

**Enacting Mistress and Steward Roles in a Letter of Household Management:  
Bess of Hardwick to Francis Whitfield, 14 November 1552**

**Abstract:** Bess of Hardwick's popular reputation has been largely shaped by biographers and antiquarians who did not all have full access to her letters and other household documents in the manuscript originals and who were not equipped to interpret her epistolary language in its sociohistorical context. This article reassesses Bess's reputation by examining the range of rhetorical techniques she uses to express to a steward at Chatsworth her pleasure and displeasure and thus to perform her authoritative role as mistress in one of her most notorious letters. Along the way, it explains the cultural assumptions about employer-servant relations and communication that underlie the letter; highlights how Bess represents the steward's duties and urges him to fulfil his own role in the household; argues that her half-sister Jane, the subject of much of the letter, had a somewhat different role at Chatsworth than has been traditionally ascribed to her; and, through material readings of the letter and related texts, reveals the importance of several family servants in both running the household and shaping Bess's reception there and thereafter.

**Keywords:** letters, mistress, servants, accounts, rhetoric, displeasure, reputation

**Biography:** Felicity Maxwell is a SSHRC-funded doctoral student in English Language at the University of Glasgow. She is one of two students on the AHRC project 'Bess of Hardwick's Letters: The Complete Correspondence c. 1550-1608', led by Alison Wiggins.

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## Introduction

The earliest surviving letter composed by Bess of Hardwick is addressed to one of her family's household and estate stewards, Francis Whitfield.<sup>1</sup> It is also one of the most frequently quoted and misunderstood of her letters. First printed in 1819 (with some errors of transcription) in Joseph Hunter's history of the earls of Shrewsbury at Sheffield Castle, it appears after a distinctly unflattering portrayal of Bess embedded in the account of the life of her final husband, George Talbot, the sixth earl, from whom she was estranged for much of their marriage.<sup>2</sup> Hunter's depiction of Bess as rapaciously demanding owes much to another history of the Talbot earls of Shrewsbury found in the introduction to Edmund Lodge's 1791 Illustrations of British History, Biography, and Manners [...] from the Manuscripts of the Noble Families of Howard, Talbot, and Cecil.<sup>3</sup> Lodge, influenced by Shrewsbury's own representations in some of the letters included in this anthology, gets the ball rolling by claiming, among other things, that Bess used 'intreaties' and 'threats' to manipulate each of her successive husbands to sacrifice their own best interests to her aggrandisement.<sup>4</sup> Bess's use of language and her personal reputation have been linked ever since, with her letters to Shrewsbury and Whitfield in particular cited as evidence of her character. Maud Stepney Rawson and Kate Hubbard, two modern biographers of Bess, have quoted this letter to Whitfield as an example of Bess's 'characteristic' — that is, personal and typical — authoritarian style and implied, in a move that recalls Lodge and Hunter, that this style amounts to a character flaw.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Folger Shakespeare Library (hereafter Folger), X.d.428 (82). Digital images can be viewed through <http://luna.folger.edu>. See also Bess of Hardwick's Letters: The Complete Correspondence, c.1550-1608 ed. Alison Wiggins with Alan Bryson, Daniel Starza Smith, Anke Timmermann and Graham Williams, University of Glasgow, web development Katherine Rogers, University of Sheffield Humanities Research Institute, <http://www.bessofhardwick.org> (forthcoming). I would like to thank the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and the Scottish Overseas Research Students Award Scheme for financially supporting the research presented here, Alison Wiggins and Rob Maslen for their expert and enthusiastic guidance, the staff of the University of Nottingham's Department of Manuscripts and Special Collections and David Durant for permission to photograph for my own reference his extensive research notes on deposit there (MS 663). In what follows, I have cited his transcripts and notes concerning Bess's financial records that I have not seen myself.

<sup>2</sup> Joseph Hunter, Hallamshire: The History and Topography of the Parish of Sheffield in the County of York (London: Richard and Arthur Taylor, 1819), 78 and 62-3, 69.

<sup>3</sup> Edmund Lodge, Illustrations of British History, Biography, and Manners [...] from the Manuscripts of the Noble Families of Howard, Talbot, and Cecil [...] 3 volumes (London: G. Nicol, 1791).

<sup>4</sup> Lodge, Illustrations, xvii.

<sup>5</sup> Maud Stepney Rawson, Bess of Hardwick and Her Circle (London: Hutchinson, 1910), p. 9; Kate Hubbard, A Material Girl: Bess of Hardwick, 1527-1608 (London: Short Books, 2001), 24-5, 33.

In raising this point, it is not my intention to defend Bess's honour, but to suggest that such readings lack attention to Bess's modulation of voice in this letter and across her correspondence and that they also lack awareness of the styles available to her in her historically conditioned social roles as the lady of the house writing to a male officer in her family's employ or as an estranged wife writing to her husband. What Rawson and Hubbard do, however, recognise is that the language of letters constitutes a self-representation. Their commentaries imply that self-revelation is unintentional on the part of the writer, whose statements are nevertheless open to incriminating interpretation. Yet early modern letters were self-consciously performative of social roles, and what may appear characteristic of an individual when viewed in isolation can be seen to form part of a larger pattern when viewed in its cultural context.<sup>6</sup> Close readings of Bess's correspondence with her Chatsworth officers reveal a range of stylistically embodied self-representations of mistress and men engaged in co-management of a large country house and a number of estates. This paper analyses Bess's earliest surviving letter of household management, paying special attention to the various ways in which she verbally represents the recipient's stewardly duties and enacts her own mistress role. It will conclude by tracing how the circulation of Bess's letters to Whitfield within and beyond Chatsworth House has allowed these letters and the various servants who encountered them a part in shaping Bess's reputation.

