

Female Captivity and the Rhetoric of Supplication: The Cases of Lady Mary Grey and Lady Arbella Stuart

Abstract: This article examines the epistolary production of two high-ranking women, Lady Mary Grey and Lady Arbella Stuart, who experienced various forms of captivity. It argues that they inhabited a carceral milieu where both men and women were exposed to the possibility of periodic imprisonment. Both Grey and Stuart were obsessed with the notion of liberty and its obverse, the ever present threat of captivity or execution that overshadowed their lives. Male and female prisoners sought to improve their lot by securing an intercessor to plead on their behalf, thereby manipulating the patronage system to their advantage. Pressures on these women drove them to retreat into a fantasy world. Attention is also paid to the rhetorical strategies used in their letter-writing, including an appeal to *ethos* (good character) and *pathos* (emotions) that were privileged at the expense of *logos* (reason). The article focuses on comparative analysis of the different rhetorical styles deployed by Grey and Stuart, and charts how Stuart's linguistic usage varied according to changes in her personal circumstances.

Key Words: Captivity, liberty, patronage system, rhetorical strategies, pleading, fantasy

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This article undertakes a comparative study of the epistolary output of two high-ranking female prisoners who fell from royal favour: Lady Mary Grey (1545?- 1578), who was held in captivity from 1565–1572, having secretly married the Sergeant Porter, Thomas Keys, without Queen Elizabeth's permission; and Lady Arbella Stuart (1575-1615) who was cooped up for an entire decade (1592-1602) under virtual house-arrest at Hardwick Hall at the Queen's insistence.¹ Unsurprisingly, both these women became obsessively preoccupied with issues to do with captivity and liberty that exerted a profound influence over much of their lives. The article will analyse the rhetorical strategies deployed by these women and assess how efficacious they were in securing either their release or the monarch's pardon. In addition it will consider the contrasting responses of these two women to their predicament and chart the evolution of diverse stylistic traits that shaped their letter-writing in accordance with the changing nature of their personal circumstances.²

Neither of these women were strangers to the notion of incarceration or the possibility of ending up on the executioner's block. The life of Lady Mary Grey, the youngest daughter of the Duke of Suffolk (1517-1554), was blighted early on by the executions of her father and eldest sister on the grounds of treason. Nor were the Grey sisters willing to heed the omens associated with clandestine unions. Failing to note the precedent established by her elder sister's surreptitious marriage, Mary secretly wed Sir Thomas Keys in August 1565. Once the marriage was discovered, the couple were interrogated and Keys was dispatched to the notorious Fleet prison, his huge frame crammed excruciatingly into a cell too small for him to stand up in. It was reported, too, that his wife 'was forbidden from seeing anyone and going anywhere. She could not go even into the garden more than was absolutely necessary for her health'.³ For nearly two years she was 'confined in a 12-foot-square room at Chequers, known still as the "prison room"', before being transferred into the custody of Sir William Hawtry at Chequers.⁴ Elizabeth eventually relented in 1572, allowing Mary, never a realistic candidate for the throne, to be released from her prison and so slip into the obscurity of a private life in the London parish of St. Botolph's-without-Aldgate.

However, the similarities do not end there. Arbella Stuart grew up in an environment where high-ranking figures, including the Earl of Hertford who secretly married Catherine Grey,

¹ Susan Doran, 'Keys [Grey], Lady Mary (1545? – 1578)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

² See *The Letters of Lady Arbella Stuart* ed. Sara Jayne Steen (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

³ Leanda de Lisle, *The Sisters Who Would Be Queen: The Tragedy of Mary, Katherine and Lady Jane Grey* (London: Harper Collins, 2008), 254-5.

⁴ de Lisle, *The Sisters Who Would Be Queen*, 255.

were still being subjected to lengthy spells of imprisonment. Moreover, the pattern of inauspicious unions established by her own grandmother, Lady Margaret Lennox, herself briefly imprisoned, was repeated with the Earl of Shrewsbury's onerous role as custodian to the doomed Mary Queen of Scots. Little is known about how much contact Arbella had with the Scottish Queen, but it is unlikely that she would have been unaware of the stringent conditions under which she was held.

In various respects, then, the circumstances of Lady Mary Gray and Lady Arbella Stuart had much in common; both women were possible contenders for the throne who already had or would later enter into clandestine unions without royal authorisation, thereby incurring the displeasure of Queen Elizabeth, always wary of rival successors who might supplant her. Consequently both women were subjected to periods of incarceration, including Grey's seven years confinement at Chequers and elsewhere as well as Arbella's enforced seclusion at Hardwick Hall and other Shrewsbury-Talbot properties. Habituated to confinement from an early age, Arbella was raised by her formidable grandmother, Elizabeth Talbot (better known as Bess of Hardwick), at Queen Elizabeth's behest. As a result Arbella had first-hand experience of being subjected to a life of close confinement that lasted throughout her adolescence into adulthood and beyond. During these years she came increasingly to resent her enforced seclusion, describing her life as 'this my prison'.⁵ Several epistles penned by Arbella intimate a morbid preoccupation with various forms of sequestration that could be construed in both a literal and figurative sense. Indeed her acute sense of frustration at the restrictions imposed on her may well have precipitated her botched attempt to escape from Hardwick, in 1602, and her later attempt in (1610), also unsuccessful, to escape to the Continent in the company of her husband, William Seymour, culminating in her final years of incarceration in the Tower of London (1611-15).

Another significant factor that bound these aristocratic women to a shared fate was their dependency on the patronage system. As prisoners, with very little room for manoeuvre regardless of their status, they had little option but to fall back on lobbying government officials who, wielding the necessary leverage to alleviate their condition, might intercede on their behalf. In the normal course of events competing suitors, each pressing their advantage, would have solicited a range of benefits and favours from various well-placed individuals, including annuities, wardships, offices, pensions, licences and so forth,⁶ However, the dearth of opportunities available to these captives and their restricted contact

⁵ Arbella challenges Sir Henry Brounker to 'comm to my triall in this my prison instantly'. Hatfield House, Hertfordshire, Cecil Papers (hereafter CP) 135, fols 130-138. Dated 9 March, 1603. Dates are given in Old Style, but the year is taken to begin on 1 January.

