Richard Perceval, *A Dictionary in Spanish and English*, London: Edm. Bollifant, 1599, in *Lexicons of Early Modern English*.



information.<sup>36</sup> Using this broad definition, Bernard Capp assert that gossip was very informative, about not just individuals but happenings.<sup>37</sup> Harold Love argues that gossip is only gossip if it is concerned with behavior that departs from social norms, presents people as types, and is shared with the intention to entertain.<sup>38</sup> Using the function of gossip's concern with social norms, Love asserts that gossip serves a social function by defining boundaries of acceptable behavior for various social positions like the wives, mothers, single women and widows. Gossip can also define boundaries for male roles such as husbands, landlords, local office holders and even nobles and national political figures. Harold Love argues that the purpose of gossip in the early modern community was to question the reputations of individuals.<sup>39</sup> Capp, Love, and Spacks agree that gossip involves reputations, an important element in the study of the informal politics of Elizabeth's reign.

The use of a social science perspective of gossip's use of spreading information, along with Bernard Capp's explanation that gossip in early modern society involved the discussion and dissemination of information about events, elevates women's gossip to a similar level of use as men's communications in the understanding of the past. Patricia Meyers Spacks asserts that men's talk is commonly accepted as news while women's talk has been relegated to gossip, based on the assumption that because women's talk will be

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<sup>36</sup> Patricia Meyers Spacks, *Gossip*, New York: A.A. Knopf, 1985, 5.

<sup>37</sup> Bernard Capp, *When Gossips Meet: Women, Family, and Neighbourhood in Early Modern England*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 273.

<sup>38</sup> Harold Love, "Gossip and Biography," in *Writing Lives: Biography and Textuality, Identity and Representation in Early Modern England*, eds. Kevin Sharpe and Steven N. Zwicker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 93.

<sup>39</sup> Love, 93, 97.

private it is unimportant.<sup>40</sup> The limited separation of public and private lives for the nobility and members of the court, particularly women in early modern England, makes women's talk just as much news as men's talk when judging based on the public nature of it.

A gossip could also be a newsmonger, "a person busily involved in the collection and narrating of news," asserting the connection with women's talk and the sharing and passing of news.<sup>41</sup> Harold Love recognizes that gossip was a subset of news, particularly a kind of news that was concerned with individuals, making much of women's talk a more personal kind of news.<sup>42</sup> Bernard Capp argues that women's talk discussed both people and events and did not cover different subjects than men's talk.<sup>43</sup>

As a cursory glance at the correspondence included in the State Papers shows, men's communications were full of information about individuals, proving that communication was similar regardless of gender. A 1560 letter between Nicholas Throckmorton, Elizabeth's ambassador in France and Henry Killebrew demonstrates this. They discussed diplomatic issues, such as Elizabeth's marriage negotiations with the Swedish prince and the English fleet's position and leadership, but much of the letter was devoted to discussing the fortunes of others. Killebrew noted the health and activities of a variety of members of the court, including Mary Sidney giving birth while attending

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<sup>40</sup> Spacks, 34, 37.

<sup>41</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (Oxford University Press, 1989), s.v. "Newsmonger," [http://0-dictionary.oed.com.library.unl.edu/cgi/entry/50219874?single=1&query\\_type=word&queryword=newsmonger&first=1&max\\_to\\_show=10](http://0-dictionary.oed.com.library.unl.edu/cgi/entry/50219874?single=1&query_type=word&queryword=newsmonger&first=1&max_to_show=10) (accessed November 20, 2010).

<sup>42</sup> Love, 92.

<sup>43</sup> Bernard Capp, "Separate Domains: Women and Authority in Early Modern England," in *The Experience of Authority in Early Modern England*, eds. Paul Griffiths, Adam Fox, and Steve Hindle (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996), 130.

court. He also speculated on Amy Dudley's death, whether it was murder or a natural death, and asked about what the rumors circulated in France said.<sup>44</sup>

The centrality of reputation in gossip and women's talk acted to give women power in the structure of personal politics that played a huge part of the politics of Elizabeth's reign. The preponderance of individuals discussed in letters of members of the government attests to the prominence of individuals in matters of state as representatives of the Queen as ambassadors, diplomats assigned to special missions, and leadership positions in English territories like Henry Sidney's positions in Wales and Ireland. This predominance of individuals also shows the prominence of the informal system of rule and politics. With politics based on personal relationships and reputations, women's connection to gossip increased their political power. Women gained a place in political areas as brokers of gossip because they controlled the reputations of others. For men honor came from actions, but also the women in their lives. Women's honor came from a good reputation and a woman's bad reputation could diminish the male family member's honor and reputation.

Capp argues that speakers repeated and reshaped stories and news to create or influence public opinion on either people or events.<sup>45</sup> Gossip played a key role in shaping public opinion, which can be seen in the State Papers and Carole Levin's work on the importance of rumors and public opinion to Elizabeth's reputation.<sup>46</sup> In a 1562 letter to

<sup>44</sup> Henry Killebrew, "Henry Killebrew to Throckmorton, October 10, 1560," in *Calendar of State Papers Foreign, Elizabeth, 1558-1589, vol. 3: 1560-1561*, ed. Joseph Stevenson, (London: Longman, Green, Reader and Dyer, 1865), 627.

<sup>45</sup> Capp, *When Gossips Meet*, 267, 273.

<sup>46</sup> Carole Levin, "Wanton and Whore" in *The Heart and Stomach of a King: Elizabeth I and the Politics of Sex and Power*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994), 68.

William Cecil, Elizabeth's chief councilor, Nicholas Throckmorton, the French Ambassador, begged Cecil to recall his son from Paris to avoid tarnishing Cecil's reputation when young Robert Cecil showed too much interest in an unsuitable young woman.<sup>47</sup> Additionally the power of individual reports can be seen in another letter of Cecil, when the writer assured the Secretary, "Sir Richard Lee's books should not discredit the true report of the writer" arguing for belief in one source over another.<sup>48</sup>

The State Papers show that reputation was fluid, constantly shaped by news, rumors, and comments. Letter writers based their information on the comments of others, as they constantly referred to what one person said about another and how that influenced what they thought about those people. A 1559 letter to the Count of Feria from Bishop de Quadra, the Spanish ambassador to Elizabeth's court exemplifies this.<sup>49</sup> De Quadra told the Count that a courtier called the Earl of Arundel a knave and the Earl's lack of a response only goes to show his weakness.<sup>50</sup> Sharers of gossip would shape their news to influence opinion and as such, women could use gossip in politics. One of the easiest places to see this is in the creation of political alliances through marriage, which became a problem for some of the Scottish nobility when conflicting reports of a previous marriage and thus the legitimacy of the Earl of Arran's title arose in 1560.<sup>51</sup> Rumors of

<sup>47</sup> Nicholas Throckmorton, "Throckmorton to Cecil, April 27 1562," *Calendar of State Papers Foreign, Elizabeth, 1558-1589*, vol. 4: 1561-1562, ed. Joseph Stevenson, (London: Longman, Green, Reader and Dyer, 1866), 1059.

<sup>48</sup> Thomas Jennyson, "Thomas Jennyson to Cecil, April 22 1561," *Calendar of State Papers Foreign, Elizabeth, 1558-1589*, vol. 4. : 1561-1562, 132.

<sup>49</sup> Capp, *When Gossips Meet*, 272.

<sup>50</sup> Bishop De Quadra, "Bishop Quadra to the Count de Feria, 29 October 1559" in *Calendar of letters and state papers relating to English affairs [of the reign of Elizabeth] preserved principally in the archives of Simancas*, Martin Andrew Hume, trans. (London: H. M. Stationery Off., 1892), 105.

<sup>51</sup> "The Earls of Arran and Lennox, January 1560," in *Calendar of State Papers Foreign, Elizabeth, 1558-1589*, vol. 5: 1562, ed. Joseph Stevenson, (London: Longman, Green, Reader and Dyer, 1867), 615.

previous entanglements, secret pacts or unseemly behavior could end negotiations. In 1577 Catherine, the Duchess of Suffolk became so concerned about her son, Peregrine's, reputation and the rumors of his poor behavior with women reaching her husband, Richard Bertie, and affecting the possibility of a good marriage that she asked William Cecil, Lord Bughley, to help rein in her son's behavior.<sup>52</sup>

Patricia Meyers Spacks asserts that when gossip focuses on reputations it can be used towards concrete goals. It can generate power and further political ambitions by damaging competitors.<sup>53</sup> As Killebrew told Throckmorton in 1560, a Mr. Lee was trying to gain a position with the government fleet in Berwick and "seeks to discredit Portynary, but failed."<sup>54</sup> Spacks notes the use of gossip by the otherwise powerless, by influencing opinion and reputation through talk they can get around the avenues closed to them. Social science refers to gossip as a "catalyst in the social process" because of the role it plays in controlling competition and generating power.<sup>55</sup> For aristocratic women in early modern England that would be a formal place in the political system. They used their talk to bolster the reputations of their allies and undermine their enemies. Lady Elizabeth Chandos wrote to Willam Cecil, to damage George Throckmorton's reputation and credibility by asserting that he had been violent against witnesses in a case against her

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<sup>52</sup> Suffolk, Duchess of, "The Duchess of Suffolk to Lord Burghley, July 14 1577." in *Calendar of the Manuscripts of the Most Hon. the Marquis of Salisbury, Preserved at Hatfield House, Hertfordshire, Vol. 2: 1572-1582*, ed. S. R. Scargill-Bird, (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1888), 464.

<sup>53</sup> Spacks, 4.

<sup>54</sup> Henry Killebrew, "Henry Killebrew to Throckmorton, October 10, 1560." In *Calendar of State Papers, Foreign, Reign of Elizabeth. vol 3*, 627.

<sup>55</sup> Spacks, 34.

daughter.<sup>56</sup> The number of women punished for seditious talk seems to show that political power was attributed to women's talk. If women's talk has no political power there would be no need to punish women for speaking against the government. By punishing women for political speech the government acknowledged that women's talk had power and could be dangerous.

Women's participation in gossip was also highly important regarding their own power because it worked to challenge the hierarchy of authority. In deeply patriarchal early modern England, it allowed women to question those with formal power.<sup>57</sup> One of the greatest political weapons a woman had was to undermine the reputation of a male or female rival, to decrease their political connections and power. In 1589, the Duchess of Suffolk used this strategy to convince William Cecil she had the right a wardship, to be granted by the Queen, which would bring money and power to her family. She discredited the other woman, Margaret Balckbourne, in contention for the wardship by stating that her title was false.<sup>58</sup>

Gossip also acted to create and support networks of female community in which women used gossip to resist male and patriarchal authority.<sup>59</sup> A good example of this can be found in the relationship between the Dorothy Essex, a lady at Jane Dormer, Duchess of Feria's court and Lady Anne Hungerford. Lady Anne had been displaced by her husband and depended on Dorothy to get her the favor of Jane, a niece of Henry Sidney,

<sup>56</sup> Elizabeth Chandos, "Elizabeth Lady Chandos to Cecill. August 20 1559." *Calendar of State Papers, Domestic Series, of the Reigns of Edward VI, Mary, Elizabeth, 1547-1580, Elz Vol. VI*, ed. R. Lemon. (London: Longman, Brown, Green, Longmans, & Roberts, 1856), 24.

<sup>57</sup> Spacks, 35.

<sup>58</sup> Frances, Duchess of Suffolk, "Frances Duchess of Suffolk to Sir Wm. Cecill, April 19 1559." *Calendar of State Papers, Domestic Series, of the Reigns of Edward VI, Mary, Elizabeth, 1547-1580. Elz Vol. IV*, ed. R. Lemon. (London: Longman, Brown, Green, Longmans, & Roberts, 1856), 5.

<sup>59</sup> Spacks, 45.

for financial help and support in her legal battles against her husband.<sup>60</sup> For women, gossip is generally an alternative to the public male dominated discourse showing a separate culture with different values and norms.<sup>61</sup>

In “‘Suche Newes as on the Quenes Hye Wayes We Have Mett’: the News and Intelligence Networks of Elizabeth Talbot, Countess of Shrewsbury (c. 1527-1608),” James Daybell uses the political career of Elizabeth, Countess of Shrewsbury, best known as Bess of Hardwick, and the immense number of contacts and information found in her letters to expose the gendered way that women’s communication has been wrongly dismissed. Daybell asserts the same way men’s letters are regarded as important intelligence sources, women’s letters should be regarded as important documents of news and politics as well, not dismissed as gossip as they have been in the past.<sup>62</sup> He holds that aristocratic women were in the business of spreading information and news related to both family and household matters and nationally important pieces. In addition, women of the court were important news sources for men and women as “conduits” of information to monarchs, courtiers, and officials.<sup>63</sup> He argues that the extant letters of Elizabeth Talbot show her to be a “serious political operator.” She received letters of all varieties, information from court, European news and updates on her household and family matters, which Daybell asserts was used to specific ends.<sup>64</sup>

<sup>60</sup> Anne Hungerford, “Anne Lady Hungerford to Dorothy Essex, at the Duchess of Feria’s, March 25 1570.” in *Calendar of State Papers, Domestic Series, of the Reign of Elizabeth, Addenda 1566-1579*, ed. M. A. E. Green (London: Longman & Co., 1876), 119.

<sup>61</sup> Spacks, 46.

<sup>62</sup> James Daybell, “‘Suche Newes as on the Quenes Hye Wayes We Have Mett’: the News and Intelligence Networks of Elizabeth Talbot, Countess of Shrewsbury (c. 1527-1608),” in *Women and Politics in Early Modern England, 1450-1700*, ed. James Daybell (Burlington, VT : Ashgate, 2003), 116.