### Transcription

[*italic, Bess's hand*]

francys I haue spoken w[<sup>i</sup>][<sup>t</sup>][<sup>h</sup>] your mayste[r]<sup>7</sup> for the clytes<sup>8</sup> or bordes that you wrete to me of and he ys contente that you shall take some for your nesecyte by the apountemente of neusante.<sup>9</sup> so that you take seche as wyll do hyme no saruese aboute hys byldynge at chattysworthe. I pray you loke

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<sup>6</sup> For the idea that individual voices speak from historically specific 'social scripts', see Lynne Magnusson, *Shakespeare and Social Dialogue* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

<sup>7</sup> Sir William Cavendish (1508-57). Superscript characters have been lowered. Abbreviations are expanded and missing letters supplied between brackets. Line breaks are unmarked in the continuous prose but preserved in the subscription and the list on the address leaf.

<sup>8</sup> *cleats*: 'cleat, *n.*', '1. A wedge [...] 4a. A short piece of wood (or iron) nailed on transversely to a piece of joinery, in order to secure or strengthen it' (*Oxford English Dictionary*, <http://www.oed.com>, accessed 27 June 2012).

<sup>9</sup> A master carpenter (Basil Stallybrass, 'Bess of Hardwick's Buildings and Building Accounts', *Archaeologia* 64 (1913), 347-98 (352)).

well to all thynges at chattysworthe tyll my auntes<sup>10</sup> comynge whome<sup>11</sup> whyche I hope shalbe shortely and yn the meane tyme cause bronshawe<sup>12</sup> to loke to the smethes and all other thynges at penteryge<sup>13</sup> lete the brewar make bere for me fourthew[*i*][*t*][*h*] for my owne drynkyng and your mayster and se that I haue good store of yet<sup>14</sup> for yf I lacke ether good bere, or charcole or wode I wyll blame nobody so meche as I wyll do you. cause the flore yn my bede chambe[r] to be [*fol. 1v*] made euen ether w[*i*][*t*][*h*] plaster claye or lyme and al the wyndoyes were the glase ys broken to be mendod and al the chambers to be made as close and warme as you cane. I here that my syster lane<sup>15</sup> cane not haue thynges that ys nedefoulle for hare<sup>16</sup> to haue amongste you yf yet be trewe you lacke agreat of honyste as well as dyscrescyon to deny hare any thyng that she hathe amynde to beyng yn case as she hathe bene. I wolde be lothe to haue any stranger so yoused yn my howse and then assure your selfe I cane not lyke yet to haue my syster so yousede. lyke as I wolde not haue any superfleuete or waste of any thyng. so lyke wysse wolde I haue hare to haue that whyche ys nedefoulle and nesary. at my comynge

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<sup>10</sup> Marcella Linacre, a widowed sister of Bess's mother. She lived with Bess from at least September 1548 and received the highest wages at 20s per quarter (see Folger, X.d.486, fol. 11r and v). She is also mentioned in a letter from Bess to another Chatsworth steward, James Crompe, dated 8 March [1560?], and she received a letter from Bess's son William Cavendish, dated 23 February [1569] (Folger, X.d.428 (83) and (21)). If Marcella Linacre ever wrote to Bess or others, these letters have not survived.

<sup>11</sup> home

<sup>12</sup> Apparently an understeward at Pentrich.

<sup>13</sup> Pentrich, Derbyshire, seventeen miles south-south-east of Chatsworth.

<sup>14</sup> it

<sup>15</sup> Bess had two sisters named Jane: her elder, full sister Jane Boswell or Bosville (née Hardwick) and her younger, maternal half-sister Jane Kniveton (née Leche). 'My syster' first appears in account book entries in March 1549, the same month as Whitfield (Folger, X.d.486, fol. 11r and v), and a 'Mistress Jane' appears in the Cavendishes' London accounts for 1552-53 (Chatsworth House, Devonshire MSS, Hardwick MS 1, fols 42v, 49r, 53r; cited from Durant's index card on 'Hardwick Jane' in Nottingham University Library (hereafter NUL), MS 663/3/5). From the 1560s onwards, there are scattered references to 'Mistress Kniveton' in the Chatsworth and Hardwick accounts, reaching a high concentration in the Hardwick accounts of the 1590s. Since Jane Kniveton demonstrably lived with Bess for much of their adult lives, the early sources, including this letter, more likely refer to her than to Bess's full sister Jane. Jane Kniveton also appears in a handful of other letters: 'your sister and her knifton' are greeted in a letter to Bess from an unknown correspondent, 22 October 1564, a letter to Bess from her stepson Gilbert Talbot asks 'my cosen lane' to write him an explanation, 13 October 1575, and in the same year Shrewsbury mentions in a letter to Bess that 'yo[u]r cistar cent to you for Iron At my smethes' (Folger, X.d.428 (78), Sheffield Archives, MD 6278 and Folger, X.d.428 (97)). Jane also received two letters, one from her niece-in-law Grace Cavendish, 10 October [1585?], and one from her son William Kniveton, 22 June 1607 (Folger, X.d.428 (7) and (40)). As with Marcella Linacre's, any letters that Jane may have written have not survived.

<sup>16</sup> her

whome I shal knowe more. and then I wyll thy[n]ke as I shall haue cause. I wolde haue you to geue to my mydwylfe frome me and frome my boye wylle.<sup>17</sup> and to [fol. 2r] my syster nurse frome me and my boye as hereafter folowet[h] fyrste to the mydwylfe frome me tene shylynges. and frome wylle fyue shylynges. to the nurse frome me fyue shylynges. and frome my boy iij fore pence. so that yn the wolle<sup>18</sup> you mouste geue to them twenty thre shylynges and fore pence make my syster lane preuye of yet and then paye yet to them fou[rth]<sup>19</sup> w[i]t[h] yf you haue noother money take so meche of the rente at penteryge tyll my syster lane that I wyll geue my dowter<sup>20</sup> somethynge at my comyng whome and prayinge you not to fayle to se all thynges done accordyngely I bede you fare well frome london the xiiij of nouember

your mystrys

Elyzabethe Cauendyssh

tyll lames crompe<sup>21</sup> that I haue resauyed the fyue ponde and ix s[hyllynges] that he sente me by heue alsope<sup>22</sup>

[address leaf, fol. 2v]

[italic, *Bess's hand*]

to my sa[rvant] francys wytfelde [delive]r thys at chattysw[orth]e<sup>23</sup>

[secretary, unidentified]

for the myll[er]

for tak[in]g shepe

for tak[in]g Cll<sup>24</sup> woode[s]

for Capons to be fatt

for swyne /

for the hard Cornefelde[s]

<sup>17</sup> Bess's second son, William Cavendish, born December 1551.