⁶ Regarding the patronage system, see Linda Levy Peck, *Court Patronage and Corruption in Early Stuart England* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1990), 1-74.

with the outside world meant that they were obliged to settle for a single appeal. Such appeals generally took the form of petitions begging for clemency and forgiveness from the monarch. Considering the constraints imposed upon them, it was expected that even the plaintive letters dispatched by Mary Grey to her kinsman, Sir William Cecil, in his role as intercessor, would fail to produce any tangible improvements in her situation. Similarly, Arbella's twilight years spent in the Tower were characterised by a sense of isolation and withdrawal into the self, rejecting contact with her diminishing circle of relatives, acolytes and servants. The inability of these female petitioners to secure an amelioration of their circumstances was a timely reminder of how easily the see-saw aspect of the patronage system could tip either way.

However, the focus of this article is not primarily biographical matters or the material culture within which early modern letters were composed, circulated and disseminated, but rather with analysing the various ways in which these women might have been indelibly affected by the removal of their freedom and the rhetorical strategies they deployed in their letter-writing in order to draw attention to their plight. Several questions may be raised in this context. What factors drove these aristocratic captives to avail themselves of supplication, the most abject form of pleading? Which persuasive devices did they deploy as a means of alleviating their apparently helpless state? To what extent can we view this most humble mode of entreaty as, paradoxically, empowering? And why, despite their mobilisation of the patronage system and the support they received from powerful backers, such as Sir William Cecil and his son, Sir Robert Cecil, were their pleas for their liberty to be restored ultimately unsuccessful?

Supplicatory Discourses and the Patronage System

One possible explanation for the use of a supplicatory approach may lie in the well established cultivation of extreme deference and the tensions this generated within early modern society. Various glosses in early modern dictionaries as signifying 'to beseech humbly' (Lat. supplicare), 'humble to sue, to beseech, to intreat' (Ital. supplicare) or, in Cotgrave's exhaustive list, 'humble to pray, petition, intreat, request, beseech or be suitor unto' (Fr. supplier), supplication may be defined as a ritualistic or formalised kind of pleading that entails an ostentatious display of humility.⁷ Derived from the Latin verb *supplicare*, created from the prefix 'sub' and the root verb 'plicare', meaning to 'fold or bend under', the word semantically implies – and indeed calls for – a gesture of submission. It presupposes

⁷ Thomas Elyot, The Dictionary of syr Thomas Eliot (London, 1538), sig. Bb4r; John Florio, Queen Anna's New World of Words (London, 1611), 548; Randle Cotgrave, A dictionarie of the French and English tongues (1611), sig. Ffff1v.

that whoever is making the request will adopt an overtly submissive stance towards the benefactor or patron whose aid or protection is being solicited, lowering himself or herself actually or figuratively in order to elevate the other. Whether enacted on stage or in her Majesty's Presence Chamber these rituals involved recourse to a repertoire of coded forms of self-abnegation that might entail a lowly posture, humble speech and a propitiatory mode of address, along with other conventional gestures such as kneeling, extending of hands in prayer or entreaty, and even self-prostration.⁸ But whatever form this action took, its semiotic function was to publicise the asymmetrical relationship instantiated between suppliant and patron.

Yet it is noteworthy that the performance of deference, with its ostentatious display of humility, was often at variance with the suppliant's sense of his or her own elevated status, thereby creating an underlying disjunction with the self-consciously crafted posture of abjection. Ideally, early modern women were supposed to be submissive in their conformity to gender codes and respect for the social hierarchy. However, this supposition jarred with the autocratic female role-models surrounding Arbella, including the redoubtable Bess of Hardwick, Lady Mary Stuart and Mary Talbot, the Countess of Shrewsbury.⁹ Consequently it was only to be expected that their occupation of this bifurcated position and the tensions it generated would be conducive to a life-time of insecurity. To complicate matters further, I would argue that those suing for favours in ways that foregrounded their dependency and striving for advancement were, paradoxically, capable of wielding a power scarcely inferior to that of the patron himself. For it was generally acknowledged that the down-trodden suppliant also had rights: the right to defend their own interests and the right to succour and protection that the vulnerable have customarily claimed of the strong. The process of humbly entreating might enfold an implicit demand or even a threat that was barely veiled by the self-deprecatory language in which it wrapped itself – covert assertiveness masquerading as its antithesis: self-effacement. Such displays of latent aggression reflected the fact that, regardless of the suppliant's professed helplessness, their demands were seldom made from a position of impotence. Indeed their cognizance of this fact created scope for various sorts of pressure (moral, affective, religious and political) to be brought to bear on the patron in order to coerce the latter into performing the suppliant's bidding. Thus the process of enacting frailty could be converted into a source of strength. An outstanding instance of this is the way in which Arbella manipulated her seemingly weak position to her

⁸ See John Bulwer, *Chirologia; Or the Natural Language of the Hand. Chironomia or the Art of Manual Rhetoric* (London, 1644), Plate 8, especially the figure of Supplicio (i.e. pleading).

⁹ As Sara Jayne Steen notes, Arbella, 'like most of us, was a person of contradictions but what she was not was the model of humble woman or subject'. Steen, 'Fashioning an Acceptable Self: Arbella Stuart', *English Literary Renaissance* 18:1 (1988), 78-95 (79).

own advantage when attempting to blackmail her guardians with repeated threats to starve herself or even take her own life – a ploy to which she reverted at a later stage.

Arbella's case is a striking illustration of the strains associated with the dichotomous stance she was forced to adopt, a situation that in the longer-term would prove untenable. For Bess of Hardwick's grand-daughter had been bred up to believe in her exalted status as prospective heir to the throne. By her own admission, she '[stood] greatly upon [her] reputation', being imbued from birth with a powerful sense of hereditary entitlement to such an extent that she judged herself to be 'unworthy of life if I had degenerated from the most renowned stocke whearof it is my greatest honour to be a branch'.¹⁰ Yet, ironically, this important constitutional figure was hidden from the public eye, kept in strict isolation, left to languish in the wilds of Derbyshire and deprived, as she often complained, of suitable company. That her speech was often imperious and haughty, for example in claiming precedence over the ladies-in-waiting at Court, is well documented. Recalling the occasion of her humiliation at Whitehall when 'it pleased hir Majestie to give me leave to gaze on hir and by triall pronounce me an Eglett of her owne kinde' helped soften the blow to her amour propre. Equally, it may have complicated the process of resolving her conflicting identities.