<sup>63</sup> Daybell, “‘Suche Newes as on the Quenes Hye Wayes We Have Mett,” 115.

<sup>64</sup> Daybell, “‘Suche Newes as on the Quenes Hye Wayes We Have Mett,” 117, 122.

Daybell insists that women's writings were not gossip and chitchat but necessary news and intelligence for work at the court. These letters show the interest of women in serious political news that many thought did not affect or matter to them. The complete picture of women's lives presented in the Countess' letters shows the depth and breadth of women's worlds in early modern England. Daybell's work also serves as a reminder to reexamine the ways we approach women's writing and connections.

Kevin Sharpe argues that gossip in early modern England was concerned with recognition and reputation, essential aspects of gaining and maintaining political power when politics is personal. He notes that gossip was particularly important in the lives of courtiers because they were such public figures that their authority could be bolstered or maimed by the way gossip presented them.<sup>65</sup> Bernard Capp's view of gender and politics in early modern England allows him to argue that women's role as brokers of gossip gave them some public power because it made them the makers or breakers of reputation. Capp also argues that gossip played a key role in molding local public opinion as well as wider politics.<sup>66</sup> Following these understanding of gossip, it is clear that even though men decried women's talk as gossip, it was politically relevant and important.

Using these definitions and theories of gossip, it becomes apparent that women's communication cannot simply be dismissed as gossip for multiple reasons and that gossip needs to be viewed as more than idle talk. Scholars, both social scientists and historians, have proven that gossip plays an important role in the construction of social institutions,

<sup>65</sup> Kevin Sharpe, Introduction to *Writing Lives: Biography and Textuality, Identity and Representation in Early Modern England*, eds. Kevin Sharpe and Steven N. Zwicker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 5, 10.

<sup>66</sup> Capp, *When Gossips Meet*, 267, 272.



in power relationships, and that the topics of men's news and women's gossip are not that different. Additionally, the historical value of women's communication is apparent, as their talk in the early modern period gave them political power in an informal political system.

The term gossip has been useful to this point, as research on women's communication generally uses this term, but for the remainder of this work the term "gossip" will not be used. The terms "women's talk" or "women's communication" seems more appropriate for this study. The connotation of gossip as malicious and solely concerned with reputations constricts its use. Additionally, the possible anachronism when using it to describe female communication and not friendship makes it troublesome and a bit inaccurate.

#### **Chapter 4: Women at Elizabeth's Court**

Personal politics in the sixteenth century allowed English aristocratic women to influence politics through their husbands and sons, their female networks and sharing information. With a woman on the throne, women were able to get closer to the center of political power and thus became more involved in politics and exerted more political power and influence.

The members of the Privy Chamber were the women and a few men closest to the Queen whom she felt she could trust the most, largely kin connections of the Queen. Elizabeth's court was relatively small and filled with men and women related to

Elizabeth and each other. The Privy Chamber was the Queen's private rooms at whatever palace she was occupying with entrance granted by her permission. The members of the Privy Chamber were those who attended to the Queen's personal needs. At her accession Elizabeth filled the Privy Chamber with those who had been loyal and served her faithfully at Hatfield house, making members of the Privy Chamber a closely knit unit.<sup>67</sup> The structure of the court is difficult to find, in that Elizabeth did not formalize many of the changes she made from the structure created by Henry VIII. The only record of the structure is available from the beginning of her reign, the coronation roll of 1559.

The structure of Elizabeth's privy chamber was largely unchanged from the system established by her father Henry VIII.<sup>68</sup> There are a few differences in the structure of the court due to Elizabeth's sex, such as the complete separation of the members of the Privy Chamber and Privy Council and her need to separate the Bedchamber from the Privy Chamber. The coronation roll of 1559 shows that Elizabeth maintained a hierarchy in the chamber. There were seven or eight waged women of the Privy Chamber, with four senior members titled Ladies of the Bedchamber. The chamber included young women, six Maids of Honour, whose families clamored for the chance to get their unmarried daughters into court.<sup>69</sup>

There were also six women of high rank who were unpaid, all the women were family connections of Elizabeth except Mary Sidney. The unwaged status of these members of the Privy Chamber indicated their close relationship with Elizabeth and was

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<sup>67</sup> Simon Adams, *Leicester and the Court: Essays on Elizabethan Politics (Politics, Culture and Society in Early Modern Britain)*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002) 7, 17, 30.

<sup>68</sup> Starkey, 5.

<sup>69</sup> Wright, 150, 151.

because the women served the Queen at their own expense, was a high honor.<sup>70</sup> The expense of serving as one of the unwaged members of the Privy Chamber is apparent in the Sidney family accounts, when for just a few months of being at court the family owed just over two hundred and fifty pounds for various services like riding out with the Queen.<sup>71</sup> Mary Sidney's letters show the physical and emotional toll of her service. In one she blames Elizabeth's Lord Chamberlain for her failure to attend to the Queen because he would not give her apartments at court. In an anxious missive to her husband's secretary, Molineaux, Mary Sidney complained about the difficulty of furnishing rooms at court because, "the Queen will look to have my chamber always in a redinees, for her majesties coming" even though Lady Mary is often unwell.<sup>72</sup>

The women of the Privy Chamber also held titles that indicated their domestic duties and responsibility for the Queen's jewels clothing, robes and furniture. Unlike in male reigns the members of Elizabeth's Privy Chamber held no administrative positions; the roles of keeper of the Privy Purse and the great seal were shifted to men outside the chamber. The few male members of the Chamber, like the Grooms and Gentlemen of the Privy Chamber, may have also taken on some of the administrative duties.<sup>73</sup>

The Privy Chamber was the location of the tensions between the public, ceremonial lives of the monarch and their more personal existence, the members of the

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<sup>70</sup> Adams, 28.

<sup>71</sup> *Report on the manuscripts of Lord de l'Isle & Dudley preserved at Penshurst*, 426.

<sup>72</sup> Mary Sidney, "Mary Sidney (s ister to the E. of Leicester) to the E. of Sussex; assigning her reasons..." in *A Catalogue of the Manuscripts in the Cottonian Library deposited in the British Museum, 1744-1827*, ed. J. Planta, (London: Hansard 1827) 523; Mary Sidney, "Lady Mary Sydney to Edmund Molineaux Esq. from Chifwicke, 11 Oct., 1578," in *Letters and memorials of state : in the reigns of Queen Mary, Queen Elizabeth, King James, King Charles the First, part of the reign of King Charles the Second, and Oliver's usurpation / written and collected by Sir Henry Sydney*, Arthur Collins (London: T. Osborne, 1746), 271.

<sup>73</sup> Wright, 150,152.

chamber dealt with this dual aspect of the monarch. The Privy Chamber was also where the most important matters of politics played out; in male reigns, the membership of the Privy Chamber and the Privy Council greatly overlapped, making the incursion of politics into the Chamber unavoidable. Elizabeth tried to separate the governmental aspect of her role from the Privy Chamber. Her decision to remove the position of secretary from the Privy Chamber and depend on her Secretary of State, William Cecil, shows that unlike her sister, Queen Mary, she was unwilling to allow overlap between her Privy Chamber and government positions.<sup>74</sup> Much has been made about Elizabeth's decree that the women of her Privy Chamber not discuss or be involved in the politics of her court and her resolution that she would not discuss governmental issues with them.<sup>75</sup> The importance and influence of these policies will be discussed in detail at a later point.

Elizabeth's reluctance to formalize or record changes to the structure of the Privy Chamber suggests that formal ties and titles were less important to the Queen than personal relationships. Elizabeth's preference for personal relationships over formal positions is also apparent in the way that she dealt with her Privy Council, despite their structural role as the main policy body of the government. Elizabeth's Privy Council held little power. Elizabeth selected trusted individuals, regardless of their official position, to guide her through decisions and shape her policies.<sup>76</sup> Clearly, power and political influence in Elizabeth's court was independent of the formal structures of the court, and Elizabeth seemed to see little need to change the structures of the court when she would just work outside of them. The separation of power and official position at Elizabeth's

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<sup>74</sup> Starkey, 6, 8, 13, 15.

<sup>75</sup> Wright, 160.

<sup>76</sup> Adams, 30; Mears, 75.

court allowed women, like Mary Sidney, to gain power and hold political influence. Additionally the closeness of the women of the Privy Chamber to the Queen and their position as the point of access between the Queen and court further increased the women of the Privy Chamber's political importance, especially in regards to patronage.

### **Chapter 5: Patronage and Women's Political Power**

Elizabeth's court and government, like many in early modern Europe, depended on patronage and the resulting informal client/patron relationships to help the government run smoothly. Members of court would act as patrons, supporting and working for the interests of their clients. Government patronage strengthened the monarch and allowed for the government centered at court to maintain a place at the local level despite the development of a modern bureaucracy and court centered politics pulling influence away from far flung locales.<sup>77</sup> Aristocratic patronage strengthened the monarch by building a network for government patronage and widening the influence of the central government.<sup>78</sup> Patronage also acted to balance power at court, as Elizabeth deployed her patronage to keep different factions and interests on a level playing field.<sup>79</sup> Courtiers used patronage to gain power and influence, advancing requests that strengthen them and were likely to receive support, while in return gaining supporters for their own schemes

<sup>77</sup> Ronald G. Asche, Introduction to *Princes, Patronage, and the Nobility: the Court at the Beginning of the Modern Age*, (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1991), 3, 17, 18.

<sup>78</sup> Maczak Antoni, "From Aristocratic Household to Princely Court: Restructuring Patronage in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century," in *Princes, Patronage, and the Nobility: the Court at the Beginning of the Modern Age*, eds. Ronald G. Asche and Adolf M. Birke (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1991), 320.

<sup>79</sup> Adams, 69.

and plans.<sup>80</sup> Because courtiers used patronage to strengthen their own positions, Elizabeth used a broad distribution of patronage to ensure that the power of the government remained with her; no one member of court would control too many favors to become too strong of a patron.<sup>81</sup>

Many aspects of the government's dependence on patronage allowed women control and influence in the politics of the day, including its dependence on a fluidity between public and private and dependence on kinship.<sup>82</sup> Patronage thrived in a world like the court that could not clearly separate public and private, because the public world intruded into private spaces, they could not be closed off. This meant that women could not be confined to the private sphere and could not help but be part of the public world of politics. It also meant that concerns were not separated into public and private because the public was within the private sphere, allowing the concerns of women in domestic areas to gain importance as part of public discussion.

Patronage's dependence on connections, particularly kinship networks, allowed women a significant place. Aristocratic women spent much of their time and energy fostering their kin connections with both their natal and marital families as well as creating fictive kin networks out of close friends and other connections, like women who served together at court, meaning their place at the center of kin networks made them important to acts of patronage. The shift towards a centralized government under the Tudors allowed women's patronage to gain significance, as women's patronage moved to

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<sup>80</sup> R.J. W. Evans, "The Court as a Protean Institution and an Elusive Subject," Epilogue to *Princes, Patronage, and the Nobility: the Court at the Beginning of the Modern Age*, (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1991), 488.

<sup>81</sup> Adams, 79.

<sup>82</sup> Antoni, 316, 317.

a central location from the periphery, strengthening their position of authority and increasing their influence.<sup>83</sup> Patronage was also based on informal structures and networks, allowing a place for women to express and gain informal power, as the structures and formal power of Elizabethan government were closed to women.

The power and importance of patronage and having connections to the right members of court can be seen in many of the letters collected by prominent aristocratic families and the correspondence between members of the government as part of the State Papers. While men with obvious connections to power and the authority had the power to grant favors such as monopolies on trade or, like William Cecil, the authority to grant wardships, women played an important role in patronage as well. If men looked to other men like William Cecil to advance their interests and patronage suits, whom did women look to but other women? One of the most common reasons women used their connections at court was to gain favor in legal disputes over lands and money, generally connected to their dowries. In 1592, Lady Dorothy Perrott wrote to the Dowager Lady Russell and asked her to use her influence with her brother in law, William Cecil, to settle a land dispute and allow her husband to inherit his father's lands and incomes. Lady Perrott argued that without Lady Russell's support "all that ever we had, or hoped for, is fallen."<sup>84</sup> The letters of Elizabeth Talbot, Mary Cavendish and Arabella Stuart show that the vast networks of the women helped them gain favor for themselves and others with the Queen, William Cecil and others at court. The women carefully facilitated their

<sup>83</sup> Harris, *English Aristocratic Women, 1450-1550*, 200, 212.

<sup>84</sup> Dorothy Perrott, "Lady Dor[othy] Perrott to the Dowager Lady Russell, June 1592," in *Calendar of the Manuscripts of the Most Hon. the Marquis of Salisbury, Preserved at Hatfield House, Hertfordshire, Vol. 4: 1590-1594*, ed. R. A. Roberts (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1892), 213.

political involvement with well thought out letters, including forging and making up letters with false information to best accomplish political goals.<sup>85</sup> Women also acted as patrons for male family members, advancing their interests and suits to higher levels of the government. In the letters between the Count de Feria and the Spanish Ambassador, Mary Sidney's patronage was of great concern for getting Henry Sidney's sister, the Countesses' mother, permission to stay at the court.<sup>86</sup>

Under a Queen, with women in positions closest to the monarch, female patronage became even more important. From the records of Privy Chamber membership, it is clear that the family makeup of the chamber was stable, with younger women of a family taking the places of their mothers and aunts.<sup>87</sup> Women of the Privy Chamber were highly sought after to be patrons of the young women hoping for one of the limited open places in the chamber.<sup>88</sup> The women of the Privy Chamber also promoted the suits and interests of various men, usually kin but also other members of the court, to the Queen.<sup>89</sup> The correspondence of men deeply involved in the government and politics of Elizabeth's court shows the influence and power attributed to women at the court due to their patronage. In a letter from 1585 a French diplomat, Castlenau de Mauvissiere, requested that despite his need to return to France he be "kept in favor to Walshingham, Sidney, and their wives" acknowledging that the favor of the women of the court was important to advancing his interests along with the good opinion of their

<sup>85</sup> Sara Jayne Steen, "The Cavendish-Talbot Women: Playing a High-Stakes Game," in *Women and Politics in Early Modern England, 1450-1700*, ed. James Daybell (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2003), 154.

