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## To Take Us Lands Away

Essays in Honour of Margaret R. Hunt



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# Queen Elizabeth I and her Swedish gossips: Godparenting, friendship, and family in early modern England

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One legacy of Margaret Hunt's work grows from its exploration of the range of relationships eighteenth-century women had with one another, including sworn sisterhoods and romantic friendships, rich with emotional and sometimes erotic elements.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, though focused on men and earlier years, Alan Bray traced premodern intimacies among male friends who talked of their love, faithfulness, and desire for one another. In his study of the ethics of friendships past, Bray called on readers to remember that 'marriage was only one among several forms of what one might call voluntary kinship: kinship created not by blood but by ritual or a promise.'<sup>2</sup> This essay suggests that tracing the practice and language of godparenting can allow us to explore the functions and meanings of one form of ritualized, voluntary kinship aside from marriage in which women actively participated. Godparenting among much of the population often appears only in the fleeting mentions made in baptismal registers, wills, and the occasional letter. For one admittedly unusual godmother, though, more evidence exists: England's Queen Elizabeth I (r.1558–1603). The 'Virgin Queen', Elizabeth never had children of her own,

<sup>1</sup> Margaret R. Hunt, 'The Sapphic Strain: English Lesbians in the Long Eighteenth Century', in Judith M. Bennett & Amy M. Froide (eds.), *Singlenwomen in the European Past, 1250–1800* (Philadelphia 1999), 270–96; Margaret R. Hunt, *Women in Eighteenth Century Europe* (Harlow 2010), 81–2, 269–70 *et passim*, drawing in part on Lillian Faderman's classic, *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love Between Women from the Renaissance to the Present* (New York 1981).

<sup>2</sup> Alan Bray, *The Friend* (Chicago 2003), 104. For histories of friendship in the sixteenth century, see also Laura Gowling, Michael Hunter & Miri Rubin (eds.), *Love, Friendship and Faith in Europe, 1300–1800* (Basingstoke 2005); Eva Österberg, *Friendship and Love, Ethics and Politics: Studies in Medieval and Early Modern History* (Budapest 2010). For useful overviews of recent literature on the overlapping circles of friendship and family, ones that enjoin readers to attend to the language used by early modern people to describe their own relationships, see Naomi Tadmor, 'Early Modern English Kinship in the Long Run: Reflections on Continuity and Change', *Continuity & Change* 25/1 (2010), 15–48; Lyndan Warner, 'Family, Kin and Friendship', in Amanda L. Capern (ed.), *The Routledge History of Women in Early Modern Europe* (London 2019), 53–76.

but over the course of her life was godmother to perhaps 149 children.<sup>3</sup> She thus became godsibling or 'gossip' to all those infants' parents, too. What significance, personal or public, might such ties of ritual kinship have held?

This essay focuses on the relationships Elizabeth fostered by godparenting with the Swedish Princess Cecilia on her visit in 1565–6 and with the young lady-in-waiting Cecilia left behind in England, Elin Ulfsdotter (Snakenborg) of Fyllingarum, later known to the English as Helena, 'Lady Marquess' of Northampton.<sup>4</sup> Elizabeth's connection with Cecilia proved short-lived and unsatisfying for both, but her association with Helena became long-lasting and intimate. One might well explore these interactions through the frame of the 'lesbian-like' possibilities of an age before modern sexual identities.<sup>5</sup> In this short essay, though, the point is simply this: the relationships between the unmarried Elizabeth and her Swedish gossips affirm yet again that some women in the past could craft families for themselves from materials other than blood and marriage.

Godparenting created (and among some, still creates) dense webs of relationships with spiritual meanings and social functions. At baptism, infants received names and membership of the Christian community, given through ritual a spiritual and social birth to accompany physical birth. From the fifth and sixth centuries, godparents began to play a role in the rites. The godparents bestowed the name, raised the infant from the font, and affirmed faith in Christ

on the baby's behalf. In so doing they became spiritual kin to accompany those of the flesh. The Church deemed this spiritual kinship to be so close that incest prohibitions applied to it as much as to blood relations. Godparents had spiritual responsibilities for their godchildren, implied by words used to describe their role such as witness, sponsor, and surety. They also acquired spiritual ties with the natural parents of their godchildren, ties that intermixed with social webs of patronage, clientage, and friendship. Families valued such ties highly enough that they often ignored the Church's injunction that each child ought to have only one godparent, and even its later allowance that a child might have three—two godmothers and a godfather for a girl, two godfathers and a godmother for a boy.<sup>6</sup> In some Italian cities, families invited more godfathers than mothers to participate, and chose the women they did for reasons more spiritual than the social aspirations that drove their selection of the men, but elsewhere a rough parity seems to have prevailed.<sup>7</sup> Their invitations created relationships between themselves and the godparents conveyed by the still-meaningful Italian *comparatizo* or Spanish *compadre/compadrezo*. English retains no such term to designate the relationship between natural and spiritual parents, but for centuries they became 'godsiblings', 'godsibs', or more simply, 'gossips'.