Ethos and Pathos in Action

It should be noted that, despite their high-ranking status, the access of these two female prisoners to sources of aid was severely curtailed, leaving them with little choice but to rely upon the abject language of supplication. Approaching this topic from the standpoint of 'discourse pragmatics', Lynne Magnusson argues that it was the petitioner's social circumstances - comprising such variables as marital status, wealth and familial alliances - that determined what kind of rhetorical register they deployed in their correspondence.¹¹ Female suppliants who perceived themselves as being at a disadvantage tended to gravitate towards what Angel Day described in his epistolary manual, The English Secretorie (1586), as a self-abasing language of 'humilitie and entreatie' as opposed to a more confident script of 'supposall and assurance'.¹² This would have taken the form of an indirect or circumlocutory mode of request-making, often couched in the conditional or subjunctive mood, that studiously avoided making any claims of self-worth while still maintaining the pressure on potential patrons to honour their moral obligations. Yet despite the precarious position in which Grey and Stuart found themselves, an underlying resentment filters through their plaintive tactics in ways that undermine their show of contrition. Thus Mary Grey

¹⁰ CP 135, fols 159-160: 4 March 1603; CP 135, fols 144-145: mid-January 1603.

¹¹ Lynne Magnusson, 'A Rhetoric of Requests: Genre and Linguistic Scripts in Elizabethan Women's Suitors' Letters' in James Daybell (ed.), Women and Politics in Early Modern England, 1450-1700 (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), 51-66.

¹² Angel Day, The English Secretorie (London, 1586), 184.

expresses repentance regarding her 'foly' for 'that I have thereb[e] incured the quenes maiesties desplessur, whiche is the greatest greffe to me; for that the princes faver is not so soon gotten agayn'.¹³ In another letter, addressed to Sir William Cecil, she belatedly concludes that 'no tormente can be greater' than to bring down upon herself her Majesty's wrath.¹⁴ In another epistle Mary appeals to Cecil's compassion by reminding him of 'whate a greate tyme of truble' she has endured since the calamity that befell her family.¹⁵ While acknowledging her 'greatt and haynusse cryme' in a subsequent epistle Grey's impatience regarding her long-delayed pardon spills over in her admission that she expected 'to have holly obtaynd her maiesties favor before thyse tyme'.¹⁶ Some forty odd years later, Arbella would make the same complaint.

Like many early modern women who found themselves in dire straits, the petitionary letters of these female prisoners situated their predicament within the context of a rhetorical framework that mobilised the moral and affective properties of ethos and pathos to the relative detriment of logos (i.e. reason or logic). If ethos entails the self-conscious crafting of an appealing persona that is calculated to make a positive impression upon the recipient and elicit their good will, pathos could be used to manipulate the audience's feelings through the mimetic arousal of emotions which, according to the Ciceronian theory of ipse ardere, has an irresistibly contagious effect on its target audience, aimed at eliciting pity – the dominant emotion such supplicatory acts were primed to evoke.¹⁷ This is vividly exemplified in Grey's correspondence with Sir William Cecil, which adheres to standard epistolary formulae. In another letter she emphasises her reliance on his mediation of her suit, begging him to be 'an earnest suttor for me to her maiestie for favour and remessyon' and then goes on to remind him of 'whate a greate tyme of truble' she has endured which she trusts, with the Secretary's good help, will move the Queen's heart to take pity on her.¹⁸ In the same letter Mary expresses her grief and remorse concerning the loss of her majesty's favour, all the while pressing the Secretary to continue his efforts to reinstate her in the Queen's good books:

Good master secrytary I am bold to truble you at this present withe my rude letter trustinge you will think no thinge in me for my boldnes but will I hope concether my longe and greuos empresonment and as you haue hetherto byne my greate frynde so I trust you will conteneue and moue my most lamentable estat vnto the quenes

¹³ British Library (hereafter BL), Lansdowne MS, 8 fol. 181: 7 February 1566.

¹⁴ The National Archives, State Papers (hereafter TNA, SP) 12/37, fol. 179: 7 November 1565.

¹⁵ TNA, SP 12/ 40, fol. 146: 30 September 1566.

¹⁶ TNA, SP 12/38, fol. 100: 16 December 1565.

¹⁷ For definitions of 'ethos' and 'pathos', see Cicero, *De Oratore*, Books I - 3 (Cambridge (US) and London: Harvard University Press and William Heinemann, 1988), see esp. Book 2, 328-57.

¹⁸ TNA, SP 12/40, fol. 146: 30 September 1566.

maieste crauing moste humble pardonn of her maieste for me [...] for now I fell [feel] what hartes sorowe it is to a trew subiectes harte to haue the princes aunger the greffe wherof is so greate as I assur you I thinke no tormente to be compared to that payne and therfor for gods sake I craue it be an earnest sutter for me to her maieste for fauor and remedieson [...] whiche I truste with your good helpe will so moue her maiestes harte that at the laste her maieste will I trust haue compassyon on me and receue me into her fauour and pressence agayne.

your pore frynde to comande Mary Graye ¹⁹

Employing tried-and-trusted formulaic expressions of regret, Mary continues to importune Cecil by not allowing him to forget just how much is at stake.

Both Grey and Stuart were adept at crafting a favourable image of themselves. In particular, Mary Grey fashioned a pitiful persona for herself that combined a rhetorical display of her grievous – and implicitly undeserved – suffering at the Queen’s hands with a relentless determination to maintain pressure on Cecil while seeking to assuage her own sense of guilt. In various letters Arbella evoked the spectacle of herself as ‘a poor silly infant and wretch’ who finds herself in a ‘most distressed state, having been unfairly subjected by her grandmother to a ‘voley of most bitter and injurious words’, thereby prompting her to set out ‘the ill favoured picture of [her] grieffe’ by re-affirming her ‘malinchoy innocence’.²⁰ Yet for all her self-portrayal as a long-suffering woman, the resentment she harboured regarding her treatment and alleged neglect emerges all too clearly in her barely veiled frustration over the deferral in receiving her long awaited pardon.