<sup>86</sup> Bishop De Quadra, "Bishop Quadra to the Count de Feria, 29 October 1559", CSP Spanish, 105.

<sup>87</sup> Adams, 28,35.

<sup>88</sup> Harris, *English Aristocratic Women, 1450-1550*, 219.

<sup>89</sup> Wright, 161.



husbands.<sup>90</sup> Even when she was away from court, Mary Sidney remained active in advancing the family interest at court through her connections. She reminded her husband's secretary, Mollineaux, of his role maintaining strong relationships on her behalf with influential members of the court and told him that she "sent letters to my Lords my Brothers and to Mr. Dyer" so that "some good resolution were towards my Lord, either for an honorable voyage or a contentfull aboud at home." She also emphasized the importance of maintaining her connections to the other women of the court, asking Mollineaux to "inquire for Mistress Edmonds, of the Privy Chamber, and offer to send her letter at any time to me, and make most hearty commendations unto her; and also to Mistress Skudamore, of the Privy Chamber."<sup>91</sup>

The women of the Privy Chamber also acted as patronage gatekeepers, deciding which requests and suits would be brought to the Queen's attention and which would fade away.<sup>92</sup> As the members of the court closest to the Queen the ladies of the Privy Chamber acted as a mediator between Elizabeth and the rest of the court and their patronage requests, deciding when was the right time to bring up certain topics and who was worthy of the Queen's attention.<sup>93</sup>

The involvement of the women at court in advancing male and female suits serves to show women were as just as involved and influential in the personal politics of patronage.

<sup>90</sup> M. Castelnau, "M. Castelnau, [de Mauvissière] to Archibald Douglas Oct. 2 1585," in *Calendar of the Manuscripts of the Most Hon. the Marquis of Salisbury, Preserved at Hatfield House, Hertfordshire, Vol. 3. 1583-1589*, ed. R. A. Roberts (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1892), 199.

<sup>91</sup> Mary Sidney, "Lady Mary Sidney to Edmond Mollineaux, Esq; Secretary to Sir Henry Sidney; from Chifwyke, 1<sup>st</sup> of Sept. 1574," in Collins, *Letters and Memorials*, 66-67.

<sup>92</sup> Asche, 22; Adams, 80.

<sup>93</sup> Evans, 487; Adams, 38.

## Chapter 6: Women as Information Centers

The women of the Privy Chamber acted not just as gatekeepers and mediators of patronage between the Queen and the wider court, they were also the source of news and information in both directions between Elizabeth and the court. Women of the court were important news sources for men and women as “conduits” of information to monarchs, courtiers, foreign ambassadors and officials.<sup>94</sup> The information that the women brought out of the Privy Chamber generally informed male members of the court on personal aspects of the Queen. They conveyed the Queen’s mood and attitudes to important men of the court, such as Robert Dudley and William Cecil.<sup>95</sup> This allowed them to decide the right time to bring up a delicate matter and avoid losing the Queen’s support on an important issue.<sup>96</sup> In a time when the Queen had final say and could not be overruled, the women of the Privy Chamber’s role as information brokers placed them in a position of great importance in the court. As an extension of the women’s role as information broker, Catherine Howey argues that Elizabeth’s Privy Chamber women acted as the “Queen’s mouthpiece” and that Elizabeth used the women to share her opinion on a topic.<sup>97</sup>

Elizabeth also used the women of her Privy Chamber to convey information causally. She strategically used the women’s connections outside the court by having the women include news and information in letters to leak information and her desires for government policy or action without going through the formal apparatuses of

<sup>94</sup> Daybell, “Suche Newes as on the Quenes Hye Wayes We Have Mett,” 115.

<sup>95</sup> Wright, 153.

<sup>96</sup> Mears, 73.

<sup>97</sup> Howey, 21-22.

government.<sup>98</sup> Distinctive to Elizabeth's reign, she used the women of her Privy Chamber to discuss issues of foreign policy more informally, including her marriage, with the ambassadors at her court. Ambassadors noted how involved women were in foreign affairs. Most famously, Elizabeth used Mary Sidney, one of the members of her Privy Chamber, to discuss the possibilities of her marriage to Archduke Charles of Austria with the Spanish Ambassador. Using the women of the Privy Chamber in issues of foreign relations allowed Elizabeth to get her wishes and opinions out and influence the actions of the ambassadors without having to make any real decisions or agreements, as the women of the Privy Chamber had no authority to do so.

The women of the Privy Chamber also brought information and news from the court to the Queen. Robert Dudley became upset when he discovered that the Queen knew of the plan he was a part of for the marriage of Duke of Norfolk and Mary, Queen of Scots, despite efforts to keep it secret. He placed the blame on the women of her chamber, stating "I find there is some babbling women that hath made her highness believe that you and wee should seem to enterprise to go through without making her majesty privy" and lamented the effort it took to convince the Queen otherwise.<sup>99</sup> Catherine Howey argues that the women of the Privy Chamber acted as the Queen's "eyes and ears."<sup>100</sup>

A look at patronage, gossip and information sharing shows that in the era of personal politics, with little or no separation between public and private the importance of

<sup>98</sup> Mears, 74.

<sup>99</sup> Duke of Norfolk, "Nov. 10, 1571 Duke of Norfolk Confession" in *Calendar of State Papers relating to Scotland and Mary, Queen of Scots, 1547-1603*. Vol. 4. : 1571-1574, 36.

<sup>100</sup> Howey, 22.

reputation, access, information and favor were crucial to gaining and maintaining political power. Through patronage and information sharing the women of Elizabeth's Privy Chamber held an important place in the politics of the court.

### **Chapter 7: Mary Sidney as Exemplar of Women's Political Power**

Women were politically significant in early modern England because the system of personal politics allowed them to be; when this combined with a female ruler women gained great political importance through their proximity to the queen, their ability to direct patronage and their importance as information sources. No member of Elizabeth's court better shows how the reign of a woman allowed women to gain political power than Mary Dudley Sidney.

Mary Dudley was born to John Dudley and his wife Jane between 1530 and 1535. She was one of five daughters and eight sons in the Dudley family. Because of their father's status under Henry VIII the Dudley children were the chosen companions of young Prince Edward. When the royal children's households were combined under Catherine Parr, the children were also viewed as suitable companions for Princess Elizabeth.<sup>101</sup> The relationship formed between the Dudley children and the young princess Elizabeth during their childhood has been emphasized in research focusing on the relationship between the Queen and Robert Dudley, but it is also essential for Mary Dudley. She became the only non-relation or woman who had not previously served the

<sup>101</sup> Margaret P. Hannay, *Philip's Phoenix: Mary Sidney, Countess of Pembroke*, (New York; Oxford University Press, 1990), 4; Michael G. Brennan, *The Sidneys of Penshurst And the Monarchy, 1500-1700*, (Hampshire, England: Ashgate Publishing, 2006), 21.

Queen to become part of the privy chamber, probably because of a bond formed in their childhood.

There are many reasons to believe that the Dudleys were well-educated women. Jane Dudley was widely noted for achieving a level of education uncommon for women.<sup>102</sup> The Dudley girls, like other noble girls, were educated at home; there is reason to believe that their mother would try to provide them the same level of education that she had. Later accounts of Mary Sidney, including the Spanish Ambassador de Quadra's letters and *Holinshed's Chronicle* acknowledge her vast knowledge of foreign languages, like Italian and French, and how well spoken she was, indicting her high level of education. Additionally, as an adult, Mary Dudley opened her home as a school educating her children along with other noble children, suggesting that she was educated in the same way.<sup>103</sup>

The Dudley children were educated in a humanist tradition, learning French, Latin and writing, and natural philosophy; Mary Dudley was trained to the highest level.<sup>104</sup> There was an interesting twist to the Dudley education; it included an emphasis on cosmography, geography and astrology because the Dudley family were great patrons of explorers and had naval and military interest, as John Dudley was at one time Lord High Admiral and head of the army against Scotland.<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Arthur Collins, *Letters and memorials of state : in the reigns of Queen Mary, Queen Elizabeth, King James, King Charles the First, part of the reign of King Charles the Second, and Oliver's usurpation / written and collected by Sir Henry Sydney*, (London: T. Osborne, 1746), 33.

<sup>103</sup> Elizabeth Darracott Wheeler, "Mary Dudley Sidney" in *Ten remarkable women of the Tudor courts and their influence in founding the New World, 1530-1630* (Lewiston : E. Mellen Press, 2000), 61

<sup>104</sup> Hanney, 4.

<sup>105</sup> Elizabeth Jenkins, *Elizabeth and Leicester* (London, V. Gollancz, 1961), 27-28; Collins, 19.

The brothers of the Dudley family also helped the girls gain their education because they were not sent away to school but educated together at home. The presence of brothers at home usually allowed women to gain an education that would normally be denied to girls.<sup>106</sup> This seems to be the case with Mary Sidney, whose multiple brothers all aided her access to a strong education with a very utilitarian focus and also gave her contacts outside the normal female sphere. Mary Sidney's strong education would prove to be extremely useful in service to the Queen and her family.

In his *Description of England* William Harrison notes the smallness of the gap between elite men's education and women's in Elizabeth's England by looking at languages. He says the women of Elizabeth's court that he met had "sound knowledge of Greek and Latin tongues and therefore were no less skillful in Spanish, Italian and French... these ladies come very little of nothing at all behind noble men."<sup>107</sup> This is the type of education and skills for which Mary Sidney was known.

The family's political fortunes were also very important to Mary Dudley. John Dudley steadily rose in power and prestige during the reign of Henry VIII but it was his role in the reign of the young king Edward VI that brought the family to the heights of power and ultimately to the bottom of fortune's wheel. As a member of the Privy Council, John Dudley participated in the power struggle with Edward Seymour, Duke of Somerst, Edward's regent, and won, becoming Lord Protector of England and the most powerful man in the realm.

<sup>106</sup> Naomi J. Miller, Naomi Yavneh, "Introduction" to *Sibling Relations and Gender in Early Modern England: Sisters, Brothers and Others*, (Burlington, VT; Ashgate, 2006), 2.

<sup>107</sup> William Harrison, *The Description of England*, Ed. Georges Edelen, (Ithaca, NY: Folger Shakespeare Library by Cornell University Press, 1968), 228.

During the family's time of influence and power under Edward, the Dudleys became intertwined with the monarch. The Dudley sons were companions to the young king and held positions at the court.<sup>108</sup> The family's relationship with the king also allowed Mary to meet her future husband. Henry Sidney grew up alongside the young king and was one of the principle Gentlemen of his Privy Chamber.<sup>109</sup> Henry was a friend of her brothers, and apparently knew Mary well.<sup>110</sup> The pair married in 1551.

The legacy of the Dudley family and the political power and influence they held were much higher than that of the Sidneys, suggesting that the Sidney marriage was probably a love match and not arraigned for dynastic or property reasons. John and Jane Dudley seemed content to allow their children to marry for love over political or monetary advantage, as they also permitted their son Robert to marry for love at age 17.<sup>111</sup>

While Henry Sidney continued to serve the King, it appears that Mary was also present at court. The events at the end of Edward's reign were significant for the Dudley family. Edward died in Henry Sidney's arms and Mary is credited with telling her sister-in-law, Jane Grey, that she was the new queen.<sup>112</sup> John Dudley, now the Duke of Northumberland, in May of 1553 had married his son Guilford to Jane Grey and then upon Edward's death had her declared queen through a weak claim to the throne. The plan failed and Mary Tudor took the throne almost effortlessly. John Dudley's grasp for

<sup>108</sup> Samuel Jebb, *The Life of Robert, Earl of Leicester, the Favourite of Queen Elizabeth: Drawn from Original Writers and Records*, (London: Woodman and Lyon, 1727), 3.

<sup>109</sup> Collins, 82, 83.

<sup>110</sup> Hannay, 5.

<sup>111</sup> Jebb, 4.

<sup>112</sup> Collins, 84; Brennan, 31.

power nearly led to the downfall of the entire Dudley clan. John Dudley was beheaded, as were Jane Grey and Guildford Dudley, six months later, after the Wyatt Rebellion challenged Mary's reign. The other Dudley males were imprisoned in the Tower. Henry Sidney apparently fled to Penshurst, the Sidney family estate in Kent, immediately following Edwards death, and somehow, in a way that is unclear, Mary Sidney escaped entanglement in the downfall of the rest of the family. Henry even managed to gain a position in Mary Tudor's government.