Several scholarly lenses have illuminated aspects of this rite of incorporation. Anthropologists long dominated studies of godparenting, or 'ritual co-parenthood', responding to the institution's continued significance in parts of Latin America and Eastern Europe as a supplement to familial ties knit by blood or marriage. Allowing for much regional and temporal variation, they traced practices that used ritual variously to intensify or to extend kin networks, whether horizontally or vertically, in ways that benefited the parents at least as much as the children.<sup>8</sup> Historians of the family and of religion have also explored the subject. The former sometimes link weakening ties over time to economic shifts—though studies of the vibrant baptismal kinship system in Renaissance Florence complicate any notion that urbanism and capitalism on their own sufficed to weaken the bonds.<sup>9</sup> Historians of religion have been

<sup>6</sup> For the early history of the institution, see J. H. Lynch, *Godparents and Kinship in Early Medieval Europe* (Princeton 1986); Guido Alfani, *Fathers and Godfathers: Spiritual Kinship in Early-Modern Italy* (New York 2009).

<sup>7</sup> Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, 'Parrains et filleuls: Une approche comparée de la France, l'Angleterre et l'Italie médiévales', *Medieval Prosopography* 6 (1985), 51–77; ead., *La maison et le nom: Stratégies et rituels dans l'Italie de la Renaissance* (Paris 1990), 112–14, 131; ead., 'Au peril des commeres: L'alliance spirituelle par les femmes à Florence', in Jean Dufournet (ed.), *Femmes, Mariages, Légendes: Mélanges Offerts à Georges Duby* (Brussels 1992), 215–32.

<sup>8</sup> The classic article is S. W. Mintz & E. R. Wolf, 'An Analysis of Ritual Co-Parenthood (*Compadrazgo*)', *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology* 6 (1950), 341–68; for a review of the literature, see Guido Alfani & Vincent Gourdon, 'Spiritual Kinship and Godparenthood: An Introduction', in ead. (eds.), *Spiritual Kinship in Europe, 1500–1900* (Houndmills 2012), 1–47.

<sup>9</sup> Louis Haas, *Il Mio Buono Compare: Choosing Godparents and the Uses of Baptismal Kinship in Renaissance Florence*, *Journal of Social History* 29/2 (1995), 341–56.

<sup>3</sup> Constance E. B. Rye, 'Queen Elizabeth's Godchildren', *The Genealogist* (N.S.) 2 (1885), 262–5 counted 102 children whose christening expenses were recorded in the accounts of the Treasurer of the Chamber. My thanks to Dr Simon Healy for photographing the relevant records for me, now in E351/541-3 at The National Archives of the UK, Kew (TNA). Elaine Kruse, "'A Queens Matter in Early Modern Studies' (Basingstoke 2018), 181–98 suggests 114, perhaps counted from the Audit Office Rolls. Marion E. Colthorpe, 'The Elizabethan Court Day by Day' s.v. 'Court: Women at Court and the Royal Household', 81, (hereafter ECD8D), Folger Shakespeare Library [folgerpedia.folger.edu/The\\_Elizabethan\\_Court\\_Day\\_by\\_Day](http://folgerpedia.folger.edu/The_Elizabethan_Court_Day_by_Day), drawing upon a wider range of sources identifies 149, including 8 from before Elizabeth's accession as queen and foreign christenings not included in the household accounts.

<sup>4</sup> Amongst other names, see *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (ODNB), s.v. 'Gorges [née Snakenborg], Helena, Lady Gorges (other married name Helena Parr, Marchioness of Northampton) (1548–1635)' by Paul Harrington (Oxford 2004); for Helena, see also Charles Angell Bradford, *Helena, Marchioness of Northampton* (London 1936); Gunnar Sjögren, 'Helena, Marchioness of Northampton: A Swedish Lady at the Court of Elizabeth', *History Today* 28/9 (1978), 597–604.