Where the epistolary output of these two female captives differed was in their tactical approach to the politics of letter-writing and the degree of rhetorical versatility they displayed. Grey’s epistolary exchanges with William Cecil during the period of her imprisonment (1565-71?), wherein she repeatedly beseeches him to intercede on her behalf by inducing the Queen to take pity on her situation and restore her to the favour she formerly enjoyed at Court, admit culpability but afford little insight into her motives, nor do they venture any mitigating circumstances. On first acquaintance with her letters we are presented with a

¹⁹ TNA, SP 12/40, fol. 146: 30 September 1566.

²⁰ CP 135, fols 144-145: Mid-January 1603; CP 135, fols 159-160: 4 March 1603; CP 135, fols 130-138: 9 March 1603.

moving account of the 'great messery and moste lamentabell lyff' suffered by the captive.²¹ In another letter she depicts herself as being desirous of death rather 'then to be any longer without so greatt a juell [jewel] as her maiestis favor'.²² In a subsequent letter she bemoans her loss of the Queen's good will; acknowledging that she has 'deserved greatt desplessur of her maiestie'.²³ Mary presented her 'petyfull and lamentable suett' to her Majesty in the hope of being readmitted to the Queen's favour, promising 'never [to] offende her ... any mor'.²⁴ She also placed her trust in the Principal Secretary's assistance (well disposed, as he was, towards the Grey sisters) to move the sovereign to clemency. But all to no avail: on this point the Queen's position - like that of her successor, James I/VI - was not negotiable. However, when these letters are read in the context of Mary Grey's entire correspondence with Cecil, we are compelled to reassess their impact, both politically and stylistically, for it becomes apparent that she doggedly reiterated her plea for liberty year on year, recycling the same epistolary formulae with only minor variations - resulting, presumably, in diminishing returns. In fact Mary was highly literate with a keen interest in political and theological disputation, but she decided to suppress this in her epistolary output, preferring to redeploy stock phrases. Possibly this is a sign of how much faith she placed in them. However, even allowing for the high tolerance of repetition to which early modern suitors and patrons were largely inured, it is very likely that exposure to an unremitting renewal of requests would have felt comparable to being bludgeoned.²⁵ Whether Mary's persistent reiteration of her demands could also be ascribed to a lack of linguistic agility, an obtuse sense of entitlement or a tactical war of attrition designed to wear down Elizabeth and Cecil's resistance remains uncertain.

If Mary's letters suffer from an apparent paucity of expressive resources despite her erudition, Arbella's are, by contrast, notable for their chaotic syntax, striking inventiveness, obscure conceits and profuse, rambling nature. Mary's terseness is superseded by Arbella's self-confessed prolixity. In times of stress, particularly following her abortive attempt to escape Hardwick Hall in early 1602 and the gruelling interrogations forced upon her, writing afforded Arbella some respite from mental anguish that could be likened to a form of catharsis. Moreover, she employed her epistolary skills in order to mitigate the constraints imposed by her grandmother and government inquisitors (Sir Robert Cecil and Sir Henry Brounker) and to allow herself free reign to summon a whole cast of fictitious characters,

²¹ TNA, SP 12/ 39, fol. 174: 3 May 1566.

²² BL, Lansdowne MS, 8, fol. 181: 7 February 1566.

²³ TNA, SP 12/ 39, fol.174: 3 May 1566.

²⁴ TNA, SP 12/ 40, fol. 146: 30 September 1566; TNA, SP 12/ 42, fol. 113: 17 April 1567.

²⁵ See Frank Whigham, 'The Rhetoric of Elizabethan Suitors' Letters', *Publications of the Modern Language Association* 96 (1981), 864-80. This article demonstrates the highly competitive nature of the patronage system.

including an imaginary lover whose usefulness she continued to exploit long after his existence was disproved.²⁶ In the process she wrote herself into a state of ‘scribbling melancholy’, born of ‘idle conceits’ and intensified by her continuing segregation from the outside world – a condition she recognised as ‘a kinde of madnesse of which there are severall kindes’, though the modern reader would probably attribute this to a depressive illness. This is reflected in the shifting moods inscribed in her letters, particularly during the crisis precipitated by Brounker’s interrogation methods. According to Robert Burton’s observations in his monumental work, *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621), the early modern obsession with melancholia (caused by an excess of black bile, as understood in terms of humoral psychology) was inextricably linked with bouts of insanity. Moreover, he avers that ‘[m]elancholy [...] is the character of mortality’, a trait on which Arbella frequently dwelt.²⁷ Periodically susceptible to what she called ‘the dumps’, she was prone to various ailments that probably originated from the condition of porphyria, allegedly inducing pains in the side, sore eyes, crippling headaches and convulsions, though these were treated dismissively by Arbella’s doctors as symptomatic of melancholia and hysteria.²⁸ These same traits imbued her writing with its occasional lapses into incomprehensibility or incoherent excitement. Of greater significance is Burton’s insight regarding the integral connection between mind and body which gave rise to her strange style of writing. It is debatable whether, as seems likely given her medical history, Arbella’s symptoms were genuine or merely a calculated ruse on her part to get her own way. We may surmise that, more plausibly, it was a combination of the two.

Shaping Fantasies

In any event, Arbella had a marked propensity to retreat into a hypothetical world, particularly in times of stress, for example when she was being grilled by Sir Henry Brounker. Judging by her frequent recourse to literary and theatrical tropes it would appear that she considered herself to be as much a denizen of the fictional world as of the royal Court. Once her interrogator had established that the unnamed beloved was supposedly none other than ‘the King of Scots’, the fictional web Arbella had woven around herself swiftly unravelled. Placed under unremitting observation, she was forced to confess that her desperate invention of a putative lover was merely a subterfuge, nothing ‘but a poetically

²⁶ CP 135, fols 130-138: 9 March 1603.

²⁷ Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (London, 1621), 144. On humoral physiology, see Gail Kern Paster, *The Body Embarrassed: Drama and the Disciplines of Shame* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993).