<sup>18</sup> whole

<sup>19</sup> A tear at the edge of the page cuts off the end of the word.

<sup>20</sup> Bess's eldest daughter, Frances Cavendish, born June 1548.

<sup>21</sup> Bess also corresponded with Crompe. See Folger, X.d.428 (18, 19, 83).

<sup>22</sup> Hugh Alsop, a carrier of Derby who had transported some of the Cavendishes' belongings from London to Chatsworth in 1551 (Mary S. Lovell, *Bess of Hardwick: First Lady of Chatsworth* [2005] (London: Abacus, 2006), 73).

<sup>23</sup> The superscription was partly ripped away when the letter was opened.

<sup>24</sup> There is a curved stroke that could be an 'o' between the 'C' and the first 'l'.

for a pynder<sup>25</sup>

[later cursive italic, unidentified]

Elizabeth Wife of S[i]r W[illia]m Cavendish of Chatsworth, afterwards  
Countess of Shrewsbury.

### **Analysis**

Bess's style in this autograph letter, though always authoritative, changes considerably as she moves between instruction, rebuke, threat and reminder. Her more usual matter of fact tone, comprised of simple sentences and direct orders, gives way to a complex syntax of indirect and conditional statements even as her words gain emotional force in expressing her displeasure. By comparing the linguistic features of Bess's two main modes of writing in this letter, it becomes apparent that both are rhetorical performances of her mistress role: Bess writes to the steward to impress upon him her pleasure in the form of instructions and her displeasure in the form of reprimands, explanations and warnings, with the expectation that he will dutifully act according to her stated wishes. Displeasure appears to require a degree of elaboration unnecessary when giving practical instructions, for it involves more complicated social and emotional negotiations. (The greater length and rhetorical complexity involved in expressing displeasure helps explain why this particular mode of writing has attracted the attention of later readers of Bess's letters and contributed so much to her reputation.) Bess's discourse of displeasure is not only more syntactically complex but also more reflective of social concerns through accumulating references to domestic hierarchies, rules of hospitality and representations of how Whitfield is to manage the social side of provisioning. By referring in the course of the letter to several aspects of Whitfield's supervisory duties, from provisioning and repairing the building to caring for the needs of her sister, Bess's letter urges its recipient to play out his own multifaceted role as steward. To manage the country house efficiently and according to the mistress's wishes, both she and the steward must play their parts.

A summary of the domestic circumstances in which Bess wrote to Whitfield and of his service up until that time may be helpful. The letter is dated 14 November only, but both its subject matter and entries in household financial accounts suggest that she wrote it in 1552, while staying with her husband, the courtier Sir William Cavendish, in a rented house in London. This was shortly after Cavendish had given up one country house and estate,

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<sup>25</sup> 'pinder, *n.*', 'A person in charge of impounding stray animals' (OED, <http://www.oed.com>, accessed 27 June 2012).

Northaw Manor in Hertfordshire, and purchased another, the dilapidated Chatsworth in Derbyshire, the ancestral seat of Bess's relatives and childhood neighbours, the Leches.<sup>26</sup> Whitfield appears to have been in the Cavendishes' service since at least 1549. Account book entries for the years 1549-53, many of them in Bess's hand, present him as a chief officer responsible at Northaw and/or Chatsworth 'for the howse' as a whole and also for the important task of purchasing foodstuffs for the London household.<sup>27</sup> The same duties are represented in this and the only other surviving letter from Bess to Whitfield, which are explicit about his responsibility for overseeing the maintenance of both Chatsworth House and its inhabitants.<sup>28</sup>

In this first letter Bess breaks down in some detail what this entails as she lists the preparations to be made for the return to Chatsworth of her aunt Marcella Linacre and of herself with her husband. The tone of these opening instructions is businesslike, perhaps brusque, for the style is direct and concise and the syntactic organisation is comparatively simple: a series of direct orders given in the form of imperative verbs. Bess writes with the assurance that Whitfield will obey; she does not belabour this point. It is worth noting that almost all of Bess's commands are directed at Whitfield only as an intermediary; he is not their final recipient. As an overseer, he will pass these orders down to Bronshawe at Pentrich and to the builders and lower servants at Chatsworth; his own job is to 'cause' each of them to work and to 'loke' over what they do. Thus, although Bess issues these directives in the most forceful grammatical form, the context, far from demeaning Whitfield, invites him to share in her verbal authority by passing her orders down to others.

However, at the points in the letter in which Bess holds Whitfield personally responsible, her style changes to reflect this. The first of these instances occurs when Bess adds an afterthought to her orders about the beer: 'and se that I haue good store of yet for yf I lacke ether good bere, or charcole or wode I wyll blame nobody so meche as I wyll do you.' This passage and the subsequent one about the alleged neglect of Jane seem to have had particular impact on later generations of readers, however Whitfield himself may have responded upon reading them for the first time. The beer passage is selected for quotation in

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<sup>26</sup> For the details of these land transactions, see David N. Durant, *Bess of Hardwick: Portrait of an Elizabethan Dynast* [1977], rev. ed. (London: Peter Owen, 2008), 14, 18-19.