<sup>5</sup> For entry points to histories of sexuality and gender identity focused on the years in which Elizabeth reigned and immediately after, see Valerie Traub, *Thinking Sex with the Early Moderns* (Philadelphia 2016) and esp. *The Renaissance of Lesbianism in Early Modern England* (Cambridge 2002), which dates the emergence of the 'ideology of normative heterosexuality' to the seventeenth century. Traub draws on Judith Bennett, *History Matters: Patriarchy and the Challenge of Feminism* (Philadelphia 2006), 108–27 at 110, for the 'lesbian-like': 'women whose lives might have particularly offered opportunities for same-sex love; women who resisted norms of feminine behavior based on heterosexual marriage; women who lived in circumstances that allowed them to nurture and support other women.'

spurred in part by John Bossy's social histories of the sacraments. Bossy saw the *compatrias* created at the baptismal font as an aspect of late medieval peacekeeping and community building, undermined over the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries by changing feelings about the family and the effects of the Reformation.<sup>10</sup>

Certainly, the religious conflagrations of the sixteenth century sparked changes. Protestants attacked the theological foundation of spiritual kinship but generally retained the practice of sponsorship. Indeed, they removed restrictions on the number of 'witnesses' to baptisms once they had stripped the ceremonies of their older sacramental dimensions as effective rituals that changed the participants, and deemed them instead signs and seals of God's grace. John Calvin criticized the traditions of godparenting more strongly than Martin Luther had done, but, save for the Anabaptists who renounced infant baptism altogether, most Protestants continued the practice. Catholic authorities at the Council of Trent endorsed the principle of spiritual kinship even while trying to regulate 'abuses': as well as criticizing families who sought rich and powerful *compatri*, they tried again to restrict the number of godparents and to mandate baptismal registers to reduce the risk of 'spiritual incest' and attendant scandals. Godparenting thus survived the Reformation, but thereafter travelled different and disputed trajectories in both Catholic and Protestant Europe, and sometimes served not so much to incorporate but to raise tensions in and between communities.<sup>11</sup>

In England, the theoretical nature of godparenting changed with the Reformation, though not as much as some of the ardently Calvinist members of the Church would have wished, and practices seem to have varied regionally. The incest prohibitions on marriage in a network created by baptism disappeared as early as the 1530s, weakening the notion of *spiritual* kinship, but ritual or fictive relatedness persisted. Some of Calvin's English adherents argued that godparents were unscriptural and superfluous, insisting either that none be named or at least that they serve merely as 'witnesses' to a simplified ceremony in which the birth parents assumed the central role. Save for a brief pause in the seventeenth-century revolution, though, the practice persisted in England, even as it slowly lost some of its significance. Writing of the

<sup>10</sup> For example, John Bossy, 'Blood and Baptism: Kinship, Community and Christianity in Western Europe from the Fourteenth to the Seventeenth Century', *Studies in Church History* 10 (1973), 129–45; id., 'Godparenthood: The Fortunes of a Social Institution in Early Modern Christianity', in Kaspar von Greyerz (ed.), *Religion and Society in Early Modern Europe* (London 1984), 194–201; and id., *Peace in The Post-Reformation* (Cambridge 1998).

<sup>11</sup> See Alfani 2009 for the Tridentine reforms and their effects; the Catholic Church rescinded its prohibition on marriages that crossed lines of godparenting in 1918. For the ability of post-Reformation baptismal rituals to divide, see, for example, Clodagh Tait, 'Spiritual Bonds, Social Bonds: Baptism and Godparenthood in Ireland, 1530–1690', *Cultural & Social History* 2/3 (2005), 301–27. For the later history in post-Reformation Sweden, see Solveig Fagerlund, 'Women and Men as Godparents in an Early Modern Swedish Town', *History of the Family* 5/3 (2000), 347–57.

seventeenth century, one historian suggests that the ties created at the font, 'though a useful strengthener of friendships, particularly influential ones, made little impact on everyday life.'<sup>12</sup> In his detailed study of regional practices as revealed in wills and baptismal registers, Will Coster broadly concurs, allowing that godparenting became a weak tie but arguing that it remained a mediating force in social relations.<sup>13</sup>