Their ability to avoid the fate of the rest of the family made the Sidneys particularly useful at this time. Alongside Jane Dudley, the Duchess of Northumberland, Mary and Henry worked tirelessly for the release of the Dudley men from the Tower, as well as for the restoration of their rights to inherit titles and remain peers.<sup>113</sup> Henry traveled to Spain as part of his position with Mary's court and used the opportunity to gain the influence of Philip of Spain. After the marriage of Philip and Mary, the Sidneys even went so far as to name the King as godfather and namesake to his first son Philip. The Sidneys' campaign for influence in the Spanish court worked, as Philip convinced his new wife Mary to release the Dudleys from the Tower.<sup>114</sup>

Mary Tudor seemed to have a favorable view of the Sidneys, as Henry Sidney's power and prestige increased throughout her reign and Mary Sidney may have enjoyed a place at the court as well. While Mary's reign was a time of rising fortunes for the Sidneys, the accession of Elizabeth in 1558 allowed their power and influence to expand. As previously noted, Mary Sidney was the only member of Elizabeth's privy chamber at

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<sup>113</sup> Collins, 33, 84.

<sup>114</sup> Collins, 36-37, 98.



her coronation who was not a relation and had not been serving her for years before. Elizabeth's accounts of Robert Dudley as a childhood friend would suggest that Mary Dudley was also present allowing her entry into Elizabeth's court from the beginning. Elizabeth has been noted for creating a spiritual family at her Hatfield house and moved the closely bonded group to court upon her accession.<sup>115</sup> She surrounded herself with those she knew and could trust, those who had been with her for years or were related to her. In this way, Mary Sidney was an outlier in the first iteration of Elizabeth's court. Some scholars, like Simon Adams, argue that this happens only because her brother Robert Dudley was Elizabeth's favorite; however, I argue that her noted political skills and a bond created in childhood certainly played a role. Mary Sidney's success at getting her brothers released from the Tower and reinstated to their titles and lands proved her political acumen.

### **Chapter 8: Early Signs of Mary Sidney's Political Involvement**

Mary Sidney's political astuteness first appeared when she worked with her mother in England and husband in Spain to get her brothers released from the Tower, their charges of treason dropped, and their rights to titles and lands restored.

Arthur Collins, the author of the family chronicle written in the eighteenth century from records kept at Penshurst when the family line was dying out with only female heirs, credits Jane Dudley, the Duchess of Northumberland with the restoration of the family. In the dedication of his work he states, "the Duchess of Northumberland was the

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<sup>115</sup> Adams, 17, 30.

greatest example of fortitude in mind in adversity and of modest virtue; and whose wisdom, care and prudence, restored her overthrown house, in a reign of cruelty and tyranny.”<sup>116</sup> In his later biographical explanation of the Duchess, Collins goes on to explain how he came to his earlier characterization of Jane Dudley and points out her political agency and involvement, “by her solicitations, after the marriage of the Queen with the King Phillip, she obtained Pardon for her sons, principally by the Spaniards, who accompanied him into England.”<sup>117</sup>

Henry Sidney was able to maintain the lands, grants, and offices given to him by Edward VI because of his flight to Penshurst and non-involvement in the reign of Jane Grey. Henry Sidney’s favor continued under Mary, as she gave him additional offices and wardships.<sup>118</sup> She also sent him to Spain to escort Prince Phillip to England for his marriage, a task that Sidney later acknowledged in a 1581 letter to Francis Walsingham he used to gain favor with the king for the release of the Dudleys.<sup>119</sup> Simon Adams suggests that Mary Sidney accompanied her husband on this journey, similarly using the opportunity to lobby the Spanish for her brothers release.<sup>120</sup>

The efforts of the Sidneys and the Duchess were rewarded when the Dudley brothers were released from the Tower in October 1554. John Dudley, the first released, went directly to the Sidney’s home, Penshurst, showing the strong ties between the Sidneys and the Dudley brothers, but also the status of the Sidneys under Mary.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> Collins, b.

<sup>117</sup> Collins, 3.

<sup>118</sup> Collins, 83-85.

<sup>119</sup> Brennan, 25; Hannay, 10.

<sup>120</sup> Adams, 133.

<sup>121</sup> Collins, 31.

The family relationship with the Spanish is highlighted in Jane Dudley's will, in which she bequeathed her parrot to the Duchess of Alva and requests that she, "continue to be a good Lady to all her Children, as she has begun." She also noted Lord Dindagoe Damondesay's efforts to recommend her to the King and his men and made commendations to the Duke of Salvan.<sup>122</sup> These three bequests show the strong connections between the Dudleys and Sidneys and the Spanish courtiers and the efforts to curry the favor of the Spanish members of the court who were so influential to the family. What is rather remarkable about the will is that until the very end, Jane Dudley seemed sure that her sons would be pardoned; in fact, she thanked Philip and Mary for doing so. But, at the end of the will she included a provision in case her sons were not pardoned and unable to inherit at the time of her death. In the case of having Henry Sidney and other more distant family members inheriting, she asserted that they must use the resources to help her children.<sup>123</sup>

Though Mary Sidney's role in the freeing of her brothers and restoring their rights is not highlighted, we can surely assume that in the tight knit Dudley family she would not be sitting idly by as her mother and husband lobbied for the release and rights of the Dudley brothers. Collins' story presents a legacy of women in the Dudley family that used their education to help their family, with Jane Dudley at the pinnacle. It was usual in this time for women to lobby members of the court for the benefit of their sons and husbands accused of treason.<sup>124</sup> What is interesting in this case is that the family presented a united plan to gain support from the ascendant Spanish. Jane Dudley used her

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<sup>122</sup> Collins, 35.

<sup>123</sup> Collins, 34, 35, 36.

<sup>124</sup> Harris, *English Aristocratic Women, 1450-1550*, 227.

political acumen to come up with a plan to free her sons. Through the right connections, shown in her will, and her willingness to acknowledge and maintain the support that their Spanish connections provided, she succeeded. All her sons were released from the Tower and eventually obtained their rights to inheritance and membership of the peerage. The Dudley/Sidney connection with Philip and his Spanish court cultivated by the Dudleys and Sidneys proved to be useful in Mary Sidney's later political actions.

### **Chapter 9: Mary Sidney's Role in her Family's Political Fortunes**

Women gained political importance and significance in marriage if their family connection gave their husbands and children importance. The prime example of this is Margaret Beaufort, whose support of her son's claim to the throne through herself, made her politically important. This can be seen in the birth announcement of Henry VIII, which featured Margaret Beaufort's personal badge of a portcullis alongside her son Henry VII's, attesting to her significance.<sup>125</sup> Mary Sidney's position within her marriage shows that she held political significance as a woman. Like Margaret Beaufort, Mary Sidney's Dudley family lineage was important to Henry Sidney and the way he represented himself. After their marriage, Henry modified the Sidney family badge to include the Dudley bear and ragged staff alongside the Sidney porcupine.<sup>126</sup> Mary Sidney brought political clout and prestige to her marriage; the chronicle of the Sidney family written for descendants of Mary and Henry Sidney in the middle of the eighteenth

<sup>125</sup> Henry VIII's Birth Announcement, 1491. Part of Vivat Rex! Commemorating the 500th Anniversary of the Accession of Henry VIII at the Folger Shakespeare Library.

<sup>126</sup> Hanney, 5.

century, *Letters and Memorials of State* by Arthur Collins attests to this. In the chronicle of the family, the histories of Mary Sidney's ancestors far outweigh the amount of space and time devoted to Henry Sidney's ancestors. The chronicle clearly shows that Mary Sidney brought more power, prestige and a greater lineage to the marriage.

The Dudley connections proved more important when looking at the way family ties affected the Sidney marriage, with Mary and Henry constantly working for and benefiting the kin of the Dudley family. Women who made relationships between their brothers and their husbands lessened the impact of patriarchy, which certainly seems to be the case with Mary Sidney.<sup>127</sup> The relationship between Mary Sidney, her husband and her brothers allowed Mary Sidney agency and importance in family politics, as her support was essential for her husband's participation in the Dudley family political machine. Michael Brennan argues that the Dudleys' and Sidneys' public and political fortunes depended on strong family loyalty and connection, like many prominent families, but the Dudley-Sidney dependence on the women of the family's political involvement and instincts set them apart.<sup>128</sup>

As with many political women, natal kin proved to be the most important patronage network for Mary Sidney.<sup>129</sup> Relations with the Sidney connections took a back seat; in fact, Mary Sidney had more issues with her brother-in-law, Thomas Radcliffe, Earl of Sussex, who was married to Frances Sidney, than benefits from their connection. In 1569, Mary Sidney unexpectedly gave birth in London while serving the Queen. This must have been a traumatic experience for Mary, as she had been living with

<sup>127</sup> Harris, *English Aristocratic Women, 1450-1550*, 184.

<sup>128</sup> Brennan, 5.

<sup>129</sup> Harris, *English Aristocratic Women, 1450-1550*, 175.

her husband in Wales at the time and her midwife had to be sent from there at great expense.<sup>130</sup> The distress of this incident did not stop Sussex from using it as a chance to harm the Sidney family. Years later Sussex argued that Mary had not returned bedding borrowed from Elizabeth and accused her of stealing them despite Mary's protestations that she had returned them.<sup>131</sup>

As Elizabeth's Chamberlain, Sussex allocated rooms at court, but again Mary Sidney did not benefit from their kinship. Mary apparently had many problems getting rooms at court despite being a member of the Privy Chamber and Sussex's sister in law. In a letter to her husband's secretary, Edmund Molineaux, Mary complained that "her lodgings being very little" making them inappropriate for both visits by the Queen and people who come to conduct business with her husband and hoped that Molineaux would have more luck convincing Sussex to give them bigger rooms than she did.<sup>132</sup> The Sussex connection was never beneficial for the Sidneys, as he seemed to harbor resentment towards them, possibly because the Queen recalled him and chose Henry Sidney to replace him as Lord Deputy of Ireland in 1565 or, more likely, because of his rivalry with and hatred for Robert Dudley.<sup>133</sup>

Henry Sidney proved the importance of the Dudleys and thus Mary Sidney when he writes to his young son Philip at school. His reminder of, "remember my Sonne the Noble blood you are discended of by your mothers side and thinke that only by virtuous

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<sup>130</sup> De Lisle and Dudley 357.

<sup>131</sup> Hannay, 30.

<sup>132</sup> Mary Sidney, "Lady Mary Sydney to Edmund Mollineaux Esq. from Chifwicke, 11 Oct., 1578," 271.

<sup>133</sup> Wallace T. MacCaffrey, "Radcliffe, Thomas, third earl of Sussex (1526/7–1583)," in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. H. C. G. Matthew and Brian Harrison (Oxford: OUP, 2004); online ed., ed. Lawrence Goldman, January 2008, <http://0-www.oxforddnb.com.library.unl.edu/view/article/22993> (accessed March 27, 2011).

life and good action, you may be an ornament to that ylustre family,” confirms that service to the Dudley family was most important to the Sidneys.<sup>134</sup> Mary Sidney also highlighted the importance of the Dudley connection to the Sidney family political and monetary fortunes when she wrote to her husband’s secretary in London while she was away and asked him to “go often in my name, to inquire how my deare Brothers do, and the most vertuse Lady of Warwick.”<sup>135</sup> The ties to the Dudley family became more important for the Sidneys as it seemed that their sons Philip and Robert would inherit the titles and lands from the Dudley brothers as they failed to produce living heirs. Robert Dudley’s son was not born until 1579 and only lived for five years and Ambrose Dudley never had any children. Robert took Philip Sidney under his wing from an early age and trained him for the life of a courtier suggesting the importance he saw in grooming him to inherit his title.<sup>136</sup> Robert’s interest and participation in the marriage negotiations of Mary Sidney to William Herbert, also suggest the close bond he felt with the Sidney children.<sup>137</sup>

The fortunes of the Dudley family rose to spectacular heights during the reign of Elizabeth, taking the Sidneys with them. At one time during Elizabeth’s reign between their own lands and the lands they controlled through government offices, the Dudley-Sidney family controlled one-third of English lands.<sup>138</sup> This immense amount of control gave the family incredible political importance; unfortunately, for the Sidneys it did not

<sup>134</sup> Henry Sidney, “Sir Henry Sidney unto Philip [sic] his Sonne” in *A very Godly letter made, by the right Honourable Sir Henry Sidney*, (London : T. Dawson, 1591), 4.

<sup>135</sup> Mary Sidney, “Lady Mary Sidney to Edmond Mollineaus, Esq; Secretary to Sir Henry Sidney; from Chifwyke, 1<sup>st</sup> of Sept. 1574,” 67.

<sup>136</sup> Breannan 48.

<sup>137</sup> Hannay, 41.

<sup>138</sup> Brennan, 32.

translate into a fortune. Mary Sidney's political involvement during Elizabeth's reign also included lobbying the Queen directly for her husband while he was serving the Queen far from court as Lord Deputy of Ireland and President of the Councils of the Welsh Marches. She consistently argued for the Queen to repay him money spent in government service, echoing his many letters to Elizabeth, William Cecil, and the Privy Council. Despite their political influence Henry and Mary Sidney never gained a title. The disadvantages of the Sidney's loyal service to the Queen appear in Mary Sidney's 1572 note to William Cecil, the Queen's Secretary, she wrote

Her Majesty's pleasure for my husband who I find greatly dismayed at being called to be a baron. Our ill ability to maintain a higher title than we now possess. Since titles of great calling cannot be well held but with some amendment at the prince's hand, of a 'ruinated' start, or else to his discredit greatly that must take them upon him.... My humble request is that you will stand so much his good lord that the motion be no further offered unto him.... Stay the motion of this new title to be any further offered him.<sup>139</sup>

Henry Sidney's loyalty to the Queen and years of service had cost the Sidney family much of their fortune.