<sup>27</sup> Whitfield first appears in the Cavendishes' household accounts being paid his 20s half-year's wages on Lady Day 1549 (Folger, X.d.486, fol. 11v). Subsequently, there are frequent entries for 'It[ems] geven to francys to lay out for the howse' (fols 14r, 15r, 16r and v, 17r). For Whitfield's financial transactions in London, see Hardwick MS 1, fols 15r, 50r and 52r (cited from Durant's index card on 'Whitfield Frances (cont)' in NUL, MS 663/3/6).

<sup>28</sup> The other letter to him from Bess is Folger, X.d.428 (84).

four out of the five published discussions of the letter that do not print it in full.<sup>29</sup> Rawson, E. Carleton Williams and Mary S. Lovell give both passages special mention, though the latter biographer appears more interested in Bess's drinking than in her language. In addition, Williams likens an incident in which Bess allegedly 'hurled abuse' at another servant, John Dickenson, to the way she 'berated' Whitfield in this letter, while Hubbard comments on the 'peremptory tone' that 'she used towards her steward'.<sup>30</sup> Certainly, the tone of this and the subsequent Jane passage sounds harsh to modern ears. But James Daybell reminds us that Bess's tone is not unique to her but rather an indication of her social position and, moreover, that it is used to express particular disapprobation: 'The authoritarian manner with which Bess delivered these orders is characteristic of other letters from aristocratic women to servants, though its severity is heightened by her displeasure at the poor way in which her sister Jane was treated at Chatsworth'.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, early modern employers of both genders regularly adopt an angry, authoritarian tone of writing as a rhetorical strategy for coercing their stewards, as D. R. Hainsworth's work on seventeenth-century estate stewards demonstrates.<sup>32</sup>

Similarly, the specific threat, 'yf I lacke ether good bere, or charcole or wode I wyll blame nobody so meche as I wyll do you', is an expression of the mistress-steward relationship in that it refers to Whitfield's particular duty to supply consumables for the household under her authority. Nobody *would* be more to blame than Whitfield — unless it were Bess herself as his supervisor. Beer seems to have been a particularly valued commodity, and the troubles of another early modern mistress, Lettice Kinnersley, clarify the pressures on household managing wives to ensure a good supply. On 14 September [1608?], Kinnersley wrote to her

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<sup>29</sup> These are Stallybrass, 'Bess of Hardwick's Buildings Accounts', 351-2; E. Carleton Williams, *Bess of Hardwick* [1959] (Bath: Cedric Chivers for The Library Association, 1977), 23-4; Hubbard, *Material Girl*, 24-5; Lovell, *Lady of Chatsworth*, 79-81. Three works print the letter in full: Hunter, *Hallamshire*, 78; Rawson, *Bess and Her Circle*, 9; James Daybell, 'Lady Elizabeth Cavendish (Bess of Hardwick) to Francis Whitfield (14 November 1552)', in Helen Ostovich, Elizabeth Sauer and Melissa Smith (eds), *Reading Early Modern Women* (London: Routledge, 2003), 193-5. The discussion that does not quote this passage is Alison Plowden, *Mistress of Hardwick* (London: BBC Publications, 1972), 17, while Durant, *Portrait*, 26 incorporates information from this letter without mentioning the letter itself.

<sup>30</sup> Williams, *Bess*, 133, citing Hunter, *Hallamshire* (1869 edn), 116. Williams's account is based on a misunderstanding of the letter in question (Gilbert Talbot to Bess, [July 1577?], Folger, X.d.428 (111)). There are many reported speeches in this letter, and Williams appears to have misattributed Shrewsbury's 'vehem[en]t coller & harde speches' to Bess, who (not Dickenson) was actually their target. Hubbard, *Material Girl*, 33.

<sup>31</sup> Daybell, 'Lady Cavendish to Francis Whitfield', p. 194. Much of this article was inspired by Daybell's commentary and his suggestion that I consider how my readings of Bess's letters of household management can modify our perception of her personality.

<sup>32</sup> D. R. Hainsworth, *Stewards, Lords and People* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992). Hainsworth's social history is based on extant correspondence between a number of estate stewards and their masters.



brother for help when, as she narrates, her husband had taken the 'charge of the house' away from her, discharged her servants and confined her to her chamber because the beer had run out.<sup>33</sup> Bess's language to Whitfield, then, was informed not only by his duties but by hers as well: as mistress, she passes down to the steward the pressure and potential blame that she herself would experience from her husband, their master, should anything be lacking. Worry may have fuelled her fiery manner of directing Whitfield in this sentence.

For all its force of personal blame, Bess's threat is just that: a threat of potential blame, not the act of blaming outright. The future more vivid conditional statement, 'yf I lacke [...] I wyll blame [...] you', paints a picture of hypothetical future events with greater immediacy than would a future less vivid construction (if I were to lack, I would blame you). It is the grammar of Bess's statement that makes the hypothetical future feel real and present, giving her words their undeniable edge. In effect, the statement functions as a warning by giving Whitfield a foretaste of her displeasure but also allowing him the opportunity to act so as to avoid its full force.

The second point in the letter when Bess holds Whitfield personally responsible is again constructed of complex syntax that does not occur when she is giving straightforward instructions. Once again, Bess is writing about social dynamics that pertain to both Whitfield's responsibilities as steward and her own standing in the household at Chatsworth when she broaches the subject of the rumour she has heard in London that her sister Jane's needs are being left unmet. The rhetoric of Bess's lengthy rebuke, no less than her earlier instructions and threat, relates to Whitfield's specific duties in the household: providing and overseeing. Even as she takes him to task for alleged neglect in these areas, Bess must use caution, for she continues to rely on his considerable services. The linguistic result is a mixed rhetoric of restraint and anger effects. Bess opens this section with controlled civility, employing an indirect statement and a conditional clause to position in the realm of rumour and possibility, rather than fact or Bess's own firm belief, the implicit accusation that the Chatsworth staff under Whitfield have neglected her sister Jane's needs: 'I here that my syster lane cane not haue thynges that ys nedefoulle for hare to haue amoungste you yf yet be trewe [...]'. The syntax of Bess's statements carefully distances the accusation from Whitfield himself, even though, as they both knew, any lack of 'nedefoulle' items was ultimately a failure of duty on his part.