While the English did not have nearly as rich a culture of *compatrias* as the Italians even before the Reformation, let alone after, in the late sixteenth century Queen Elizabeth and members of her aristocracy still found the conventions of godparenthood useful to their own ends. Letters requesting that someone serve as godparent suggest that both the offer and the acceptance signified honour and respect. Lucy, Marchioness of Winchester, wrote to inform the queen's advisor, Sir Robert Cecil, of her safe delivery of a son: 'and being very desirous to have it made a Christian by some of my nearest and best friends, [I] am therefore earnestly to desire you to make me beholden unto you for being a godfather.'<sup>14</sup> Other letters invoke the relationship as a mark of friendship—and not incidentally show that the term 'gossip' had not yet lost its positive, gender-neutral connotations, *pax* claims to the contrary. When the Scottish Earl of Arran wrote to the English ambassador, William Davison, he addressed him as 'my lord and gossip'.<sup>15</sup> Davison in turn reported to his superiors that his position at the Scottish court had improved since the earl and his wife had asked to make him 'their gossip, since which time my company grows every day less contagious than others'.<sup>16</sup> When English diplomats Henry Killigrew and Thomas Randolph wrote to Davison, they asked to be remembered to his wife, their 'good gossip' or asked after the health of 'my gossip, your wife'.<sup>17</sup> In 1562, the queen's favourite, Sir Robert Dudley, soon to become Earl of Leicester, wrote that Lady Throckmorton had 'made me her gossip', wryly observing that he had named her son Nicholas as he 'would not have him Robert'.<sup>18</sup> When Mary Queen of Scots asked Elizabeth to preside at the christening of her son and Elizabeth talked of sending the Earl of Leicester,

<sup>12</sup> Alan Macfarlane, *The Family Life of Ralph Josselin, a Seventeenth-Century Clergyman: An Essay in Historical Anthropology* (Cambridge 1970), 145.

<sup>13</sup> Will Coster, *Baptism and Spiritual Kinship in Early Modern England* (London 2016). For the changing theology, liturgy, and practice of rites of passage surrounding birth and post-Reformation disputes over elements such as veils, vows, signing the cross, the nature and placement of the vessel (font versus basin), etc., see David Cressy, *Birth, Marriage, and Death: Ritual, Religion and the Life-Cycle in Tudor and Stuart England* (Oxford 1999), 97–230.

<sup>14</sup> *Calendar of the Manuscripts...Preserved at Hatfield House*, 26 vols. (London 1883), x, 42, the Marchioness of Winchester to Sir Robert Cecil, 23 Feb. 1599/1600.

<sup>15</sup> TNA, SP52/27, f. 31, the Earl of Arran to Thomas Randolph, 1578.

<sup>16</sup> TNA, SP52/35, f. 59, William Davison to Lord Burghley, 27 July 1584.

<sup>17</sup> TNA, SP83/2, f. 90, Henry Killigrew to William Davison, 23 Aug. 1577; TNA, SP83/5, f. 16, Thomas Randolph to William Davison, 29 Dec. 1577.

<sup>18</sup> TNA, SP70/38, f. 208, Sir Robert Dudley to William Cecil, June 1562.



the Earl of Morton wrote of the honour in having a man so well favoured 'to be gossip' to his queen.<sup>19</sup>

The letters of English ambassadors at foreign courts as well as those of domestic intelligencers frequently mention who stood sponsor at baptisms, for such ties served not only to solicit rewards, protection, and friendships in a community close at hand, but also to shore up diplomatic efforts and international connections across Europe. Louis Haas has described the use of baptismal kinship ceremonies among Italian Renaissance states, noting that even Florence, a republic, would stand as a collective godfather, represented by proctors, given the utility of such ties for foreign policy: in one instance, Florence and Milan made a pact after a representative of the commune became godfather to a child of the Visconti lord of Milan.<sup>20</sup> Like her lords and ministers and foreign counterparts, Queen Elizabeth also sought to tighten ties with others through godparenting.

Elizabeth became godmother in person or by proxy to at least twenty subjects of other sovereigns, some born in England and others not. She became, for example, godmother to Marie Elisabeth, daughter of the French King Charles IX; Elizabeth Ferrières, daughter of the French Huguenot leader, the Vidame de Chartres; five children of French ambassadors, including at least two given her name; Elizabeth, daughter of William, Prince of Orange; Elizabeth, daughter of Landgrave William IV of Hesse; and Elizabeth, daughter of Landgrave Moritz of Hesse-Cassel.<sup>21</sup> In each case, of course, it was the relationship between the parents that mattered most. Her ties across England's northern border included not just Scottish lords such as the Duke of Hamilton, but also, and most significantly, Scottish sovereigns. Elizabeth was godmother to Queen Mary's son James and then in turn to his two eldest children. Notably, King James had those children named for Elizabeth's father, Henry, and for herself, with James presumably intending thereby to strengthen ties with the woman he hoped to succeed.<sup>22</sup>

Vying for significance with the French, German, and Scottish connections were Elizabeth's baptismal ties with Swedish parents and their children. Two of Elizabeth's first baptisms as queen were for children of the Swedish ambassador, Dionysius Beurresus, in 1559 and 1560, in the midst of negotiations to secure her marriage with King Erik XIV. Erik's brother, John, had arrived in 1559 to press the suit—and on his visit became godfather to a

<sup>19</sup> TNA, SP 52/12, f. 64, the Earl of Morton to the Earl of Bedford, 24 May 1566.  
<sup>20</sup> Haas 1995, 346.