The interconnection between Mary Sidney and the Dudleys in the political realm is a part of Mary Sidney's life in Elizabeth's court from beginning to end. Early biographers of Robert Dudley suggested that Mary Sidney was simply a pawn in her

<sup>139</sup> Mary Sidney, "Mary, Lady Sidney to Burghley, 2 May 1572" in *Calendar of State Papers, Ireland, 1509-1585*, Rev. ed. ed. Mary O'Dowd (Kew, UK: Public Record Office Irish Manuscripts Commission, 2000), 160.



brother's political schemes placed in the Privy Chamber to widen his political influence.<sup>140</sup> Despite a significant decrease in her presence in at court following her disfigurement from smallpox in 1562, Mary Sidney's departure from court did not occur until 1580 when she removed herself in protest of Elizabeth's marriage negotiations with the Duke of Anjou and in support of Robert Dudley's opposition to the marriage.<sup>141</sup> Despite withdrawing in support of her brother, Mary Sidney's action shows that she was politically involved; she acted with a motive to influence the politics of Elizabeth's government.

### **Chapter 10: Mary Sidney's Most Famous Political Act**

The most famous action of Mary Sidney's career at court occurred at the beginning of Elizabeth's reign. In the midst of early marriage negotiations, Elizabeth utilized Mary Sidney's political astuteness and her family connections to the Spanish court to use her as an intermediary with the Spanish Ambassador in the marriage negotiations with Archduke Charles, son and later brother to the Holy Roman Emperor, a Hapsburg connection to the Spanish crown. Elizabeth summoned Mary Sidney along with her brother Robert Dudley one evening in September of 1559 and instructed Mary to begin discussions with the Spanish Ambassador de Quadra about the match with the Archduke. Mary Sidney, with support from her brother, promptly began her political

<sup>140</sup> Leicester, Robert Dudley, Earl of, *The picture of a favourite: or, Secret memoirs of Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, Prime Minister and favourite of Queen Elizabeth, and Stadtholder of Holland*, (London : Printed for Samuel Briscoe, 1721), 82-83.

<sup>141</sup> Jenkins, 274.

mission.<sup>142</sup> Mary Sidney's involvement in the marriage negotiations demonstrates her political agency. Elizabeth used her as a political operative and the information she provided influenced the decisions and actions of foreign powers.

Elizabeth often used her courtiers, male and female, for political purposes based on their connections. During a time of rough relations with France in February 1560, Elizabeth's Ambassador, Nicholas Throckmorton, suggested that she "send Mr. Mason, Mr. Mewtas, Challoner, or Sidney, of whom the French have good opinion."<sup>143</sup> Mary Sidney's strong family ties to the Spanish court formed in the efforts to free her brothers made her the perfect choice for an intermediary. Her previous relationship with the Spanish allowed them to trust her more easily and believe that she was acting in their interest. As a member of Elizabeth's Privy Chamber Mary Sidney would have been acknowledged as possessing information about Elizabeth's desires and intentions not widely known. Elizabeth's use of her courtiers to pass along information to foreign ambassadors must have been common, as the Spanish Ambassador, Alvarez de Quadra treats information from Robert Dudley and Thomas Perry as ordinary.<sup>144</sup>

The letters of Spanish Ambassador, Alvarez de Quadra, the Bishop of Aquila, to his king, the Duchess of Parma, and other members of the Spanish court and government show Mary Sidney was his main source of information about Elizabeth and the goings on of the court. In early September 1559 Mary Sidney approached the Spanish Ambassador and Caspar von Brünner, the Ambassador for the Holy Roman Emperor, and advised them

<sup>142</sup> The Bishop of Aquila to the Duchess of Parma 7 Sept 1559. CSP Spanish 96.

<sup>143</sup> Nicholas Throckmorton, "R.O. Throckmorton to Cecil, Feb 20, 1560," in *Calendar of State Papers Foreign, Elizabeth, 1558-1589. Vol. 2 : 1559-1560*, ed. Joseph Stevenson, (London: Longman, Green, Reader and Dyer, 1865), 391.

<sup>144</sup> The Bishop of Aquila to the Duchess of Parma 7 Sept 1559. CSP Spanish 96

that “this was the best time to speak to the Queen about the Archduke.” Despite de Quadra’s efforts to “discover what this might mean,” Mary Sidney was reluctant to give more information. De Quadra stated that she “would not speak herself,” suggesting that she was following specific instructions on what information to pass along to spur the actions Elizabeth wanted. Mary Sidney also told de Quadra that the Queen wanted the Archduke to visit right away, a request that the Queen would make of many of her suitors.

Mary Sidney took her mission seriously, answering de Quadra’s doubts about Elizabeth’s true intentions by assuring him that “it is the custom of ladies here not to give their consent in such matters until they are teased into it.” In addition to giving him information about the Queen, Lady Sidney informed him that in just a few days, “the council would press [the Queen] to marry” further solidifying her suggestion that it was the best time for the Ambassador to bring up the match. This also shows that Mary Sidney’s inside information involved more than the Queen, and suggests that she was part of a larger information network. Not only did Mary Sidney advise the Ambassador on the best time to approach the Queen, she gave him specific instruction on how to do his job, telling him that “he ought to write to the Emperor to send [Archduke Charles]”

Mary Sidney assured de Quadra of the veracity and legitimacy of her information by reminding him “if this were not true... it might cost her her life.” The fact that acting outside the Queen’s authority would have serious consequences strongly supports Mary Sidney’s assertion that she was acting upon the Queen’s request at this time. Mary Sidney promised she was acting with the Queen’s consent only because the Elizabeth did not

want to speak to the Emperor's Ambassador herself. Throughout her conversation, Mary Sidney kept reasserting that she was telling the Ambassador the truth and not misleading him. Even with an established relationship with the Spanish, Mary Sidney still had to defend her actions, showing how important having a level of trust was and how astute Elizabeth was to utilize Lady Sidney in this role.

The Ambassador apparently trusted Lady Sidney, stating early in the relationship "she [Lady Sidney] would never dare to say such a thing as she did in the presence of an Italian gentleman who was interpreting between us unless it were true."<sup>145</sup> De Quadra found further reason to trust Mary when he corroborated her story with her brother, Robert Dudley, who he found trustworthy because he owed his life to the Spanish King. When asked about Mary Sidney's actions Robert assured the Ambassador that "the Queen has summoned both of them the night before."<sup>146</sup>

In another account written on the same day as the highly detailed letter to the Duchess of Parma, De Quarda wrote to the Bishop of Arras and further revealed that Mary Sidney was giving him information not just about the Queen. In it, he said that her information about a plot against some members of the court had given him insight into Elizabeth's French and Scottish policy and the possibility of a war.<sup>147</sup> The information about court happenings and foreign policy that Mary provided the Ambassador shows up in another letter to the Duke of Alba just two days later, where he said that the French were likely involved in a plot to poison the Queen and murder the Earl of Arundel. Apparently this was secret information, as he is "only able to find out about this plot what

<sup>145</sup> The Bishop of Aquila to the Duchess of Parma 7 Sept 1559. CSP Spanish 95.

<sup>146</sup> The Bishop of Aquila to the Duchess of Parma 7 Sept 1559. CSP Spanish 96.

<sup>147</sup> Bishop Quadra to the Bishop of Arras, 7 Sept 1559. CSP Spanish 96.

I am told by a great friend of Robert's," a friend who is later acknowledged as Lady Sidney.<sup>148</sup> Clearly, Mary Sidney's information sharing went beyond the Queen's mood and de Quadra's passing along her information by name suggests that he trusted her based on more than her access to the Queen, as she is his only named information source.

Mary Sidney did act as the "bellwether of the Queen's mood," as Pam Wright dismissed her and the other women of the Privy Chamber, but her actions proved crucial to the foreign politics of Elizabeth's early reign. Mary Sidney not only provided de Quadra with information about what Elizabeth told Mary were her intentions to marry Archduke Charles, but also inside information about foreign affairs and conflicts, including an assassination threat from within the court.<sup>149</sup> This shows that she had become trusted to be involved in usually female issues of marriage but also matters of war and foreign affairs.

De Quadra's high level of trust for Mary Sidney appeared in his letter to the Emperor discussing what should be done about sending Archduke Charles to England. The immense trust that de Quadra put in Mary's information that the Queen wanted the Archduke to come to England and was interested in the match is apparent, as he told her that he "had written to your Majesty to that effect on her word alone." De Quadra's faith in Mary appears again when he told the Emperor that he chose to follow Lady Sidney's advice and "refrained from going to Hampton Court." Following Mary's advice was an intelligent decision, as a visit by another unnamed ambassador angered the Queen.

<sup>148</sup> The Bishop of Aquila to the Duke of Alba, 9 Sept 1559. CSP Spanish 96.

<sup>149</sup> Bishop Quadra to the Bishop of Arras, 7 Sept 1559. CSP Spanish 96.

Additionally, De Quadra's absence allowed the Queen to ask him about the Archduke's visit and gave him the chance to push her for an answer.

It seems that at this point, almost a month after their first conversation, Mary was still working under the Queen's guidance. The Ambassador stated that Mary told the Queen the extent of their earlier conversation and that the Queen was now waiting to see what the Hapsburgs would do, indicating that Mary was working as an information conduit in both directions and showing that she was doing this with the Queen's permission. If she did not have the Queen's permission, she would certainly not share her conversations. Additionally, though Mary teased the Ambassador by saying, "she knew that if she might speak she could say something that would please me" she was still following the Queen's orders that she not say more on the topic of the match.

In this same letter to the Emperor, the Ambassador's record of a conversation he had with the Queen hints the beginnings of the Queen's displeasure with Mary Sidney's discussions with de Quadra. The recounting started out well enough in regards to Mary, in the beginning of the conversation the Queen stated that "it is never fit for a queen and a maiden to summon anyone to marry her for her pleasure," confirming Mary Sidney's claims for why she was discussing the match with the Ambassadors. Later in the same paragraph, the beginning of issues for Mary Sidney appear.

De Quadra appears to refer to Mary Sidney when he referenced his conversations with "some of her household" about the Queen's wish for the Archduke to visit and apparent interest in the match and found Elizabeth "surprised" and "not wishing to be approached on that side." At the mention of the conversations between Mary Sidney and

the Ambassador Elizabeth physically pulled back, and continuously insisted that Archduke was welcome to visit, but a visit did not obligate her to marry him. De Quadra noted that her attitude and speech countered the information that he had from Mary Sidney. Though this shows the beginnings of a rift that will emerge between Mary and the Queen, it does not diminish the importance the Ambassador placed on Mary's information. He said, "I do not believe Lady Sidney and Lord Robert could be mistaken" and "I premise that we have to depend principally not on the Queen's words."<sup>150</sup> Because the Queen was well known for her clever ways of avoiding straight answers, Mary Sidney and the information she conveyed gained importance and significance for the Spanish Ambassador.

Despite Elizabeth's displeasure with the previous result of her use of Mary Sidney as an information conduit, she still used Mary as messenger in both directions in the middle of October. De Quadra said that Elizabeth was pleased that the Archduke would be coming to England soon and through his information from Lady Sidney that "now more than ever the Queen is resolved on the marriage."<sup>151</sup>

A month later, the situation was significantly different. In the middle of November the Ambassador's letter to his King shows his concern about the situation of the marriage negotiation and the relationship with the Dudleys, together they led to his need to directly ask the Queen about her intentions with the Archduke. The reason for de Quadra's concern shows how integral Mary Sidney has become to the marriage negotiations. A fight between Mary and Robert over his feelings that "she was carrying

<sup>150</sup> The Bishop of Aquila to the Emperor, 2 Oct 1559 CSP Spanish 98, 99, 100, 101.

<sup>151</sup> The Bishop of Aquila to the Emperor, 16 Oct 1559. CSP Spanish 107.

the affair further than he desired” and “Lady Sidney instead of coming to me as usual with encouragement was alarmed” caused De Quadra to question the Queen about her intentions towards the Archduke and push her to be “more open to us than hitherto.”

The Ambassador’s forcefulness with the Queen and need to find out her true intentions led to difficult consequences for the woman on whom he had depended, Mary Sidney. He used the information he got from Mary Sidney to call Elizabeth’s bluff, stating that he used the information from those in her court to justify bringing the Archduke to England because out of modesty she refused to give a definite answer. De Quadra assumed that the Queen would be excited to hear that the Archduke was on his way because of the advice of Mary Sidney, but he did not receive the reaction he expected.

Elizabeth was furious and told the Ambassador “that some one had done this with good intentions, but without any commission from her.” Despite her effort to sacrifice Mary Sidney to save her freedom to make a decision, de Quadra did not believe her, saying that she had played a trick on the Spanish and the Empire. Even though he did not believe the Queen’s claim, de Quadra made Mary Sidney his scapegoat, stating, “I am obliged to complain of somebody in this matter, and have complained of Lady Sidney only, although in truth she is no more to blame than I am.” Regardless, de Quadra’s strongest statement of his belief in Mary’s information came after his scapegoating of her, “so long as the Queen’s own words were confirmed by the assurance of her friends, I thought I could not be wrong if I followed their advice, but when I found Lady Sidney



was doubtful and complained of the Queen and her brother, I thought best to put an end to uncertainty.”

The portrayal of Mary Sidney at the end of the letter shows the negative effects of Mary Sidney’s involvement with the marriage negotiations. De Quadra wrote that he had “heard that Lady Sidney is discouraged about the Queen,” an unsurprising statement. What is surprising is de Quadra’s claim that Mary Sidney was sent to the Tower. Despite her apparent imprisonment, de Quadra alleged that she wrote to him to say that “she will not cease to proclaim what is going on, and that her worst enemy is her brother.”<sup>152</sup> As de Quadra is the only source to mention Mary’s imprisonment, it is rather unlikely that she was sent to the Tower. Even if she was not imprisoned, de Quadra’s inclusion of this information in a letter to the King suggests that such a punishment was plausible to the King, de Quadra or both. Mary’s supposed imprisonment and conflict with her brother shows a break in some of the most important relationships in Mary’s life because of her involvement in the marriage negotiations. As part of a court that functioned through patronage and personal politics, the breakdown of Mary Sidney’s most important alliances is significant, as it would take a lot to provide a strong enough motivation for her to destroy these alliances.