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<sup>33</sup> Folger, L.a.598.

But Bess's displeasure in this passage is about more than lack of provisions; it is about disrespect to the family and Whitfield's alleged failure to maintain a high level of respect for her sister amongst the other staff. The hypothetical language with which Bess opens the subject of Jane's treatment recalls her earlier warning to Whitfield and paves the way for a high-impact personal accusation: 'yf yet be trewe you lacke agreat of honyste as well as dyscrescyon to deny hare any thynge that she hathe amynde to'. Once again, the cautious 'if' clause is outweighed by the conclusion, which here topples over into outright blame as Bess moves from the subjunctive to the indicative mood. At the same time, her accusations appear to shift from the group to the individual, as the prepositional phrase 'amongste you', which implicates the entire staff, gives way to 'you' — you, Whitfield, who are ultimately responsible for their behaviour, lack honesty and discretion if you have allowed this neglect.<sup>34</sup> Whitfield's position as steward both allows him to assume his employer's authority in his dealings with lower servants and exposes him to her wrath when those beneath him fail to comply with her wishes.

The lengths to which Bess goes in elaborating her (by now not so hypothetical sounding) displeasure, explaining what she expects from Whitfield and threatening him with her imminent return would have indicated to him that she takes any disrespect towards her sister as a very serious matter. The rhetoric of the letter reaches its climax in the sentence, 'I wolde be lothe to haue any stranger so yoused yn my howse and then assure your selfe I cane not lyke yet to haue my syster so yousede'. This is Bess's fullest expression of outrage. Its effectiveness derives from word choice, shared knowledge of domestic protocol and a forcefully one-sided representation of Jane's nebulous position.

It is significant that Bess elides Jane's elite servant status and insists that she be treated with respect because of their blood relation and the unspecified 'case' that she has recently been in. Jane's presence at Chatsworth in the 1550s appears to have been open to multiple interpretations — and still is. In his biography of Bess, David N. Durant states that in her retinue 'her sister, Jane Leche, [...] acting as gentlewoman, [...] was paid a wage of £3 per year', and Lovell echoes this assertion.<sup>35</sup> While several account book entries for 'my syster' written in Bess's holograph testify to Jane's presence in her household from 1549 and Jane's high wages — half-again Whitfield's — register her high status, the earliest accounts

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<sup>34</sup> By this time, 'you' had largely displaced 'thou' in speech and correspondence as the default singular form of the second person pronoun, relegating 'thou' to an indication of particular disrespect or familiarity (Terttu Nevalainen, An Introduction to Early Modern English (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), 78-9). Although expressing anger, Bess does not insult Whitfield with the term 'thou'.

<sup>35</sup> Durant, Portrait, 16; Lovell, Lady of Chatsworth, 59.

do not name her position or give any indication of her regular duties.<sup>36</sup> Since it was usual for women of gentle birth to serve as attendants to other gentry or aristocratic women, including their relatives, and this was a comparatively elevated and well paid service position, it seems safe to assume with Durant and Lovell that this was Jane's primary role at Chatsworth in the early 1550s.

Matters are complicated, however, by Bess's absence in November 1552, by the suggestiveness of Jane's additional duties later in the decade and beyond and by her near relation to her employer. To take the first question first: what was an attendant to do when not in attendance but left behind in the country while her mistress was in London? Lovell suggests that Jane's 'case', mentioned in the letter, may have been giving birth to her first child while secluded at Chatsworth, but it is impossible to know when this event occurred: the dates of Jane's marriage and of her children's births are not recorded, and the early accounts refer to 'my syster' and 'M[jist]r[es]s lane' without either maiden or married name.<sup>37</sup> The traditional understanding of Jane's role while Bess was away is that she was acting as her sister's delegate. Durant states, 'In Bess's absence from Chatsworth, she left her sister Jane in charge of the household with Francis Whitfield, her bailiff, responsible for running the estate'.<sup>38</sup> Neither the accounts nor Bess's letter to Whitfield makes this an obvious conclusion. If anything, Bess's letter shows that Jane was not in charge of the household but that Whitfield acted as a household as well as an estate steward.<sup>39</sup> Whereas textual representations of Whitfield's many duties abound, Jane's activities in this period are off record.

While not waiting on Bess or outright managing Chatsworth House, Jane may have represented her sister there in various ways. Later in life, the matron Jane Kniveton was a

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<sup>36</sup> Folger, X.d.486, fols 11r and v, 16v, 21v, 27r. In the first of these, Jane is 'geuen' 2s 'when she crystenyd boteler[e]s chylde'; perhaps this was a gift for her to pass on to James (the) Butler's child as godmother. In any case, this was clearly an isolated incident. The wage entries on fol. 16v show that Jane and a male servant, Myntereg, were both paid 15s per quarter, the second highest recorded wages in Bess's household at that time, while Whitfield was 1 of 4 men paid 10s per quarter and another 2 were higher paid at 13s 4d.

<sup>37</sup> Lovell, *Lady of Chatsworth*, 80-1. This would account for the presence of a midwife and (wet)nurse at Chatsworth, both of whom Bess instructs Whitfield to pay at the end of the letter. However, these payments do not necessarily mean that Jane had recently given birth; the Cavendishes seem to have routinely delayed wage payments and to have employed a midwife year round. The Mrs Jane of the London expenses in December 1552 (Hardwick MS 1, fols 42v, 49r, 53r) could refer to either sister of this name.

