

Gender and Authority: Bess of Hardwick in Tudor History and Philippa Gregory's *The Other Queen*

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ABSTRACT

Bess of Hardwick, daughter of a farmer, became one of the most influential women of the period after Queen Elizabeth I in the Elizabethan era. She climbed in the social strata through her strategic marriages when women's authority was limited. Her life as a successful builder, landowner, and political negotiator defied the traditional expectations of women of the period. This paper analyses the dynamic relationship between gender and authority through the life and actions of Bess of Hardwick in Tudor England. Through a close reading of Philippa Gregory's historical novel *The Other Queen*, the paper examines Bess's strategies for asserting authority in a rigid patriarchal society. It sheds light on how gender shaped her opportunities and experiences.

Keywords: Tudor England, Patriarchy, Marriage, Gender, Female Authority

The Tudor society was fundamentally patriarchal. Women of the era were supposed to be dependent daughters, wives, and mothers, and were confined mainly to the household. They were expected to be submissive and obedient to the men of their families and masters. Religion and the legal system positioned men as the head of the household with authority over women. Punishments were given to the women who disobeyed their male counterparts. Women were expected to run the household, to support their husbands, and to bear children. Legally, women were considered dependents of the men of the family. Though two queens- Queen Mary I and Queen Elizabeth I- ruled England then, they couldn't change the means of male domination. Yet, within this context, some women gained significant authority mainly through heredity, patronage, and marriage.

Bess of Hardwick, one of the wealthiest women in the Elizabethan era, rose to power through her ambition and well-made marriages. She is also popular in history as a builder whose houses attract people still in the twenty-first century. Each marriage advanced her wealth, influence, and power. Her first marriage at thirteen with Robert Barley, an heir to a neighbouring estate, provided her with the Barley estate and compensation after several years of his death. Her second marriage to Sir William Cavendish, Treasurer of the King's Chamber, upgraded her position to Lady Cavendish. Being part of the Court of Augmentation, he made much of his wealth during the dissolution of the monasteries. He bought the famous Chatsworth estate for her at this time. His death left her in debt to the crown, as he was accused of corruption during an audit during the reign of Queen Mary I. Bess's third husband, Sir William St Loe, was the Captain of the Guard and the Chief Butler of England in the

Elizabethan court. Bess's debt owed in the previous marriage was reduced because of his official connection with the queen. He left his wealth to Bess against the wishes of his daughters and brother, as he didn't have a male heir. His death made her one of the wealthiest women of the time, and later she became a Lady of the Bedchamber of the Queen. Bess then decided to "attend Court and choose a fourth husband; her debts and her ambitions and her feminine instinct may have told her that if she did not take this chance in her late thirties, by her forties she would regret it, and all combined to bring the widow... to Court and a-courting" (David N Durant, 53). Her fourth husband, George Talbot, 6th Earl of Shrewsbury, was one of the wealthiest aristocrats in England at the time. The couple was the host of Mary, Queen of Scots, who fled to England due to the political issues in Scotland. The long fifteen years of hosting the Scottish queen cost them their wealth as their queen, Queen Elizabeth I, didn't provide them the money she had promised. The tensions between them, primarily regarding the hosting of the Scottish queen, eventually broke their marital relationship. Yet, she became the Dowager Countess of Shrewsbury by his death in 1590. Like her marriages, Bess carefully arranged the marriages of her children and grandchildren, expanding her wealth and influence in the country.

Bess's financial acumen led her to invest her wealth in lands and properties. Bess's life provides insights into the complex convergence of gender and authority in the Tudor period, where women lacked power due to patriarchal restrictions. More than being a successful businesswoman, she was politically involved. In her book, *Bess of Hardwick: First Lady of Chatsworth*, Mary S Lowell states,

Bess was far from being alone in having multiple spouses, yet no other non-royal woman of her times achieved a tenth as much as Bess did. And no other non-royal woman of her times comes down to us through history as a serious achiever... And she operated in an age when non-royal women had little education, virtually no legal rights, and were almost considered chattels of their husbands. (xiv)

Bess was primarily notable in Tudor society as a builder and landowner. She could control vast estates and engage in financial ventures when women had limited power. Mary S Lovell states that "In adversity Bess fought back as a male counterpart would- more cleverly than most, in fact- and a man bested by woman in those days, as Lord Shrewsbury patently was, could only excuse his own weakness by branding a woman as a shrew" (*Bess of Hardwick* 478).