The Ambassador’s next letter to the Spanish King further shows Mary’s separation from the Queen. De Quadra again mentioned his blaming of Mary Sidney for the issues with the marriage negotiation but suggested that this is for her benefit. Mary told de Quadra that “she will make known to the Queen and everybody what has occurred

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<sup>152</sup> Bishop Quadra to the King, 13 Nov 1559. CSP Spanish 112, 113, 114.

if she is asked.”<sup>153</sup> Apparently, Mary wanted word to get out so that she could tell others about the way the Queen had treated her. At this point Mary Sidney aligned herself with the Spanish Ambassador to maintain her reputation at court, as her normal allegiances to the Queen and her brother had broken down.

In addition to showing how seriously the Ambassador took Mary Sidney’s role in the negotiations, the situation presented in de Quadra’s letters to the King shows Mary Sidney’s obvious involvement in a political action. Her brother’s anger at Mary’s action shows that Mary acted on her own and not just as his agent or puppet. If she had simply been following his instructions there would be no reason for Robert Dudley’s anger. Mary’s statement that her brother is her “worst enemy” is almost shocking, particularly when taking into account how often Mary is painted as simply an agent for her brother and the Dudleys are referred to as clannish. The rift in the usually remarkably close-knit Dudley family caused by Mary’s deviation from Robert’s plan only strengthens her personal agency. The Sidneys did not reconcile with Robert Dudley until months later, at the end of December.<sup>154</sup>

In addition, de Quadra’s explanation that Mary “complained of the Queen.” Mary’s voicing of her anger suggests that she felt her anger was just and that she had been mistreated or used by the Queen. Mary’s desire to let others know what happened to her and alignment with the Spanish Ambassador to maintain her reputation show her break from her normal alliances and patronage networks and the significance of her actions.

<sup>153</sup> Bishop Quadra to the King, 18 Nov 1559, CSP Spanish 115.

<sup>154</sup> The Bishop of Aquila to the Count de Feria 27 Dec 1559, CSP Spanish 119.

Mary Sidney obviously worked for the Queen as part of a political plan. Mary's own arguments to de Quadra about why he should trust her ring true. Elizabeth's punishments for court members who went against her wishes were well known. At Elizabeth's death one of the chief aspects of her reign included in remembrances of her was her swift punishment for offences against her. The author of one of these memorials to Elizabeth wrote, "[her] invention so quick, that if any of them had gone beyond their bounds, with majesty undaunted, she would have limited them within the verge of their duties."<sup>155</sup> Katherine Ashley's discussions to move forward the negotiations with Eric of Sweden resulted in house arrest, showing the Queen punished those who worked on the marriage negotiations without permission.<sup>156</sup> Though de Quadra contends Mary Sidney was put in the Tower for her involvement, he is the only source that mentions this, making it rather unlikely as the records of William Cecil usually mention when members of court were punished.<sup>157</sup> Additionally, Mary's involvement in the negotiations greatly damaged the Sidneys' strongest alliances, those with her family and the Queen. In the age when patronage and personal politics mattered greatly there is no reason for Mary Sidney to act in a way to break these alliances, as they were the best and really only way for herself and her husband to gain power, prestige, wealth and influence. Even the possibility of a Spanish alliance would mean nothing if the Queen was displeased with her.

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<sup>155</sup> Henry Chettle, *England's mourning garment; worn here by plain shepherds, in memory of their sacred mistress, Elizabeth; queen of virtue, while she lived; and theme of sorrow, being dead*, Thomas Millington, and are to be sold at his shop under St. Peter's church in Cornhill. [1603]. In: Harleian miscellany, (London, Printed for Robert Dutton, 1808-13), 532.

<sup>156</sup> Mears, 69.

<sup>157</sup> Bishop Quadra to the King, 13 Nov 1559. CSP Spanish 114.

Elizabeth took advantage of Mary Sidney and the Spanish Ambassador's trust in her to provide him with false information. She fed Mary Sidney artificial desires to meet the Archduke and intentions to marry him. In hindsight, Elizabeth did not intend to marry the Archduke, and her horror at the thought of him visiting England to move the marriage negotiations forward show this. Mary Sidney's anger and displeasure at the Queen show she realized the Queen used her as a political pawn to manipulate the marriage negotiations and had been left with a reputation of lying to the Spanish.

Even in the unlikely case that Mary was not working for or being used by the Queen, her actions and involvement in the marriage negotiations held great political significance. De Quadra mentioned many times that he, the Ambassador to the Emperor, and other members of the governments of the Spain and the Holy Roman Empire made decisions and took action based on the information Mary Sidney provided. Her ability to influence the decisions of foreign powers alone should be enough to recognize Mary Sidney's political significance.

The Spanish Ambassador's letters show the importance of sharing information at court, by both men and women. He generally treated the information he received from men and women as equally important. It is also useful to note that he shared the intelligence he received with male and female members of the Spanish court and government. The inclusion of members of both sexes in de Quadra's sources and correspondence show that in the court environment, relationships and information networks with men and women were crucial to the function of an ambassador and for foreign affairs.

At the outset of de Quadra's relationship with Mary Sidney, he wrote two letters, one to a woman, one to a man, describing the situation. Comparing de Quadra's two letters on the same topic and written on the same day demonstrates de Quadra's view of using a woman, Mary Sidney, as his main source of information and suggests that he was slightly uncomfortable about using a woman's information as the basis for important political decisions. De Quadra wrote to Margaret, the Duchess of Parma and Regent of the Netherlands, and Antoine Perrenot de Granvelle, the Bishop of Arras, the leader of the Consulta, and Margaret's top advisor. A comparison of the information that de Quadra shares with the female regent and her male advisor illustrates how gender influenced the sharing of political information.

Margaret was the illegitimate first child of Emperor Charles V and a Dutch woman of a good family. Though illegitimate, she was immediately recognized and protected by the Emperor. She was well educated in the homes of various sisters of the Emperor until her marriage in her early teens to the nephew of the Medici Pope Alexander. After his death just a year into the marriage, Margaret was married a few years later to a connection of the new Pope, Ottavio Farnese, with whom she had twins and a stormy marriage. Margaret arrived in the Netherlands at age thirty-seven, noted for her talents, pride, energy, and devotion to her Catholic faith, while her two Italian marriages furthered her education in politics. Philip, her half brother, chose Margaret as regent of the Netherlands when he returned to Spain because she had been born there and showed a love for the colonies that other candidates for the regency did not possess.<sup>158</sup>

<sup>158</sup> John Lothrop Motley, *The Rise of the Dutch Republic, Vol. 1*. (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1929), 209-212, 194.

De Quadra wrote to the Duchess of Parma under the express direction of King Philip, who commanded de Quadra to, “fulfill the orders she may send you on the subject [England] with the same zeal, goodwill and care as if I wrote it myself... I shall be glad for you to urge in the accord with the Duchess in the same manner as if I were here.”<sup>159</sup> The King additionally instructed de Quadra to “keep her well informed of all things touching my interests in English affairs. You will perceive how important it is that she should know from day to day what happens, and she will take care to answer and instruct you.”<sup>160</sup> Clearly, the King passed his authority over the Netherlands to his sister, the Duchess of Parma, giving her great power and authority by insisting that she was to be treated the same as him.

De Quadra’s letter to the Duchess of Parma is the most cited example, by scholars like Natalie Mears, Pam Wright, and Michael Brennan and popular historians like Elizabeth Gristwood and Anne Somerset, of Mary Sidney’s political involvement in the negotiations with Archduke Charles. It is full of detail and clearly shows Mary Sidney’s actions. I suspect this is because the Ambassador is writing about a woman’s political involvement to another politically powerful woman.

In his letter to the Duchess, de Quadra immediately mentioned that the information he was about to share was from a lady of the palace and then references her as “a sister of Lord Robert, called Lady Sidney.” He detailed everything that he and Lady Mary talked about, including the best time to speak to the Queen about the marriage negotiations, a plot against the Queen, possible war with France and Scotland, the

<sup>159</sup> The King to the Bishop of Aquila. 22 August 1559, CSP Spanish 94.

<sup>160</sup> The King to the Bishop of Aquila, Between 23 August and 7 September 1559, CSP Spanish, 95.

feelings of the Privy Council about the Queen's need to marry, and finally the possibility of a visit by the Archduke. As previously mentioned, the Ambassador put much effort into explaining his trust of the information that Mary Sidney provided. In this letter it is striking to notice that many of the reasons de Quadra trusted that Lady Sidney was acting for the Queen based on her personal assurances. Her assertion that it was custom and modesty that caused the Queen to use her to send information, her argument that she would be risking her life if she lied to him, and the Ambassador's claim that she would not give such sensitive information through an interpreter if it were not true. Not until the end of the letter does de Quadra mention that he verified Mary's claim of working for the Queen with her brother, after he recounted other issues discussed with him.<sup>161</sup>

In his letter to the Duchess of Parma, de Quadra gave Mary Sidney complete credit for the information she passed, and expressed that she was credible because of the risks she took. This greatly contrasts to the letter he wrote on the same day and ostensibly on the same subject to the Duchess's most powerful advisor, the Bishop of Arras.

The Bishop of Arras was on the powerful State Council in the Netherlands and most importantly, a member of the Consulta, the small group whose instructions the Regent was to follow in all important matters. The Bishop of Arras was recognized as the most important member of this small group, and a crack politician, making a comparison between the information de Quadra shared with him and the woman he was supposed to be advising, the Duchess of Parma particularly interesting. John Lothrop Motley, an early historian of the early modern Netherlands, contends that Philip intended to place control of the Netherlands in the hands of the Bishop of Arras, and chose Margaret as regent to

<sup>161</sup> The Bishop of Aquila to the Duchess of Parma 7 Sept 1559. CSP Spanish 95-96.

use her femininity to give Arras control.<sup>162</sup> The Bishop's role in the administration and as official advisor to the Duchess is the reason that de Quadra wrote to him on the same topic as he wrote to the Bishops' superior, the Governess herself.

De Quadra wrote more succinctly in his letter to the Bishop of Arras. He credited "this lady," whom he does not name, but the editor of the State Papers indicates was Mary Sidney, with giving him information about the plot against the Queen, and does not directly mention any more of their conversation. He also passed along information about the possibility of a conflict with the French and Scottish without mentioning his source. As the Ambassador credited Mary Sidney with information about the French and Scottish in the letter to the Duchess, she probably provided de Quadra with the information he gave to the Bishop. The Ambassador told the Bishop "Lord Robert and his sister are certainly acting splendidly" before he explained the status of the marriage negotiations.<sup>163</sup> Despite the fact that in the more descriptive letter to the Duchess, Mary Sidney provided all the information and Robert Dudley merely verified that she was on a mission from the Queen, de Quadra's order and only reference to Mary Sidney as "Lord Robert's sister" in his letter to the Bishop suggests that Lord Robert was the more important figure in the behind the scenes actions in the negotiations. De Quadra's letter to the Bishop significantly minimizes Mary Sidney's role in the marriage negotiations and foreign relations between Spain and England and by conflating her actions with her brother, he increased the importance Robert Dudley.

<sup>162</sup> John Lothrop Motley, *The Rise of the Dutch Republic*, 192, 193, 211.

<sup>163</sup> Bishop Quadra to the Bishop of Arras, 7 Sept 1559. CSP Spanish 96



The comparison of these two letters illustrates the importance of gender in the way that de Quadra presented his information. In his letter to another woman, the Duchess of Parma, he was much more open about stating that Mary Sidney was giving him all of his information. In his letter to the Bishop of Arras he named Mary Sidney as his source, but suggested that her brother deserved just as much, if not more credit for getting information to the Spanish. However, it is important to note that in some cases the need for information overrode de Quadra's concern about the gender of its provider. In his letter to the Emperor, de Quadra included a copy of his letter to the Duchess of Parma, showing that the Ambassador judged the information provided by Mary Sidney as both important enough and true enough to send along to the Emperor.<sup>164</sup>

Scholars have viewed Mary Sidney's actions in the marriage negotiations with the Spanish Ambassador in a variety of ways, many acknowledge that Elizabeth directed Mary's political action but do not necessarily grant Mary Sidney political agency or significance. Michael Brennan contends that Mary Sidney was working for the Queen under her brother's instruction. He argues that when Robert Dudley changed his mind on the match, Mary Sidney extricated herself from the marriage negotiations at his instruction.<sup>165</sup> This seems to completely ignore the disagreement between Mary and Robert and break in their relationship that lasted for over a month, limiting Mary's political agency, and painting Mary Sidney as her brother's puppet.

Though Pam Wright doubts the political agency of the women of the Privy Chamber, she uses Mary Sidney's actions to argue that Elizabeth used her Privy Chamber

<sup>164</sup> The Bishop of Aquila to the Emperor, 2 Oct 1559. CSP Spanish 97.

<sup>165</sup> Brennan, 35.