<sup>38</sup> Durant, *Portrait*, 26. Daybell follows Durant on this point ('Lady Cavendish to Francis Whitfield', 194).

<sup>39</sup> On the not entirely strict distinction between estate stewards and bailiffs, see Hainsworth, *Stewards*, 17-18. To complicate matters further, Whitfield's dual appointment as household and estate steward appears to have been shared with Crompe.

person of undeniable importance in her sister's households. In the well documented 1590s, Jane had servants and labourers of her own at Hardwick Hall, while from 1580 through the 1590s accounts present her taking an active role in managing Bess's finances; for example, she receives loan repayments, keeps track of 'obligations' (amounts owed to Bess by third parties, mainly for livestock purchased from her estates) and distributes largesse.<sup>40</sup> The greater density of references to Mistress Kniveton's financial transactions towards the end of the century probably reflects both her increasing importance in Bess's establishments and more thorough record keeping as time went on. No Chatsworth accounts survive from 1551-58, but in the account book Bess kept when in the vicinity of London most entries for income from rent collections from 'our ladysse daye' 1558 to 'shroftyde' 1559 are marginally annotated and initialled by Bess, 'to my syster. E'; these notes indicate that Jane was entrusted with nearly the full year's rents, presumably because she was conveniently stationed at Chatsworth while the widowed Bess was away at court.<sup>41</sup>

On this occasion, Jane appears to act as her sister's receiver, a high ranking household post.<sup>42</sup> As a part-time job, it could be held jointly with another household office, but it is not what one would expect to find a waiting gentlewoman doing in her spare time. Perhaps gentlewomen did ordinarily engage in business to a greater degree and of a greater variety than has been recognised, particularly in smaller gentry (as opposed to aristocratic, male-dominated) households. In this specific case, Jane was following in her sister's footsteps, for Bess had previously received rents on behalf of Sir William Cavendish: the opening page of the earliest Cavendish account book to survive is headed in Bess's handwriting, 'My hosbande[s] half yeres rentes due at mychelmas yn the second yere of the reingne of our sou[er]eyne lord kyng edward the vjt[h] resau[u]yd by me', and the next several pages list the rents received by wife and husband.<sup>43</sup> It seems that Sir William delegated to Bess and Bess to Jane financial responsibilities they would exercise themselves whenever possible;

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<sup>40</sup> See, for example, Hardwick MS 5, fols 16v, 17r and v; Hardwick MS 7, fols 102r, 112v, 149r (cited from Durant's transcripts, NUL, MS 663/2/1/10/7 and MS 663/2/1/13/4, 5, 7); Hardwick MS 8, fols 24r, 116v, 146r, 150r; Hardwick MS 10, fol. 17v and Hardwick Drawer 143, fol. 14v (cited from Durant's index card on 'Knifstone Mrs' in NUL, MS 663/3/5).

<sup>41</sup> Hardwick MS 3, fol. 17r (cited from Durant's transcript, NUL, MS 663/2/1/6). On Cavendish's death and Bess's subsequent whereabouts, see the somewhat differing accounts in Durant, *Portrait*, 30, 32-3 and Lovell, *Lady of Chatsworth*, 106, 111, 113-4, 147-8.

<sup>42</sup> See R. B., 'Some Rules and Orders for the Government of the House of an Earl [...]', printed and attributed to Richard Brathwait in *Miscellanea Antiqua Anglicana [...]* (London: Robert Triphook, 1816-21), part 8, 3. The title page for the anthology states that this text is 'From an Original MS. of the Reign of James I', but this manuscript has not been identified.

<sup>43</sup> Folger, X.d.486, fols 2r-7r (fol. 2r).

thus, when acting as receivers on behalf of close relatives, Bess and subsequently Jane were more like personal representatives than household officers.

Financial responsibilities aside, Jane would unavoidably represent Bess at Chatsworth simply by being her sister. The same appears to hold true for Bess's aunt. In bidding Whitfield earlier in the letter to 'loke well to all thynges at chattysworthe tyll my aunes comynge whome', Bess portrays another of her female relatives as a symbolic and perhaps more hands-on representative of the ruling family at the heart of the household. This wording could suggest that Whitfield must make everything ready for the arrival of another member of the family and/or that upon her arrival aunt Linacre will relieve the steward of his duty to 'look to all things' by taking it upon herself. In either case, both aunt and sister represent the family and specifically the mistress by virtue of their blood relation to her.

When chastising Whitfield for the neglect of Jane, Bess emphasises what makes her different from others at Chatsworth and thereby deserving of special attention: her 'case' and especially her superiority as Bess's sister. Bess stresses the social distance between Whitfield and Jane instead of their similar status as elite servants. In her statement, 'I wolde be lothe to haue any stranger so yoused yn my howse and then assure your selfe I cane not lyke yet to haue my syster so yousede', Bess elides Jane's service roles in order to emphasise instead that, like a guest, she is someone to be served. According to the rules of hospitality, Bess's own reputation would be involved in the treatment of her guests. If Jane had been a guest neglected by the household staff, not only she but Bess would have been dishonoured; how much more so given that Jane, as her sister, was her symbolic representative? Bess's standing in her own household would be undermined by such disrespect, and she reasserts her authority through rhetorical anger effects, particularly in this sentence, where the phrase 'yn my howse' pointedly enacts her rule while the interjected clause 'assure yourself' adds a threatening edge to her already forceful expression of displeasure.<sup>44</sup>

The verb 'assure' was often used in early modern letters to register displeasure; it allowed the writer to assume an air of power over the addressee and could sometimes harbour a threat. For example, in September 1595, Bridget Willoughby wrote a vengeful letter to Mr Fisher, an associate of her father, Sir Francis Willoughby, accusing him of slandering her and her husband to her father and warning him, 'tho' at this instant I have no better means of revenge then a little ink and paper, let thy soul and carkes be assured to hear and tast of

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<sup>44</sup> I am thankful to Jennifer McNabb for drawing my attention to the force of the phrase 'yn my howse'.

these injuries in other sort and terms then from and by the hands of a woman'.<sup>45</sup> Sir Philip Sidney on 31 May 1578 threatened his father's secretary, Edmund Molyneux, 'I assure yow before God, that if ever I know yow do so muche as reede any lettre I wryte to my Father, without his commandement, or my consente, I will thruste my Dagger into yow'.<sup>46</sup> Bess's use of the verb phrase assure yourself is not deadly; rather, it appears calculated to coerce without antagonising. Leaving her warning implicit rather than making it explicit allowed Bess to convey displeasure in a more subtle way.