<sup>21</sup> ECDbbd, 'Court: Women at Court: Royal Household', 82–4, 90. Though I have checked original sources where possible, I am indebted to Colthorpe's compendious catalogue for much of the reconstruction of the activities at Elizabeth's court.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 82, 84; Kruse 2018, 192, 196. For an account of one set of baptismal ceremonies, see June Schlueter, 'Celebrating Queen Elizabeth's German Godchild: The Documentary Record', *Medieval & Renaissance Drama in England* 13 (2001), 57–81.

son of Thomas Chamberlain, former English ambassador to Sweden—but to no avail.<sup>23</sup> Elizabeth had already responded to an earlier overture from Erik with an affirmation of her desire to remain unmarried: 'I so well like of this estate as I persuade unto myself there is not any kind comparable to it.'<sup>24</sup> Her resolve unchanged, she might well have agreed to godmother the ambassador's children—and to send generous baptismal gifts—as part of her attempt to maintain amicable relations with the Swedes even while declining marriage.

Elizabeth found new opportunities to craft ties with Sweden, and also perhaps personal friendships, when Erik's sister Cecilia arrived in September 1565. It seems that Cecilia did not come to revive her brother's suit but to build her own relationship. Seven years younger than Elizabeth, Cecilia had become fascinated by the unmarried queen regnant after hearing her brother John's reports of his embassy. Already well educated in several languages, Cecilia started to learn English, an unusual choice for anyone outside England at that time. She had sent letters in 1562 and again in January of 1563, telling Elizabeth 'the things which I have always desired': to honour the queen as a mother, sister, and mistress. She asked Elizabeth to write to Erik to seek his licence for her to leave. She complained that he had once already tried to make her marry against her will and now was trying again, to which 'I will in no wise consent nor agree unto but will rather serve your grace and continue unmarried until God doth otherwise appoint.'<sup>25</sup> In March the queen responded to this sad letter and its plea to attend upon her as 'a daughter, a sister, or servant', observing that should Cecilia come, 'you shall find in us a disposition towards you more like a good friend or sister than like a mistress.'<sup>26</sup> Elizabeth sent a ruby; Cecilia sent a ring. In March the queen said she could not for various reasons ask Erik a favour at that time, but when she did, he delayed. In November 1564 he wrote to Elizabeth to excuse his belated reply and to observe that Cecilia would not be able to visit after all: he had given her in marriage to Christopher,

<sup>23</sup> On 27 October 1559, Duke John (later John III of Sweden) accompanied Sir Robert Dudley and Elizabeth Brooke, Marchioness of Northampton and a member of the queen's privy chamber, as the godparents for the infant, named John: *The Diary of Henry Maadbyg*, ed. John Gough Nichols (London 1848), 216, cited in ECDbbd, '1559', 73. Near the end of her reign, Duke Karl, later Karl IX, seems to have named Elizabeth godmother for his son born in May 1601 in Tallinn: *Calendar of the Manuscripts... Preserved at Hatfield House*, xi, 264, xii, 233, cited in ECDbbd, 'Court: Women at Court: Royal Household', 84.

<sup>24</sup> British Library, London (BL), Harley MS 444, f. 29v, Elizabeth's Answer to Sir Thomas Pope, 26 Apr. 1557.

<sup>25</sup> TNA, SP70/49, f. 37, Princess Cecilia to Queen Elizabeth, 18 Jan. 1563. While the Spanish ambassador briefly thought that Cecilia planned to visit to further her brother's marriage suit, a view repeated in accounts that mention the visit in passing, the correspondence suggests otherwise, a verdict endorsed by Nathan Martin, 'Princess Cecilia's Visitation to England, 1565–1566', in Charles Beem (ed.), *The Foreign Relations of Elizabeth I* (Basingstoke 2011), 27–44.

<sup>26</sup> TNA, SP70/52, f. 135, Queen Elizabeth to the Princess Cecilia, 16 Mar. 1563.