Women as mediators to allow her the most freedom in political decisions. She also uses Mary Sidney's experience to assert that "independent initiative" in political actions was punished, not political action itself, dismissing the women's political significance because they were working for the Queen.<sup>166</sup> The problem of her argument is that she only looked at de Quadra's first letter and did not address de Quadra's trust in Mary's information over Elizabeth's and the rift that develops between the Queen and Mary Sidney. If she had, she would have seen Mary's individual political significance and that even some guided political actions were subject to the Queen's disapproval. Wright's issue appears many times in the scholarship, often only the first, most detailed, letter is used to show that Elizabeth used her Privy Chamber women in political matters, but doing so diminishes the individual women's political agency and significance.

Natalie Mears directly challenges Wright's interpretation of Mary Sidney's actions, agreeing that she was used by the Queen in a political matter, but arguing that this alone shows Mary Sidney's political significance because she participated in diplomatic matters.<sup>167</sup> Though Mears assertion of Mary Sidney's political participation is important, Mary Sidney's significance comes from more than just her political involvement and a deeper examination of her actions and their consequences gives her real political agency.

By only skimming the surface of de Quadra's letters and avoiding a discussion of the results of Elizabeth's use of Mary Sidney in the marriage negotiations with the Spanish Ambassadors scholars have missed the depth of Mary Sidney's political agency

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<sup>166</sup> Wright, 168.

<sup>167</sup> Mears, 70, 77.

and the significance role she played in international politics. Though I am certain Mary Sidney played a part in the marriage negotiations with the Archduke at the Queen's direction, whether working for the Queen or not, Mary Sidney's involvement with the marriage negotiations show she played a part in the politics of Elizabeth's reign. Mary Sidney's work for the Queen was clearly political, as she moved the negotiations for a visit and a marriage in the way that Elizabeth desired and pushed the Ambassador to provide information about what he was telling the King and Emperor and what was going on the Spanish/ Holy Roman Empire side. Additionally, Mary could not have been working for her family or personal interest, as the breaks that occurred between the Sidneys and the Queen and the Dudleys because of her involvement hurt Mary. Finally, the information Mary shared with the Spanish Ambassador shaped the actions of foreign powers and political outcomes. Mary Sidney's guidance of the Spanish Ambassador on the marriage negotiations between Elizabeth and Archduke Charles shows that women were political actors and politically significant in Elizabethan England.

### **Chapter 11: Representations of Mary Sidney Show her Political Significance**

The representations of Mary Sidney made later during her lifetime and shortly after her death by chroniclers, memorialists of her son, and most importantly her daughter, show that Mary Sidney was understood to be politically important by her contemporaries.

The reflections on royal service by those closest to Mary Sidney show another side of her that is not part of the minimal public record and scholarly work. The fact that the Sidneys are known for using familial references and biographical details in their writings make the locating of Mary Dudley Sidney in their works that much more important.<sup>168</sup> Mary Sidney's children thought highly of her service to the Queen and suggest that her support was necessary to Elizabeth's rule but note that the prestige and service came with sacrifices.

Mary Sidney Herbert translated Robert Garnier's *Marc-Antoine*, and published it in 1592 as a closet drama. Though the work is a translation, the many differences between the two works and Herbert's liberties with Garnier's text allow *The Tragedy of Antony* to be analyzed as her work. Mary Sidney Herbert's Cleopatra can be used to understand Herbert's view of the connection between a queen and her waiting women and their importance. Her depiction exposes the importance Mary Dudley Sidney had in the politics of Elizabeth's reign.

The most striking aspect of *The Tragedy of Antony* is the importance placed on Cleopatra's waiting women, Eras and Charmion. In the character list, Herbert places these two women just behind Antony and Cleopatra. Arthur Kinney asserts that Herbert listed the characters in order of importance.<sup>169</sup> By placing Eras and Charmion in the third and fourth position, she points out the centrality of her waiting women to Cleopatra.

<sup>168</sup> Marion Wynne-Davies, "'As I, for one, who thus my habits change': Mary Wroth and the Abandonment of the Sidney/Herbert Familial Discourse," in *Women Writers and Familial Discourse in the English Renaissance: Relative Values* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 89.

<sup>169</sup> Arthur Kinney, "The Tragedy of Antony," in *Renaissance Drama: An Anthology of Plays and Entertainments*, Second Edition (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2005), 335.

Their position also puts them before any other men in the play, including Cleopatra's male advisors, highlighting the significance of these women to Cleopatra's rule.

Herbert presents the waiting women as Cleopatra's close companions, using the term sister repeatedly to signify the strong bond between the women. More critically, Herbert depicts Eras and Charmion as the voice of reason to Cleopatra's excessive guilt. Throughout the play, these women try to persuade Cleopatra that her suicide is unnecessary and that she is not to blame for the downfall of Egypt. Additionally, Herbert makes the point that the waiting women are essential to fulfilling Cleopatra's plans. In the Argument, following Plutarch, it is the waiting women who help Cleopatra get Antony into the tomb.<sup>170</sup> Mary Sidney Herbert also reveals the disadvantage of waiting women being essential to a queen's rule, as she notes that those who love and serve the queen lose their freedom.<sup>171</sup>

As both Mary Sidney Herbert and her mother Mary Dudley Sidney served Elizabeth I as women of the privy chamber, Herbert's representation of waiting women is easily viewed as a comment on the relationship between Elizabeth and her waiting women, as well as their importance. Clearly, Herbert felt that women of the Privy Chamber, such as her mother, were essential to Elizabeth's rule.

The significance Herbert places on the waiting women, putting them before male advisors, including the queen's secretary, also reveals her opinion that the women of the privy chamber were more important than male advisors. Mary Sidney Herbert had an inside view of the structure of the Privy Chamber and the women's importance to and

<sup>170</sup> Mary Sidney, Countess of Pembroke, "The Tragedy of Antony," in *Renaissance Drama: An Anthology of Plays and Entertainments*, Second Edition (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2005), 336.

<sup>171</sup> Mary Sidney, Countess of Pembroke, 336.

influence on Elizabeth, making the fact that she places them before male members of the government and court significant. It suggests that David Starkey and Pam Wright's dismissal of women of the privy chamber and focus only on men as politically important has been incorrect.

The use of sister to explain the bond between a queen and her women could also hold some weight with the way Elizabeth viewed her Privy Chamber women. Elizabeth's bond with those serving her was seen as approximating a family, even before she became queen. She was noted for the "family" she created with those serving her at Hatfield House, with older women in mothering roles.<sup>172</sup> Late in her reign she viewed herself as a mother or beloved aunt to the younger women serving in her Privy Chamber.<sup>173</sup> It would be unsurprising if she felt the bond between herself and women of the same generation who she knew as children, like Mary Dudley Sidney, was sisterly.

Herbert's portrayal of the waiting women as the voice of reason to an irrational, passionate ruler acts as an inside look at one of the roles these women played to a monarch that was known for her occasional illogicality and whimsy, attributed to her gender. One can image her Privy Chamber women attempting to persuade Elizabeth to make a decision on a potential marriage match. Chroniclers of her time like Holinshed and Moffett recognized Mary Dudley Sidney for her skill as a great persuader and she left court over her distaste for the Alençon marriage negotiations.<sup>174</sup>

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<sup>172</sup> Adams, 30.

<sup>173</sup> Karen Robertson, "Negotiating Favor: the Letters of Lady Raleigh," in *Women and Politics in Early Modern England, 1450-1700*, ed. James Daybell (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2003), 102.

<sup>174</sup> Jenkins, 274.

Herbert's depiction that waiting women were essential to carrying out the Queen's plans is also illuminating. Many scholars, such as Pam Wright, David Starkey, and Simon Adams, argue that Elizabeth's Privy Chamber women were inconsequential to the functioning of politics and the government, Mary Sidney Herbert seems to be saying the exact opposite. She may have been thinking of an incident within her own family in which her mother, as a member of the Privy Chamber, engaged in strategic conversations with the Spanish ambassador about the possibility of a match with the Hapsburg Archduke Charles of Austria. In his missives to Spain, the ambassador presented Mary Dudley Sidney as his main source of information and her assurances as his reason for believing that the match will happen. This behind the scenes communication helped Elizabeth's political alliances.

It is also important to mention Herbert's view that those who loved and served the queen lost their freedom. This can be viewed as her commentary on the sometimes-negative impact that her mother's loyalty and service to Elizabeth had on her mother. Mary Dudley Sidney devoted her adult life to serving the Queen, in the process she was disfigured by smallpox and though she may have wished to retreat from the harsh eyes of the court she continued to serve and appear at the Queen's will. This sometimes involved a battle of wills to get respectable rooms at court and gain income to afford the lifestyle expected.<sup>175</sup> The disadvantages of loyal service to the Queen appear in Mary Sidney's 1572 note to William Cecil, the Queen's Secretary, when she had to regretfully turn down a title of Baron for her husband. Despite the honor a barony represented, Mary Sidney

<sup>175</sup>Mary Sidney, "Mary Sidney (sister to the E. of Leicester) to the E. of Sussex; assigning her reasons (viz. the want of an apartment) for not attending on the queen," 141; Mary Sidney, "Lady Mary Sydney to Edmund Mollineaux Esq. from Chifwicke, 11 Oct., 1578," 271.

had to decline the title and contingent rise in status because Henry Sidney's service as Lord Deputy of Ireland had cost the family much of their own fortune. Mary Sidney Herbert recognized that though serving in the Privy Chamber made some women in Elizabethan England very important, the costs endured by the status were considerable. Mary Sidney Herbert's depiction of waiting women in *The Tragedy of Antony* illuminates the importance of women of the privy chamber, like her mother Mary Dudley Sidney, in Elizabeth's reign.

In addition to the work of her daughter, views of Mary Sidney survive in a variety of sources, most tied to the men in her life, her husband and her son Philip. Surprisingly, few accounts of her brother, Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, even mention Mary. The sources we do have overwhelmingly paint Mary Sidney as impressively intelligent, uncommonly persuasive, and deeply devoted to her Protestant faith.

Unlike some of the other authors who wrote descriptions of Lady Mary Sidney, George Whetstone had no connection to the Sidney family; he simply wrote his memorial to Philip Sidney to sell to the public after Philip's early death in 1586. In his memorial to Philip Sidney, Whetstone points out the importance and prestige of the Sidney family. Stating "his [Philip Sidney's] house of birth was ablaze," indicating the family's importance at the time of Philip's birth. He also calls the family pure and points to the close connections with the throne. "Sidney his sire and Dudley was his Dame: parents well knoweth of honour and fame" is the central line of importance to understand the conceptualization of Mary Sidney by the public.<sup>176</sup> Whetstone clearly highlights the

<sup>176</sup> George Whetstone, *Sir Phillip Sidney, His Honorable Life, His Valiant Death, and True Vertues*, (London: T. Cadman, 1587), B1.



Dudley connection that Mary brings to Philip, and the placement indicated that her family and background is just as important as her husband's is. He also ensures that the readers know that both Henry and Mary were famous and highly honored. The image of Mary Sidney produced by Whetstone indicates that she was publicly recognized and understood to be just as important to her family's success as her husband, through her family connection as a Dudley but also by bringing honor to the family. This is rather unusual to find evidence of a publicly recognized equality of influence and importance in a noble marriage, particularly in the Elizabethan age. This shows that Mary Sidney was not a stereotypical noble wife, but was equal and important in her marriage.

Yet another memorial biography of Philip Sidney presents Mary Sidney as extraordinary. Thomas Moffett wrote his biography in Latin, suggesting he was aiming for a well-educated audience and not the general public. His first indication of his high view of Mary Sidney comes while describing the effect of her death in 1586 on Philip. The death of his "noble mother" apparently "cast down [Philip's] sprit and confound it utterly" which Moffett explains by arguing that, "a person could have borne these things with a very resolute mind, if only he had not lost such parent."<sup>177</sup> Clearly, Mary was very important to Philip, but also well respected by Moffett.

The possible reason for Moffett's high regard of Mary Sidney appears a bit later. He states that Lady Sidney was

not only born of the noblest blood (descended from a queen)<sup>178</sup> but

<sup>177</sup> Thomas Moffett, *Nobilis; or, A View of the Life and Death of a Sidney, and Lessus lugubris*, Trans. Virgil B. Heltzel and Hoyt H. Hudson, (San Marino, Calif.: Huntington Library, 1940), 85.

<sup>178</sup> Moffett's translators, Hudson and Hoyt, believe this is in reference to Elizabeth Woodville, wife of Edward IV, whom Mary was a descendant of through the De L'Isle line on her mother's side.

also surpassing her sex and her generation in excellence of wit and of skill in arts; but I shall not speak of those graces and attractions of speech by which she charmed the minds and ears of conversants and to a degree appeared to be the very goddess of Persuasion.<sup>179</sup>

The characteristics that Moffett chose to assign to Lady Sidney are significant, as is the way he described them. He notes her nobility, which probably meant to express her family's virtuous and high-ranking lineage, but also could have indicated her intelligence, more importantly he highlights her wit.<sup>180</sup> He argues that she was smarter than usual for her sex but crucially also many in her generation, indicating that Mary Sidney possessed a superior intellect, something rarely noted for any women other than the Queen in the Elizabethan age. The other woman whose intelligence was commented on was Mildred Cooke Cecil, a close companion of Mary Sidney. Mildred and the other Cooke Sisters who were also married to important men of the court, though unlike Mary Sidney, they were generally applauded for their learning, not their application of it.<sup>181</sup>

It is important to take into account that Moffett ties Mary's wit to her "skill in arts" a term used to describe skill in something that was the result of knowledge or practice. Moffett indicates that Mary Sidney was able to apply her intelligence, probably to maneuvering the politics of Elizabeth's court and government. Moffett tries to deemphasize Mary's intelligence by calling it a grace, tying it to charm and

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<sup>179</sup> Moffett, 86.