²⁸ Sarah Jayne Steen, “‘How Subject to Interpretation’: Lady Arbella Stuart and the Reading of Illness’ in James Daybell (ed.), *Early Modern Women’s Letter Writing, 1450-1700* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), 109-213.

fiction' used to focus attention on her predicament.²⁹ It was yet another blow to her damaged ego. In compensation for this ignominious climb-down, she conjured up imaginary scenarios that cast her in a flattering light, perhaps as an antidote to the indignities she endured at her grandmother's hands or the more serious disgrace she would later encounter at Court. As we might expect, Arbella drew upon her literary imagination to recast herself in the role of a mistreated romantic heroine (commending Robert Cecil for his 'defending a wronged Lady'), an innocent victim and martyr, a woman who commanded the unconditional loyalty of her nameless 'friends' and servants who regarded her orders as 'a favour donne to them and not to me of whom they crave not so much as thanckes'.³⁰ In Arbella's fantasy she revels in her capacity to dazzle court eyes with 'the soudain and gorgeous change of [her] suite', which, 'being so costly', would make her an object of envy to others.³¹ When that ploy failed she changed tactics, seeking to boost her authority and gain access to the Queen by hinting that she was uniquely placed to 'reveile somm secrettes of love' which would be of interest to her Majesty.³² By constructing such consolatory reveries, Arbella arrogated to herself a fictive power and autonomy that she was consistently denied in life.

Ultimately what Arbella craved, above all else, was proximity to the Queen and Court. But her frustration, deriving from her youthful blunder in attempting to assert superiority over the aristocratic ladies at Whitehall, had put paid to that, resulting in her humiliation and banishment from the Court.³³ Like so many of her contemporaries, Arbella sought direct access to the monarch with the aim of forging an intimate bond with Queen Elizabeth, as her presumptive heir, only to be disappointed. Two surviving letters were addressed by Arbella to the Queen both dated to 1602/3: one a brief, conventional and dutiful epistle and the other a more expansive letter that fulsomely expresses her gratitude for 'your Highnesse most gracious interpretation of this accident [an oblique reference to Arbella's dealings with the Earl of Hertford] most humbly craving the continuance of your Maiesties good opinion which ever hath binne my greatest comfort'.³⁴ She then proceeds to lament '[her] exile out of your Majestes presence', while 'trying all the meanes I could possibly [...] devise and none succeeding I resolved to crave my Grandmothers leave to present <my service> my selfe unto your Majesty'.³⁵ She also hints at her desperation to obtain 'even that small and

²⁹ CP 135, fols 153-155: 2 March 1603.

³⁰ Longleat House, Wiltshire, Talbot Papers 2, fols 210-11: 18 December, 1603; CP 135, fols 139-141: Written between 29 January and 2 February, 1603.

³¹ CP 135, fols 139-141: January-February 1603.

³² CP 135, fols 139-141: January-February 1603.

³³ Quoted in Sarah Gristwood, *Arbella: England's Lost Queen* (London: Bantam Books, 2003), 103.

³⁴ CP 135, fols 144-145. Mid-January 1603.

³⁵ CP 135, fols 144-145. Mid-January 1603.

ordinary liberty' owed to her, all the while seeking emotional relief.³⁶ But the Queen was clearly intent on keeping Arbella at a distance by insisting that she remain with her grandmother. Probably as a consequence of this, Arbella came to regard herself as an outcast abandoned by the Queen who 'should have binne [her] only rock and defence', believing herself to be 'forsaken of all the world'.³⁷ Ostracised from royal circles, she counted herself, ominously, as one of the disaffected, that is 'those whom the world understand to be in a sort exiled her majesties presence undeservedly'.³⁸

By 1597 Arbella, then aged twenty-two, still 'without mate and without estate'³⁹ or even the prospect of either, was growing more desperate with every passing year. Condemned to an indefinite term of exile – both physical and psychological – she looked to the Queen for refuge and comfort, grounding all her hopes upon this one 'doubtfull foundation', but no relief was forthcoming.⁴⁰ Arbella's resentment, intensified by the issuing of a belated invitation to participate in the historical events of this period and the opportunities it offered, boiled over in her tart observation that

When it shall please hir Majestie to afford me those ordinary rightes which other subjectes cannot be debarred of justly, I shall endeavour to receive them as thanckfully now as if they had binne in due time offred, though the best part of my time be past whearin (my hart being not so seasoned with sorrow as it is) comfort should have binne welcomm and better bestowed becaus[e] my hart was not then so over-worne with just unkindnesse and sorrow hath binne capable <of joy>. ⁴¹

Having struck this defiant note she proceeded to flout the Queen's authority by arguing that 'neither doth hir Majesties commaundment prevaile so farre, though her fame and intreaty be every wheare glorious and powerfull'.⁴² As if this were not provocative enough, she compounds that treasonable thought by 'mak[ing] a vow if it shall so please her Highnesse to commaund upon condition I may reobtaine hir Majesties favour and have my deare and due liberty I will never marry whilst I live nor interteine thought nor conceale any such [...] matter whatsoever from her Majestie' – a pledge that was unlikely to be kept.⁴³ One can only wonder why Arbella's refusal to acknowledge the Queen's sovereignty and her inept attempt at bargaining with Elizabeth did not land her in gaol. Her letters from the Hardwick period

³⁶ CP 135, fols 144-145. Mid-January 1603.

³⁷ CP 135, fols 142-143: 2 March 1603.

³⁸ CP 135, fols 139-141: Undated.

³⁹ The Venetian Correr quoted in Gristwood, *Arbella*, 324.

⁴⁰ CP 135, fols 142-143: 2 March 1602.

⁴¹ CP 135, fols 130-138: 9 March 1602.

⁴² CP 135, fols 130-138: 9 March 1602.

⁴³ CP 135, fols 142-143: 2 March 1602.

simmer with barely suppressed anger, culminating in her threat to 'spitt [her] tongue in my Examiner or Torturers face'.⁴⁴ In one instance her tone shifts abruptly in mid sentence from a humble register to the bitter interjection: 'for all men are liers', concluding that '[t]heare is no trust in man whose breathe is in his nostrilles'.⁴⁵ Significantly, many of Arbella's letters adopt a mournful tone reminiscent of the abandoned heroines of Ovid's *Heroides*. We may also recognise this tone in the plaintive rhetorical outbursts of the Earl of Essex in his letters to Queen Elizabeth where he laments that 'out of that passion my soul cries for grace, for access, and for an end to this exile' and alludes to his 'own hart breaking in incomparable sorrow'.⁴⁶ Likewise, Raleigh mimics feminine tropes, beseeching King James to spare his life 'for it is on[e] part of the office of a just and worthy prince to here the cumplaynts of his [servants], especially of suche as art in greatest missery'; depicting himself as an 'misserabell and unfortunate wrech' he invites commiseration and pity, ascribing his grief to a 'minde which sorrow hath broken'.⁴⁷ In another letter he abjectly subscribes himself 'your Majesties most humble and penitent vassall'.⁴⁸ Arbella identified herself closely with Essex, who had been kind to her and whose death she annually commemorated on Ash Wednesday. In fact the pair had much in common in terms of their capacity for self-delusion, their romantic propensities and strong sense of disillusionment, all of which marked them out as fellow rebels at odds with the existing regime. But, as was so often the case with Arbella, she let personal bitterness overwhelm what little sense of diplomacy she possessed in ways that could only injure her cause.