The Other Queen is one of Philippa Gregory's historical novels, which narrates the imprisonment and execution of Mary Queen of Scots. Bess of Hardwick is one of the novel's narrators as she hosts the imprisoned queen. Since the novel sympathetically portrays the condition of Mary Queen of Scots, Bess is portrayed negatively. She acts against her host due to her loyalty towards her queen, Queen Elizabeth I, and for her benefit. However, Philippa Gregory sheds light on her journey from a farmer's daughter to a countess of England with a feminist tone.

The novel begins with the narration of Bess, with her fourth husband, with the title of countess. Bess became the Countess of Shrewsbury by marrying George Talbot, 6th Earl of Shrewsbury. She is a very pragmatic and calculative woman. She has made each of her marriages a stepping stone towards her success in achieving wealth and influence. Bess's success is primarily founded on her strategic marriages. By understanding the necessity of marriage and its subordination in the patriarchal Tudor period, she has taken advantage of her each of her marriages. She believes "It is God's will that women are subject to men, and Elizabeth herself never argues against it" (87). She admits this from marriages: "Every woman should marry for her own advantage since her husband will represent her, as visible as her front door, for the rest of his life" (1). As Bess has made a strategic marriage for her, she also arranged for her children, extending her wealth and political connections. In the novel, she often asserts that she is a self-made woman. In her time, "Women are banned from learning

and trade. You cannot have a woman blacksmith nor a woman clerk. All a woman can do, without education, without a skill, is to sell herself" (286). Bess has carefully found opportunities and used them strategically despite the limitations of her social class and gender. She is proud of herself for rising above such a situation and achieving what she wanted. She says, "I build, I establish, I run at a profit" (64). She believes, "Never before was there a landlord in England like me. Never in the world, for all I know, was there a woman in business like me" (81). She has looked at everything from a business perspective, even in her marriages.

Bess's authority derived not from her lineage but from her intelligence and financial acumen. She has learned about business and managing estates from her second husband, William Cavendish, and saved each penny by managing his property. Bess is well aware of the vulnerability of the male-dominated Tudor society. Her focus on financial security and social advancement is not merely because of her over-ambition, but also for her survival. Bess always pleased the powerful strategically to maintain her authority. In the novel, Gregory portrays Bess's authority as often mediated by her connection with the country's influential people. The noble men, and the people from the court- especially William Cecil and Robert Dudley- who are closely connected to Queen Elizabeth I, and Mary Queen of Scots's presence in Bess's household, prove her hold in the political connections. Her husband admits that "Bess is always friends with the most powerful" (277). Bess uses her every political connection to climb up the social ladder.

Bess's determination is depicted in the novel when her wealth, which she brought from her previous marriages, was lost in taking care of the refugee queen. She regained them through a legal fight with her husband. The restoration of wealth makes her "once more a woman of property, and a woman of property is a woman in charge of her destiny" (423). Bess states,

I have made myself, a new woman for this new world, a thing that has never been before: a woman of independent means and an independent mind.... A woman who commands herself, who owes her fortune to no man, who makes her own way in the world, who signs her own deeds, and draws her own rents, and knows what it is to be a woman of some pride... A woman who is glad to count her fortune, and pleased to do well. (437)

The life of Bess of Hardwick stands out in history as a testament to the possibilities of female authority in a rigid patriarchal society. Through her strategic marriages, financial acumen, and involvement in politics, Bess made a space for herself in male-dominated Tudor society. Gregory portrays Bess's character through her sheer ambition, achievements, and complexities of her authority. Her life story exemplifies how women of the Tudor period could navigate gendered limitations and gain significant influence.

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