<sup>180</sup> "noble, n." OED Online, March 2011, Oxford University Press, <http://0-www.oed.com.library.unl.edu/view/Entry/80373?rskey=vZdJvC&result=1&isAdvanced=false> (accessed March 27, 2011).

<sup>181</sup> Hannay, *Philip's Phoenix*, 4.

attractiveness.<sup>182</sup> This is likely because intelligence was not an ideal characteristic for a woman and was regarded as manly. The gender hierarchy that placed men over women extended to desirable characteristics, thus intelligence was viewed as masculine, creating a need for Moffett to feminize it by calling it a grace.<sup>183</sup>

Like another description of Lady Sidney that will subsequently be discussed, this author mentions that she was extremely persuasive. He describes her skills as a result of her charm and strong speaking skills, characteristics that were feminine and avoid a description of a masculine aggressive persuasion. Moffett does not note on what she was working to persuade people, but the fact that she was a member of Elizabeth's privy chamber and a member of the politically important Dudley family suggests that she was working to convince people on political matters.

Moffett's description of Mary Sidney begins by suggesting that she was a noble but rather exceptional woman, based on her effect on her son. Moffett's portrayal of Mary Sidney's use of her intelligence exposes her as an exceptional woman who surpassed not just others of her gender, but men as well in her intelligence and talent for persuasion in the court.

Fulke Greville, a close childhood friend of Mary's son Philip, wrote one of the most evocative descriptions of Lady Sidney. Greville's imagery of Mary covering her smallpox ravaged face with a veil is one of the lasting and most commonly known impressions of Mary Sidney, though he does not directly state that she wore a veil. The

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<sup>182</sup> "grace, n." OED Online, March 2011, Oxford University Press, <http://0-www.oed.com.library.unl.edu/view/Entry/80373?rskey=vZdJvC&result=1&isAdvanced=false> (accessed March 27, 2011).

<sup>183</sup> Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex; Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 5.

combination of two of his descriptions of her allows the impression that Mary roamed the halls of the court covered in veil, almost like a nun. He wrote that she “chose rather to hide her self from the curious eyes of a delicate time” and “the mischance of sickness having cast such a kind of veile over her excellent beauty.”<sup>184</sup>

Greville’s description of Mary Sidney posits her as an exemplar of a noble woman on the surface, but a deeper analysis reveals a woman who was entirely opposite of the stereotypical ideal noblewoman. He notes her “descent of great nobility” and credits it for her “large ingenuous sprit.”<sup>185</sup> By doing so Greville points out Mary’s generosity and high-mindedness, suggesting that he is trying to get across her intellect in a gender sensitive way. He also refers to Mary Sidney as holding “ingenious sensibleness.” When understanding this in the seventeenth century context this indicates that Greville found her to be intelligent, clever, and interestingly, possessing of genius. He also felt that she was able to express her intelligence and knowledge to others, as in the mid-seventeenth century sensible indicated that one’s intellect could be understood.<sup>186</sup> These few words create an image of an incredibly intelligent woman who was able to use her intellect to benefit herself, her family and those connected to her.

It is also interesting to note the context of Greville’s comment that Mary Sidney had “ingenious sensibleness.” He argues that the combination of Mary’s intellect with

<sup>184</sup>Fulke Greville, Baron Brooke, *Life of the Renowned Sir Philip Sidney*, (London: Printed for Henry Seile, 1652), 5, 6.

<sup>185</sup> Greville, 5.

<sup>186</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (Oxford University Press, 1989), s.v. "Sensible," [http://0-dictionary.oed.com.library.unl.edu/cgi/entry/50219874?single=1&query\\_type=word&queryword=sensible&first=1&max\\_to\\_show=10](http://0-dictionary.oed.com.library.unl.edu/cgi/entry/50219874?single=1&query_type=word&queryword=sensible&first=1&max_to_show=10) (accessed November 20, 2010); *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (Oxford University Press, 1989), s.v. "Ingenious," [http://0-dictionary.oed.com.library.unl.edu/cgi/entry/50219874?single=1&query\\_type=word&queryword=ingenious&first=1&max\\_to\\_show=10](http://0-dictionary.oed.com.library.unl.edu/cgi/entry/50219874?single=1&query_type=word&queryword=ingenious&first=1&max_to_show=10) (accessed November 20, 2010).

Henry Sidney's clear judgment made the Sidney children what they were.<sup>187</sup> This seems to credit Mary Sidney for the intelligence of her children, two of whom, Philip and Mary Sidney Herbert, were widely regarded as possessing great intellect themselves. Not only is it unusual to attribute children's intelligence to the mother, but the fact that the children were regarded as great minds themselves makes this an even stronger compliment to Mary Sidney's intelligence.

Greville couched his compliments to Mary Sidney's intelligence with expected female virtue, pointing out her generosity, due to the fact that gender roles of the time asserted that women were to be passive and silent. Recognition as a smart woman who used her intelligence to her advantage may not have been seen as a compliment to either Mary Sidney or the memory of her son. Along with his recommendations of Mary Sidney's intelligence Greville is careful to emphasize her hold on the prize female characteristic of modesty. In his description of her response to disfigurement he states,

shee chose rather to hide herself from the curious eyes of a delicate time, than come up on the stage of the world with any manner of disparagement, the mischance of sickness having cast such a kind of veile over her excellent beauty, as the modesty of the sex doth many times upon their native strength, and heroic-call spirits.<sup>188</sup>

He notes that her modesty kept her from most public life but he also remarks on her strength in the situation. Greville asserts that Mary Sidney had a "native strength" and a "heroic-call spirit" and this seems the more interesting part of his explanation of Mary

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<sup>187</sup> Greville, 6.

<sup>188</sup> Greville, 5-6.

Sidney's reaction to her scars. As with intelligence, strength and heroics were viewed as mostly masculine. Despite his efforts to present Mary Sidney as feminine, Greville cannot get away from her superior characteristics that were gendered masculine.

It seems that throughout his brief description of Lady Sidney Fulke Greville produces an image of a woman who is not the ideal of a chaste, silent and obedient woman but one who is intelligent to the point of genius and strong enough to withstand the stares of a society that was thoroughly intolerant of difference. By doing so, Mary Sidney holds some key characteristics of the ideal man. By also emphasizing the generosity and modesty held by Sidney, Greville manages to avoid presenting her as masculine, but she is certainly not the stereotypical ideal court woman of the Elizabethan age.

Raphael Holinshed and his contributors include many references to the Sidney family in his famous *Chronicle of the History of England, Scotland, and Ireland*. Holinshed's chronicle is recognized as one of the most popular sources of the sixteenth century on the history of England in the middle ages and acted as a source for many dramas and literature of the early modern age. Though a history of the empire beginning with William the Conqueror the work is much more detailed during the reign of Elizabeth, when it was written. Despite his inclusion of quite a bit about them in his chronicle, Holinshed did not have a connection to the Sidneys. He may have followed the family because Henry Sidney's work of organizing the administration and records of Ireland during his tenure as Lord Deputy greatly helped his historical research.

In the chronicle, Holinshed records the death of Mary Sidney, in August of 1586. In doing so, he recognizes her as a woman of great importance as well as significance to the history of the country. Holinshed paints Mary Sidney as a female ideal, a kind of saint for the still newly Protestant faithful. He asserts that Mary Sidney was “the most noble, worthie, beneficent, and bounteous ladie.” Clearly, he held her in high regard and highlights two aspects of her character, that she was noble and worthy, both indicating that she deserved respect. He also notes that she was both beneficent and bounteous, suggesting that she gave freely and was good to others. Holinshed also emphasizes Mary Sidney’s piety, asserting that she was zealous, godly and penitent. Her piety is strongly Protestant and later in her life her family, including both her children and her brother Robert, were known for their devotion to Protestantism and their fight against Catholic influences despite their early alliance with the Spanish.

Like Moffett, *Holinshed’s Chronicle* remarks on Mary Sidney’s skill of lobbying, but it specifically relates her persuasiveness to her religion, stating, “she used such godlie, earnest and effectuall persuasions to all those around her.” He also notes that she was a missionary for her Protestant faith as she would exhort her friends and visitors to repentance and beg them to keep from sin and lewdness, arguing that it wounded the conscience. Apparently, Mary was very convincing, as Holinshed says that she “pierced the hearts of many that heard her.”<sup>189</sup>

It is interesting that though the *Chronicle* finds Mary Sidney important enough to include, it does not mention her intelligence, the trait emphasized by all the other authors.

<sup>189</sup> Raphael Holinshed, *Chronicles of England, Scotlande, and Irelande*, (London; Henry Denham, 1587), 1553

By emphasizing her religion and faith and avoiding discussing her intellect, Holinshed portrays Mary Sidney as a much more proper and ideal woman than the other authors.

The most salient characteristics of Mary Dudley Sidney were her intellect, her ability to use her intelligence at court, and her persuasiveness. Though the various authors and chroniclers take pains to depict Mary as the ideal court lady and employ words like grace and modesty to represent her as feminine, clearly Mary possessed some of the most important characteristics for men of the time in her knowledge and ability to use it. As such, Mary Sidney did not fit into the stereotypical milieu of what a woman should be. Elizabeth utilized the best minds in her court and government as well as recognizing people for their merits and skills, like William Cecil; as such it is inconceivable that Elizabeth would have let Mary Sidney's brilliant mind and skills of persuasion go to waste and not employed Mary in some political function.

Mary Sidney's impressive intelligence and skills of persuasion did not allow her to fit into the box of the ideal noble woman, but neither are they presented as negative characteristics. Though Moffett and Greville tried to deemphasize the masculinity of Mary Sidney's most prominent characteristics, they still highlight and praise them. Mary Sidney's uncommon attributes were not shunned but accepted and allowed her some authority. It seems that though she was not the stereotypical ideal, Mary Sidney was recognized for her intellect and skill and some saw her as a model for protestant piety.



## Conclusion

Aristocratic women's political involvement and significance becomes apparent when delving deeper into women's lives and broadening the definition of politics to better encompass the roles women played in the politics of early modern England. The coming together of a few factors particularly allowed women to influence politics in Elizabeth's England; the lack of a separation between public and private, the importance of personal politics, the importance of patronage, and the access to influence that a female monarch gave women.

Women could play a role in politics because for the nobility a strict separation between public and private worlds did not yet exist, making women's domestic lives part of the public sphere. Additionally, without a separate private world, women could not be shut off from public life and politics. Though formal governmental structures were developing in sixteenth century England, Elizabeth's government still depended on the nobility to represent and carry out government policies. This kind of local management and control allowed women to play a role in politics. Personal politics also meant that political power and influence was based on relationships and women's networks of kin and neighbors were essential to their and their families' political power and involvement.

The combination of personal politics and women's networks allowed women to gain political influence through their communication. Though commonly derided as gossip, women's communication was crucial to early modern politics because of the importance of reputation. Women had the power to influence reputation in their

communication. Women gained positions of importance as information sources because through their talk they controlled the reputations of others. The centrality of reputation in women's talk gave women political power in the era of personal politics. Though men may have decried women's talk as gossip, the understanding of gossip as concerned with reputation and recognition and the essential aspects of both to attaining political power makes women's talk politically significant. Women's talk in Elizabethan England lent them political power in the informal political system.

The height of importance of personal politics and women's talk is found at Elizabeth's court, where members of her Privy Chamber were chosen based on their close relationships to the Queen and their family reputation. The communications of these women were essential to the politics of the court. Their information guided the political actions of members of the government and foreign ambassadors. The women of the Privy Chamber's communication also helped the Queen causally express her opinions and get information.

The women's role as point of access between the Queen and the rest of the court made them particularly important in regards to patronage. Elizabeth's government depended on patronage and the resulting patron/client relations to function and disperse political power and influence. Patronage depended on personal connections and relationships, particularly kinship connections gave women a significant place in this aspect of Elizabethan politics because of their skill in maintaining kin ties. Women, particularly those at court, acted as patrons for male family members advancing their suits and promoting their interests, gaining political influence at the same time.

Additionally, patronage's basis in informal structures and networks gave women a place to express and gain power, as the formal structures of power in the government were closed to women.

Patronage and women's communication, with an emphasis on reputation, access, information and favor, show the importance of informal structures and networks to gaining power in the time of personal politics. By using these informal structures, women achieved political influence in early modern England. Through patronage and information sharing the women of Elizabeth's Privy Chamber played an important role in the politics of the Queen's court.

Mary Dudley Sidney's political significance during Elizabeth's reign shows how women gained political power and influence in early modern England. Mary Sidney whose intelligence and political skill allowed her achieve political importance acting for Elizabeth on a political mission and becoming a crucial part of her family patronage network. Mary Sidney's political astuteness appeared early, in her ability to transition between the reign of Edward VI, her sister-in-law Jane Grey, Mary I, and finally to a position in Elizabeth's Privy Chamber. She also worked with her mother and husband to clear her brothers of treason charges and free them from the Tower. Under Elizabeth Mary Sidney achieves great political significance. She showed political agency in her participation in marriage negotiation discussions with the Spanish Ambassador and her role in the immense Dudley family patronage network demonstrates her political influence. The representation of Mary Dudley Sidney by her contemporaries as extremely

intelligent and a great persuader further suggest that her political skill and importance were well known.

Early modern English dependence on personal relationships and patronage allowed women to hold political power and influence despite their absence from the formal structures of political and governmental power. The presence of a reigning Queen only increased the amount of influence and power that aristocratic women held in the sixteenth century. Mary Sidney's actions and the way that she was represented clearly show that women in Elizabeth's court controlled real political power.

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