Margrave of Baden.<sup>27</sup> Later that same month, however, he relented. Cecilia seems to have secured from her groom a promise that he would support her request to travel to England.

Cecilia, her new husband, and their entourage set off on a fraught journey in the final weeks of 1564. At Cecilia's behest, a contemporary wrote a narrative of her party's 'tollsome progress' to affirm her affection for Elizabeth: storm-tossed at sea, beset by war and bad weather, the Swedes did much of the journey by sled over icy terrain.<sup>28</sup> Finally, on 9 September 1565, they reached the English coast. Elizabeth had ordered Bedford House prepared for their use in London, where she met them on 14 September. The two women embraced but had little time to celebrate, as Cecilia gave birth to a son the next day.

Elizabeth visited shortly after the delivery and agreed to be Cecilia's godmother. The elaborate christening ceremony began early on the morning of 30 September. Decked with tapestries and candles of a size and number that impressed the contemporary chronicler, the queen's Chapel hosted a grand company—in one of the only two christenings to be held in this special space in the whole reign. Several people needed to carry the child, 'for that it was very heavy by reason of the jewels and costly attire'. When asked for a name, Elizabeth christened the infant Edwardus Fortunatus, the first for her brother and the second for the good fortune that had brought the baby and his mother safely through their travels. The ceremony done, she and the 'other two gossips'—the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Duke of Norfolk, the highest-ranking members of the English clergy and nobility—then bestowed their gifts. Elizabeth offered an entire cupboard of plate; the archbishop gave a covered standing cup of double gilt; and the duke a gold cup valued at £100. Elizabeth continued to visit, 'each second day'.<sup>29</sup> Two weeks after the christening, on 14 October, the queen joined Cecilia at Bedford House to celebrate her 'churching day', a thanksgiving for her safe delivery. This segued quickly into the two women attending jousts and tournaments to mark the marriage of Anne Russell, another of the queen's confidants. They later celebrated Christmas together.<sup>30</sup> In between, Cecilia became godmother to the son of Frances, Lady Colham, the lady of Elizabeth's bedchamber who had welcomed the princess upon her arrival (and who already had Elizabeth as godmother to another child).<sup>31</sup> Elizabeth promised Cecilia's husband an annual pension of 2000 crowns for as long as he allowed his wife to stay in England; the warrant

<sup>27</sup> TNA, SP70/57, f. 75; Princess Cecilia to Queen Elizabeth, 22 May 1563; TNA, SP70/75, f. 90, Erik XIV to Queen Elizabeth, 24 Nov. 1564.

<sup>28</sup> James Bell, 'A Narrative of the Journey of Cecilia, Princess of Sweden, to the Court of Queen Elizabeth', ed. Margaret Morrison, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 12 (1898), 181–224.

<sup>29</sup> Bradford 1936, 48 quoting an undated letter sent by Helena Snakenborg to her mother.

<sup>30</sup> For detailed contemporary accounts, see *Journals Lalandi antiquarii de rebus britannicis collectanea*, ed. Thomas Hearne, 6 vols. (London 1770), ii, 666–9, 691–4, quotes at 693, 694.

<sup>31</sup> *Collectanea topographica et genealogica*, ed. John Gough Nichols, 8 vols. (London 1834–43), viii, 353, cited in ECDobd, '1565', 52.

referred to the 'marvelous love' that had brought the two women into 'loving familiarity', noting that Cecilia 'hath enriched our realm with a fine son whom we have also, by our assistance, brought into the society of the Church through baptism'.<sup>32</sup>

The friendly feelings soon faded, though. Despite the gifts, Cecilia and her entourage incurred ever-higher debts. Her creditors petitioned the Privy Council, hounded her at Bedford House, and hissed at her in the streets. Her husband had returned to the continent for much of her visit; when he came back, he was briefly arrested for debt. Insulted by such behaviour from tradesmen, Cecilia demanded help from the queen but never got quite what she wanted or needed. In March 1566 she asked Elizabeth to remember 'our love towards you, and that we came into this kingdom for no other reason than to declare the same'.<sup>33</sup> When Cecilia became mixed up with Cornelius de Lannoy, a Dutch alchemist brought to London on promises to make gold for the queen, Elizabeth's patience wore thin, too.<sup>34</sup> At the end of April 1566, Cecilia and much of her company left, probably to the relief of most everyone save the creditors.