Bess's warning is founded on the premise that an employer's expressed will or pleasure determines the actions of servants, an assumption that appears to underlie the discourses of service in early modern letters. In a culture in which orders were regularly communicated as the master or mistress's 'pleasure', a servant's prime duty, regardless of specific responsibilities, was to please. Robert Cleaver's Puritan bestseller, A Godly Forme of Household Government (1598), makes this explicit and demonstrates that it was the model even in middling urban households:

Seruants must take heede that they doe not wittingly and willingly anger or displease their masters, mistresses, or dames: which if they do, then they ought incontinent and forthwith to reconcile themselues vnto them, and to aske them forgiuenes. They must also forbear the[m], and suffer their angrie and hastie words [...].<sup>47</sup>

In Bess's highly wrought statement of displeasure, she claims personal ownership of the house and the associated right to dictate the behaviour of those living there, yet she explicitly commands the steward only to understand and be certain of what she 'cane not lyke'. The clear implication is that he must take action based on this knowledge to realign household affairs with the mistress's pleasure, but she specifies neither what he must do to achieve this nor what the consequences will be if he does not.<sup>48</sup> Similarly, Bess concludes this section of her letter, 'at my comynge whome I shal knowe more. and then I wyll thy[n]ke

<sup>45</sup> Historical Manuscripts Commission, Report on the Manuscripts of Lord Middleton, Preserved at Wollaton Hall, Nottinghamshire (London: His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1911), 577. The HMC report prints an abridgement of Cassandra Willoughby, duchess of Chandos's 1702 'An account of the Willoughby's of Wollaton [...]', which mainly consists of her extensive transcriptions and summaries of family papers (including this letter). Cassandra's two manuscript volumes are now NUL, Middleton MSS Mi LM 26-7.

<sup>46</sup> Letters and Memorials of State ed. Arthur Collins, 2 volumes (London: T. Osborne, 1746), vol. 1, 256. For an analysis of other letters exchanged between Molyneux and members of the Sidney family, see Magnusson, Shakespeare and Social Dialogue, chapter 2.

<sup>47</sup> Robert Cleaver, A Godly Forme of Household Government (London: Felix Kingston for Thomas Man, 1598), 380.

<sup>48</sup> In the final section of the letter, however, Bess instructs Whitfield to communicate and cooperate with Jane in paying the nurse and midwife and in passing on a message for Bess's daughter.

as I shall haue cause'. Although Bess's position gives her a right to issue direct orders and use 'angrie words' as she does, she need only 'blame' or 'thynke' ill of her steward to indicate that he had failed in duty and reprisals could follow. The historically specific social relation between mistress and chief officer allows her the option of writing to him in a somewhat elliptical manner that by implying he will comply with her wishes pressures him to do so. This is a more sophisticated approach than making outright demands or threats, but it exerts a similar coercive force.

Between Bess's angry sounding assertions of displeasure comes a passage with a rather different tone and rhetorical tactics. Here she offers a pointed reminder of what specifically she can reasonably expect from her steward: 'lyke as I wolde not haue any superfleuete or waste of any thyng. so lyke wysse wolde I haue hare to haue that whyche ys nedefoulle and nesary'. Servants' opportunities and perceived proclivity for wasting their employers' resources were of widespread concern, as testified by the steady stream of avaricious and wasteful hirelings that march across the pages and stages of early modern advice literature and plays.<sup>49</sup> If Whitfield 'lacke agreat of honyste', however, it is not through the usual servant vices of theft or carelessness. All of Bess's directives in this letter urge the steward to make sufficient provisions available and not to skimp. In this context, Bess's juxtaposition of the entirely standard wish 'not [to] haue any superfleuete or waste of any thyng' with the accusation that Whitfield lacks honesty by failing to provide necessary goods invokes the stereotype of the dishonest, wasteful servant only to suggest that Whitfield errs too far the other way. The steward's unwillingness to spend Bess's money on her dependent sister's needs can be seen as dishonest in that it robs Jane of the goods and respect to which she is entitled, while it simultaneously misrepresents Bess's own intentions toward her, making it look as though Bess does not care about her sister's well-being. Bess anticipates Whitfield's self-defensive protest that he is an honest, trustworthy steward, and she dismantles it in advance, stating clearly that although conscientious thrift is a highly valued quality in a servant, it must be exercised within the bounds of obedience and respect and without

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<sup>49</sup> For example, Henry Percy, earl of Northumberland narrates for his heir a cautionary tale of his own substantial financial losses as a young man due to the greed and incompetence of his servants ('Instructions by Henry Percy, ninth Earl of Northumberland, to his son Algernon Percy, touching the management of his Estate, Officers, &c. [...]', *Archaeologia* 27 (1838), 306-58. This is a slightly abbreviated transcription of the text in Petworth House, Leconfield MS 24/1). In Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, the retained knight Sir Toby and fool Feste neglect their duties and waste their lady's resources, while more sinister characters such as Iago in *Othello* and De Flores in Middleton and Rowley's *The Changeling* show how easily negative stereotypes of dishonest, greedy, ambitious and predatorial servants shade into each other and become instruments of tragedy. William Bas fights back against the bad reputation of servingmen in the verse treatise *Sword and Buckler, or, Serving-mans Defence* (London: for M. L., 1602).

compromising the quality or extent of provision, particularly for members of the family.<sup>50</sup> Jane, like Bess, ought to be given 'anythyng that she hathe amynde to'; her wants, no less than Bess's, are to dictate (her fellow) servants' actions.