Redefining Liberty

As has been noted, from her early years onwards Arbella was obsessed with the notion of liberty and its obverse, the ever-present threat of captivity which overshadowed her life. Thus she wrote of her desperation at being denied the opportunity to present herself at Court or acquire 'even that small and ordinary liberty' granted to her Majestie's subjects and asserted her right to a degree of independence.⁴⁹ She described her situation, sardonically, as being condemned to 'exile with expectation'; a reference to the endless deferral of the legitimate hopes instilled in her from birth.⁵⁰ It is little wonder that she became fascinated with evoking scenarios that allowed her to indulge in macabre fantasising about death,

⁴⁴ CP 135, fols 130-138. Dated 9 March 1602.

⁴⁵ CP 135, fol. 166. Probably written 7 March 1602.

⁴⁶ Earl of Essex to the Queen. State Papers (Domestic). Dated 18 October, 1600.

⁴⁷ Addressed to King James. Dated after 17 November 1603. Printed in Agnes Latham and Joyce Youngs (eds), *The Letters of Sir Walter Raleigh* (Exeter: Exeter Press, 1999), 258-60.

⁴⁸ Addressed to King James. Dated before 10 November 1603. Printed in Latham and Youngs (eds), *The Letters of Sir Walter Raleigh*, 257.

⁴⁹ CP 135, fols 144-145: mid-January 1603.

⁵⁰ CP 135, fols 130-138: 9 March 1603.

histrionically conjuring up the prospective scene of her execution. Not content with this, she demanded that her persecutors appoint her 'day of trial in this my prison instantly' and 'let me loose my head'.⁵¹ However, this longing for freedom would never be fully realised. In reality she was prevented from venturing beyond the park gates of Hardwick Hall to reclaim her 'deare and due liberty'.⁵² A disturbing picture of the claustrated life Arbella had to endure for over a decade emerges in a letter Bess addressed to Burghley in the 1590s, reassuring him in clipped sentences, so unlike Arbella's convoluted prose, that

I have little resort to me, my house is furnished with sufficient company: Arbella walks not late; at such a time as she shall take the air it shall be near the house, and well attended on: she goeth not to anybody's house at all: I see her almost every hour in the day: she lieth in my bedchamber. If I can be more precise than I have been I will be.⁵³

Nevertheless there is sufficient evidence to suggest that, from Arbella's viewpoint, the concept of liberty had more to do with an internalised state of mind than with the removal of actual physical constraints. Yet, as a learned woman of strong literary bent for whom inventing 'poetical fiction[s]' was very much the stuff of life, we may surmise that the process of letter-writing functioned as a means of enlarging the confines of her mental world as well as offering psychological release from the many disappointments she had to surmount.⁵⁴ Indeed it was characteristic of Arbella, when placed under intense strain, as was the case with her examination by Cecil and Stanhope, to take refuge in scribbling in the privacy of her closet as a way of exorcising her turbulent emotions. This reinforces the view that, for her, writing was a means of obtaining respite from the pressure of lugubrious thoughts and contending feelings she experienced as well as giving her an entrée into a more expansive hypothetical reality that could be moulded to suit her wishes.

The Triple Voices of Arbella

It is possible to track the development of Arbella's different linguistic styles over the course of her life. During her formative years, she had acquired a reputation as a precocious scholar and adept literary stylist. However, what emerged from this - perhaps owing to the pressures placed on her during her interrogation - was a more chaotic, incoherent and obscure mode of expression that could be read as an unedited transcript of her confused internal thought processes. Her linguistic usage was highly allusive, stuffed with erudite references, 'darke

⁵¹ CP 135, fols 130-138: 9 March 1603.

⁵² CP 135, fols 142-143: 2 March 1603.

⁵³ Quoted in Gristwood, *Arbella*, 123.

⁵⁴ CP 135, fols 153-155. See also the poetic devices in CP 135, fols 142-143 and fols 147-149.

speeches', opaque allegories and riddling discourses that suddenly veered off at a tangent in various directions.⁵⁵ Queen Elizabeth's would-be successor indulged in penning rambling, allusive and obscure epistolary narratives studded with various types of literary conceit. No wonder that Cecil, Stanhope and Brounker were exasperated by their inability to follow her illogical, meandering trains of thought or decode her frequently unintelligible and interminable letters. Her mode of epistolary narration has often been likened to what is popularly known as 'stream of consciousness', though the author's intermittent lucidity suggests that her letters were more carefully crafted than we might suppose. What is incontrovertible is that owing to Arbella's distressed state her normally controlled prose underwent a process of disintegration such that grammatical, semantic and syntactical structures and the use of run-on lines were confounded, along with the abandonment of logic and sense, reflecting the mental breakdown she was probably experiencing during this stressful period of her life. Placed under duress by her examiners, she sought to 'disburden' her 'travelling minde' through the therapeutical exercise of her 'restless penne'.⁵⁶ Hence Cecil may be forgiven for concluding that Arbella 'hath some strange vapours to her braine'.⁵⁷ Acknowledging her distracted state in a letter to Brounker (dated 1603) she resolves to spend her time in 'tiring you with [...] idle conceits [...] till it make you ashamed to see into what a scribling melancholy' she has descended.⁵⁸ But Arbella reassured him that 'you have brought me and leave me, if you leave me till I be my owne woman and then your trouble and mine too will cease'.⁵⁹ That much at least proved to be true, for shortly thereafter she reverted to her normal state of mind.