This baptismal bond proved weak, then, but led in turn to another, stronger and longer-lasting relationship. One of Cecilia's maids of honour remained behind: Elin Ulfsdotter, to be known for a time by the anglicized 'Ellen Wolf' or 'Helena Woulphe'.<sup>35</sup> Aged 15 or 16, she had caught several eyes at the christenings, including those of the 52-year-old William Parr, Marquess of Northampton, the second-ranking nobleman in the realm and brother of Elizabeth's last stepmother, Queen Katherine Parr. Northampton sent Helena and Cecilia gifts and asked for Helena's hand in marriage. Helena's letters home indicate her avid acceptance and Cecilia's eventual agreement. Helena wrote that Northampton and his family treated her with great respect, 'as his daughter', and that the Marquess 'has been both father and mother to me'.<sup>36</sup> But someone else stepped in to treat Helena as her 'daughter': the queen herself. Northampton had a fraught marital history. He had secured what is often deemed the only parliamentary divorce with permission to remarry in sixteenth-century England, having left his first wife, Anne Bouchier, to marry Elizabeth Brooke.<sup>37</sup> The second wife became one of Queen Elizabeth's closest companions but died of cancer in April 1565, shortly before the Swedish

<sup>32</sup> Preamble to a patent granted by Queen Elizabeth to the Margrave of Baden for a pension (23 Nov. 1565), printed in Bell 1898, 213–14.

<sup>33</sup> Cecilia to Elizabeth, 19 Mar. 1566, printed in Bell 1898, 215.

<sup>34</sup> Anna Whitelock, *The Queen's Bed: An Intimate History of Elizabeth's Court* (London 2013), 111–13.

<sup>35</sup> Jane A. Lawson (ed.), *The Elizabethan New Year's Gift Exchanges, 1559–1603* (Oxford 2013), 140, 147, 158, 166. For Cecilia's women and women at the Swedish court more generally, see Fabian Persson, *Women at the Early Modern Swedish Court: Power, Risk, and Opportunity* (Amsterdam 2021).

<sup>36</sup> Bradford 1936, 52, 54. Bradford includes translations of the letters, which were seized by Danish privateers and are now in the national archives in Copenhagen.

<sup>37</sup> See ODNB, s.v. 'Parr, William, marquess of Northampton (1513–1571)' by Susan E. James.

company arrived.<sup>38</sup> The first wife still lived, though, and as the legality of Northampton's remarriage remained in doubt, Queen Elizabeth counselled against the match for the time being. Instead, Elizabeth took Helena into her own household, making her a maid of honour and then a lady of her privy chamber.

For the next six years, like other ladies of the privy chamber, Helena occupied a position of unusual intimacy with the queen. Women appointed to the privy chamber—the queen's bedroom and personal dayroom—worked in a space both private and political. As the intimate body servants of the queen, they entertained and advised her, cared for her health and security, tended to her wardrobe and papers, and sometimes acted as messengers or helped to control access to the queen's person by privy councillors, courtiers, ambassadors, and the like. In an age of personal monarchy when some people saw the monarch's body as sacred, they shared in something of the 'charisma of royal authority' and served sometimes as surrogates for the sovereign.<sup>39</sup> Few and hard fought for, chamber appointments usually went to wives or daughters of important men to reward or invoke loyalty or to women in the overlapping circle of Elizabeth's blood kin from her mother's side. As Charlotte Merton has noted, 'only one woman broke all these norms': Helena, who 'was foreign and did not have any family ties in England whatsoever'.<sup>40</sup> Work in recent years has valuably retrieved the political roles of women who served in the privy chamber as patrons and brokers—advancing some petitions but not others, for example—but we ought not to forget that the women were, first and foremost, members of the queen's *familia*.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>38</sup> See Helen Graham-Matheson, 'Petticoats and Politics: Elisabeth Parr and Female Agency at the Early Elizabethan Court', in Nadine Akkerman & Bugit Houben (eds.), *The Politics of Female Households: Ladies-in-Waiting Across Early Modern Europe* (Leiden 2014), 31–50.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>40</sup> Charlotte Isabelle Merton, 'The Women Who Served Queen Mary and Queen Elizabeth: Ladies, Gentlewomen and Maids of the Privy Chamber, 1553–1603' (PhD diss., Cambridge University 1992), 45.