Bess assertively reminds Whitfield of his duty to her one final time in the valediction: 'prayinge you not to fayle to se all thynges done accordyngely I bede you fare well'. Whereas children and servants traditionally wish blessings such as good health upon their socially superior correspondents, Bess, as mistress, wishes the steward to obey in full. In the phrase 'prayinge you not to fayle', the verb 'prayinge' appears as a conventional politeness marker that implicitly acknowledges the writer's dependence on the reader, but in this instance it emphasises not humble entreaty but rather the urgency of Bess's directives. Bess depends on Whitfield to fully meet the material needs of the Chatsworth household and furthermore to maintain its social and symbolic order. Like the examples of culturally specific subtext discussed above, the mistress's dependency on the servant is nowhere explicitly acknowledged, but it underlies the force and urgency of her every sentence.

### **Conclusion: Material Matters**

Although none of Whitfield's letters to Bess and only one more of hers to him has survived, notes added to these two letters after their delivery at Chatsworth offer tantalising glimpses of how they functioned as both texts and material objects within the country house. These clues as to how Chatsworth officers and administrators encountered and perceived Bess's missives pose wider questions regarding the symbolic status of her letters of household management, domestic record-keeping practices and the long-term preservation of Bess's correspondence.

Bess's second extant letter to Whitfield, dated 20 October [1561], is endorsed by him, 'my ladis letter for my naggess'.<sup>51</sup> Although she does indeed grant him a nag (clearly upon request), Bess's main purpose for writing 'yn haste as a peryrs' seems to be to explain to him her priorities regarding construction work on the house before the porch is 'boched'. Whitfield's endorsement indicates both his intention to keep this letter on file and that his reasons for doing so were personal rather than professional. This letter may have been preserved in the first instance not due to routine filing or because it contained important

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<sup>50</sup> This sentiment is echoed by the job description drawn up for Sir Francis Willoughby's butler c. 1572, which concludes: 'The discretion of that officer is to foresee that no filching of bread or beer be suffer'd, nor yet any want where reason doth require may be greatly both for his master's profit and worshipp, for it is an office both of good credit and great trust' (HMC, *Middleton*, 541).

<sup>51</sup> Folger, X.d.428 (84). On the dating, see Lovell, *Lady of Chatsworth*, 179, 513 n. 14.



information that Whitfield and the builders may need to consult again, but more likely as evidence of his right to the nag(s) should that be questioned.

By contrast, the note added to Bess's letter of 14 November 1552 (transcribed above) was not written by Whitfield and does not relate to the letter's contents.<sup>52</sup> Written in a contemporary secretary hand, it concerns estate farming and finances; this suggests that the letter was left in a shared workspace where it was accessible to clerks or estate officers beyond the addressee.<sup>53</sup> Bess's words may not have been read by the anonymous administrator who jotted down on the address leaf a to-do list of agricultural payments to be made or recorded in full elsewhere; his contact with the letter was primarily as a physical object — scrap paper within reach — on which to inscribe a text of his own. This reuse suggests once again that, for all her command of language, letters from the mistress were not received or preserved with special respect at Chatsworth and that their practical value was assessed by those into whose hands they fell according to criteria unconnected to the purposes for which they were written.

These two notes coupled with the low survival rate of Bess's letters of household management compared with her familial and political correspondence suggest that her letters were received by the Chatsworth staff as ephemeral texts devoid of symbolic or more than short-term practical value. How ironic, then, that in these two letters Bess's authoritative words and the marks of relative disregard for them have been preserved together — and partly through the agency of a later family servant. It is thanks to 'one Swifte', a servant of Bess's daughter Mary Talbot who considered the family's 'evidences and writings' worth saving from governmental confiscation, that they became objects of interest, picked over and selectively preserved as they passed through the hands of centuries of booksellers and private owners before entering the Folger Shakespeare Library in 1961.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> I am thankful to Alison Wiggins for prompting me to consider the significance of this note.

<sup>53</sup> The handwriting of the note does not match any samples of identified household members' writing; its writer was one of several unidentified scribes and clerks working for the family.

<sup>54</sup> Quotations are from a letter from James I's Lords of the Council to George Lassels and Francis Cooke, 28 June 1619, printed in Hunter, *Hallamshire*, 97; the original manuscript belonging to the eighteenth-century collector John Wilson is untraced. The letter, which urges its recipients to retrieve the papers in question, relates that Swifte had spirited them away from Sheffield and Worksop and placed them in the safe keeping of his sister, wife of a Mr. Bosseville of Gunthwaite, Yorkshire. The Folger's guide to the Papers of the Cavendish-Talbot family, available at <http://findingaids.folger.edu/dfocavendish.xml>, records that a Mr. Bosville of Gunthwaite sold the manuscripts to Wilson and that they were subsequently purchased by Sir Thomas Phillipps. In all likelihood, the later Mr. Bosville was a descendant of the earlier one. This is also the family into which Bess's full sister Jane had married.

It is by considering side by side the linguistic and material features of Bess's extant letters of household management that we can build up a picture of her routine epistolary performances and, with the aid of household accounts, the roles of various servants in both running the house and shaping the mistress's reception there and thereafter — a picture that is at once more accurate, complex and surprising than the caricature sketched out by some of her biographers. Such archival research is of wider value in that it can bring to bear on a single subject the insights of disciplines as varied yet ultimately inseparable as social and economic history, women's studies, literary studies, historical linguistics, palaeography, manuscript studies and bibliography, thus opening up new perspectives on early modern letters, their writers and readers.

**Felicity Lyn Maxwell**

**University of Glasgow**