The linguistic register adopted by Arbella on her taking up residence at the Jacobean Court in 1603 could scarcely be further removed from the inchoate ruminations of her former self. Instead we find members of the Talbot-Shrewsbury clan exchanging familiar letters couched in terms that are rational, direct rather than circumlocutory, and, more importantly, immersed in daily practical matters that are typically to do with law suits, gift-exchange, property and petitions in an attempt to consolidate her precarious financial situation. It seemed, finally, as if a degree of independence lay within her grasp. In this relatively tranquil interval of her life Arbella's use of language is straightforward, even prosaic, and to the point. She seems to have consciously adopted a detached and wryly critical perspective regarding the goings-on at Court. Her letters were now littered with grievances concerning the inadequate financial

⁵⁵ CP 135, fols 142-143, or CP 135, fols 147-149.

⁵⁶ CP 135, fol. 165: 6 March 1603.

⁵⁷ CP 135, fols 159-160: 4 March 1603.

⁵⁸ CP 135, fol. 164: 4 March 1603.

⁵⁹ CP 135, fols 130-138: 9 March 1603.

provision proffered to a woman of her nominally elevated rank and the embarrassment that entailed. '[F]or all the world else I am unprovided', she remarked, 'This time will manifest my poverty more than all the rest of the yeare, but why should I be ashamed of it when it is others fault and not mine?'⁶⁰ However, for the most part, she seemed in good spirits, striving to entertain her audience or readers by engaging in running commentaries on state affairs that were witty and humorous, devoid of the melancholy that plagued her for most of her life. In letters to her close relatives, mostly addressed to the Earl and Countess of Shrewsbury, she sardonically relays the topical court gossip and playfully mocks the absurdity of the Spanish ambassador's ludicrous pretensions and his umbrage at having to lodge at an Inn 'because he had not all Christs colledge to him selfe'. But Arbella can be scornful too: 'if ever theare weare such a Vertu as courtesy at the Court I marvell what is becomm of it?', she notes, 'for I protest that I see little or none of it but in the Queen'.⁶¹ Equally she deplored James's eve[r]lasting hunting' and the ill manners of 'our great and gracious Ladies [who] leave no gesture nor fault of the late Queen unremembered as they say who are partakers of their talke as I thanck God I am not'.⁶² Likewise she showed little relish for the Queen's infantile pastimes with her Ladies, though she was eventually prevailed upon 'to play the childe againe'.⁶³ Describing herself as 'halfe a Puritan', she showed her disdain for such games by distancing herself from the courtier's indulgence in frivolous revelries of which she took a dim view.⁶⁴

The third and final voice belongs to the period following her arrest and consignment to the Tower in 1610 after her abortive attempt to escape to the Continent. Initially defiant, she protested the validity of her marriage ceremony at Whitehall on 2 February 1610, which was confirmed by witnesses. The couple were called to the Privy Council and given a stern warning to desist from such plans. Having been examined individually, Arbella and her husband continued to deny their guilt, but were forced to back down when the King insisted that she confess herself to be at fault and ask for forgiveness – an act of self-abasement that must have grated with her. Yet, instead of accepting the situation, Arbella, ever the controversialist, continued both overtly and covertly to contest the legitimacy of the King's actions in what could only be construed as an incendiary letter. She protested that

I do most hartelie lament my hard fortune that I should offend your Majestie the least

⁶⁰ Longleat, Talbot Papers 2, fols. 206-207: Addressed to the Countess of Shrewsbury, 8 December 1603.

⁶¹ Lambeth Palace Library, MS 3201, fols 124-125. 16 September 1603.

⁶² Longleat, Talbot Papers 2, fols 257-258. Summer or autumn 1603; Longleat, Talbot Papers 2, fols 190-191. 23 August 1603.

⁶³ Longleat, Talbot Papers 2, fols 208-209. 8 December 1603.

⁶⁴ CP 135, fol. 166: c. 7 March 1603.

... and thoughe your Majesties neglect of me [*and*] my good likeinge of this gentleman that is my Husband, and my fortune, drove me to A Contracte before I acquainted your Majestie I humblie beseech your Majestie to consider howe impossible itt was for me to ymagine itt could be offensive unto your Majestie havinge fewe Days before geven me your Royall consent to bestowe my selfe on anie Subject of your Majesties [...]. Besides never having ben either prohibited any or spoken to for anie in this land by your Majestie these 7 yeares [...] could not conceive that your Majestie regarded my Mariage att all.⁶⁵

Not content with reminding James of his negligence in failing to arrange her marriage, she obliquely accused him of vindictiveness by making her a scapegoat – ‘the first precedent that ever was’.⁶⁶ She then provocatively compared David’s faithless dealing with Uriah with that of James I/VI who, it is implied, might be thought insufficiently ‘imitable for so good and gracious a Kinge as your Majestie’.⁶⁷ With breathtaking tactlessness she argued that ‘if itt please your Majestie in your owne wisdom to consider throughlie of my cause there will noe solide reason appeare to Debarre me of Justice and your Princelie favour which I will endeavour to deserve whilst I breath’.⁶⁸ It is important to bear in mind that this letter was addressed to a scholarly monarch steeped in hermeneutics and knowledge of the Scriptures who could easily have decoded the veiled criticisms alluding to James’ own shortcomings. Viewed in this light, it makes sense that the King would have wished to rid himself of a troublesome relative by dispatching her to the remote regions of Derbyshire from whence she came. It must have seemed to Arbella that she was once more being returned, against her will, to the uncivil regions of remote northern lands (‘clean out of this world’, as she put it), the site of her former captivity as a prisoner in all but name.⁶⁹

That her attempt to escape across the Channel ended in disaster, with her permanent separation from her husband and subjection to an ever more constricted life in Lambeth and finally the Tower, is well documented. Suffice it to say that her northward progress into exile, increasingly bedevilled by her ailments, never reached its intended destination. Belatedly, the King agreed to a respite of three weeks, extended to one month, time enough for her to recover. Arbella responded fulsomely to this news, thanking him for granting her this respite of ‘Halcyon days [...] since it hath pleased his Majesty to give this testimony of willingness to

⁶⁵ BL, Harley MS, 7003, fol. 82: undated, probably December, 1610.

⁶⁶ BL, Harley MS, 7003, fol. 82: undated, probably December, 1610.

⁶⁷ BL, Harley MS, 7003, fol. 82: undated, probably December, 1610. See versions 1-4 of BL, Harley MS, 7003, fol. 107, with the cavilling edited out.

⁶⁸ BL, Harley MS, 7003, fol. 82. Undated. Probably written December 1610.

⁶⁹ HMC Belvoir Papers I, p. 427, cited in P. M. Handover, *Arbella Stuart: Royal Lady of Hardwick and Cousin to King James* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1957), 270.

have me live a while'.⁷⁰ However, this was a subterfuge; she was using these enforced rests to plan her escape to the continent with Seymour. James, for all his intransigence, had been right not to trust her word. As with Lady Mary, Arbella's petition is couched in the most abject terms imaginable. What information we have about her final years following her recapture is unreliable. Surviving letters written during her final years disclose her profound despair, attested by her grovelling pleas to King James which have been dated to spring 1611. Speaking of herself in the third person she objectified herself as a pathetic figure to be commiserated, protesting that

In all humility the most wretched and unfortunate creature that ever lived prostrates it selfe at the feet of the most mercifull King that ever was desiring nothing but mercy and favour, not being more afflicted for any thing then for the losse of that which hath binne this long time the onely comfort it had in the world, and which if it weare to do againe I would not adventure the losses of for any other worldly comfort, mercy it is I desire, and that for Gods sake.⁷¹

Much of the remainder of Arbella's life is mantled in silence. Poignantly, not only did her estranged husband fail to maintain contact with her, but her uncles declined to intercede on her behalf. It is as if she disappears from view, retreating from us into self-imposed seclusion and perhaps self-starvation (a ploy she had used back in her Hardwick days).

Nevertheless when reading her letters of this period we are reminded of her combative nature, forceful eloquence and ability to inhabit different personae in her correspondence. In various letters she strives to represent herself as a victim worthy of our pity and commiseration; her self-abasement is reflected in her signatures, as 'Your afflicted poore suppliant', 'the most unfortunate and afflicted creature lyvinge', and 'Your Majesties most humble and faithfull subject and servant'.⁷² Following this, it is important to note the existence of multiple drafts, four all told, of a letter addressed to King James that was read aloud before the Privy Council to the approval of the King and Prince Henry who applauded her literary style. In the fourth redrafting of her letter Arbella indicates her submissiveness, stating her willingness to comply with the King's demand that she travel northward to Durham, averring that 'for my owne part as an argument that I had never anie other thought than to gaine your Majesties favoure by obeydence I do promise to undergoe the journey

⁷⁰ BL, Harley MS, 7003, fol. 89: undated, late March or early April 1611.

⁷¹ BL, Harley MS, 7003, fol. 146: undated, probably spring 1611.

⁷² BL, Harley MS, 7003, fol. 152: undated, early 1611 before Arbella's removal from Lambeth to Durham. The letter is addressed to the 'Lord Chiefe Justice of England and the Lord Chiefe Justice of the Common Pleas'. BL, Harley MS, 7003, fols 104-105: Arbella Stuart to Robert Cecil, early 1611.

after this time expired' without creating further impediments.⁷³ Yet directly contrary to this is the acerbic glossing of her final draft (probably never sent) which is peppered with indignant interjections, noted in the margins by Arbella's secretary, that tell a very different story, revealing the rebarbative spirit of an aristocratic woman bred for a position of authority and command, but one who had lost her way. Her outward docility is belied by Arbella's caustic annotations of a letter (dated late March or early April, 1611) in which she agreed to undertake the journey northward without 'any resistans or refusall to do such things as are fitt for mee to doo to make my Journey(s) less painefull or perillous'.⁷⁴ But this is interspersed with caustic comments that reveal the depth of her anger.⁷⁵ In the margins of her letter she truculently notes 'that without the Journey is inoughe yf the King desire but his honor salved'.⁷⁶ Regarding her commitment not to offer further resistance she notes 'as thoughe I had made resistans etcs and so the Journey more periolous and painefull by myselfe, whereuppon I must confess I bely my selfe extreemely in this' and protests that 'I take it to bee more than I owe my allegiance to be separated from my husband duringe his pleasure'.⁷⁷ Concerning James I/VI's grace, she queries 'what man of grace this is I cannot guess not in what case I am'.⁷⁸ Clearly she was in no frame of mind to submit meekly to the demands of her adversaries.

It would not be an overstatement to say that Arbella Stuart and Mary Grey were throughout their lives subject to milder or more draconian forms of captivity. But why did the efforts to procure a favourable outcome to their petitions come to nought? I would suggest that as the focus of plots to abduct Arbella and of the Catholic conspiracies fomented by her aunt, the Countess of Shrewsbury, she had become a potential liability for the Jacobean regime. Hence political expediency dictated that she should die in prison. If we also take into account the volatile climate of the early years of James I/VI's reign and his paranoia concerning the 'Main' and 'Bye' plots of 1603 in which Arbella herself was tangentially implicated, to be swiftly followed by the infamous Gunpowder plot of 1605, it would appear that his anxiety at this turn of events was well founded. Given the King's battles with Parliament along with the challenges his kinswoman posed to the maintenance of his authority and the fact that hare-brained plans to set her up as a figurehead for Papists were still being concocted, it is little

⁷³ BL, Harley MS, 7003, fol. 79 (undated).

⁷⁴ BL, Harley MS 7003, fol. 79. Written late April or early May 1611. The third and fourth versions are undated.

⁷⁵ BL, Harley MS, 7003, fol. 79. Dated late March or early April 1611. Arbella to King James. The third and fourth versions are undated.

⁷⁶ BL, Harley, MS 7003, fols 83-84, incorporating Arbella's annotations.

⁷⁷ BL, Harley MS, 7003, fol. 79.

⁷⁸ BL, Harley MS, 7003, fol. 91: Addressed to King James. BL, Harley MS 7003, fols 83-84, with annotations included. December 1610.

wonder that her detention in the Tower ended with her death. Given this context, and the weight of force majeure, the efficacy of women's rhetorical strategies must have seemed irrelevant when weighed against other more pressing considerations. Nevertheless it is gratifying to note that neither of these female prisoners was so docile as to accommodate herself to her situation, but continued to press vehemently for release; indeed both responded to the loss of their liberty with strenuous resistance and a refusal to be defined by their plight.

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