<sup>41</sup> Pam Wright, 'A Change in Direction: The Ramifications of a Female Household, 1558–1603', in David Starkey et al. (eds.), *The English Court: From the Wars of the Roses to the Civil War* (London 1987), 147–72, one of the first to engage seriously with the Elizabethan privy chamber, depicted the household staff as *familia* but suggested that they played little political role compared to the chamber servants of Henry VIII. More recent work has capably reversed the latter verdict, putting the Elizabethan privy chamber alongside its predecessors and successors back alongside privy council and parliament as political venues. See Merton 1992; Natalie Mears, 'Politics in the Elizabethan Privy Chamber: Lady Mary Sidney and Kat Ashley', in James Daybell (ed.), *Women and Politics in Early Modern England, 1450–1700* (Aldershot 2004), 67–82; Catherine Howey, 'Busy Bodies: Women, Power and Politics at the Court of Elizabeth I, 1558–1603' (PhD diss., Rutgers University 2007); Whitlock 2013. Work by Barbara J. Harris has been foundational to this revision: 'Women and Politics in Early Tudor England', *Historical Journal* 33/2 (1990), 259–81. For a useful survey of women in early modern European courts more generally, see Akkerman & Houben 2014, 'Introduction' and Persson 2021, 'Introduction'.

Elizabeth and Helena's intimacy was only briefly interrupted by the latter's eventual marriages. In January 1571 Northampton's first wife died. On 29 May, Queen Elizabeth hosted the wedding of her companion and her step-uncle in her Closet, in one of only three weddings to be held in this privileged royal space in Elizabeth's reign.<sup>42</sup> One observer commented on the gout-ridden Northampton and his beautiful bride, saying that 'ere long I fear he will be dead at her side'.<sup>43</sup> So it proved. In October, the Marquess died and Helena returned to live with the queen, now as a financially secure widow with one of the highest titles in the land.<sup>44</sup> Passing references mention the 'Lady Marquess' accompanying Elizabeth on progresses and dining at her table. The women exchanged New Year's gifts—in January 1573, for example, Helena gave Elizabeth 'one jewel of mother of pearl, being Cupido without legs and arms'.<sup>45</sup> Despite her notorious parsimony, Elizabeth endowed Helena with additional estates to ensure her an income beyond what she had received from Northampton. Helena also became close, though, with another member of the queen's household, one of the grooms of the privy chamber, Thomas Gorges. The queen reacted angrily when she learned in October 1576 that the two had married secretly, as she did when other ladies of her chamber married without permission—an anger sometimes imputed to 'her notorious sexual jealousy' but which might as easily be attributed to a regal temperament not well-disposed to independent action from the women she considered her charges, or, perhaps, to a jealousy not directed in quite the ways usually imagined.<sup>46</sup> Elizabeth exiled the couple from court and had Thomas briefly imprisoned, but relented upon Helena's plea for forgiveness.<sup>47</sup> Both resumed their places in the queen's privy chamber, thereafter dividing their time between their own estates and Elizabeth's household. In August 1578, Elizabeth marked Helena's return to favour by becoming godmother to her first child, Elizabeth Gorges.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>42</sup> A point made by Merton 1992, 128, drawing on *The Old Chaucer-Book or Book of Remembrance of the Chapel Royal from 1561 to 1744*, ed. Edward F. Rimbault (London 1872), 160.

<sup>43</sup> *The Manuscripts of His Grace the Duke of Rutland*, ed. H. C. Maxwell Lyte et al., 4 vols. (London 1888), i, 92, George Delves to the Earl of Rutland, 14 May 1571, cited in ECD6D, 1571, 25.

<sup>44</sup> Marquesses were rare in the English nobility; Henry VIII created the first to elevate the status of Elizabeth's mother, Anne Boleyn, in preparation for their marriage and bestowed the second on William Parr when courting his sister Katherine.

<sup>45</sup> John Gough Nichols (ed.), *The Progresses and Public Processions of Queen Elizabeth*, 2 vols. (London 1823), i, 323.

<sup>46</sup> Quote from Harrington, *ODNB*, s.v. 'Gorges, Helena'. Allowing exceptions for the queen's responses to the 'secret marriage of Court women with the Earl of Leicester', Merton 1992, 136–9 grounds the queen's responses to other unlicensed marriages amongst her ladies in her responsibilities as head of a *familia*; see also *ibid.* 129, Frances Howard's report of the queen's 'great persuasions' against her proposed marriage, noting 'how well I was here and how much she cared for me'.

<sup>47</sup> Helena's letter to the Earl of Sussex, the queen's chamberlain, printed in Bradford 1936, 66–7.

<sup>48</sup> TNA, E351/541 (Exchequer: Treasurer of the Chamber), m. 214.



Queen Elizabeth bound herself as 'gossip' not just to other sovereigns and their representatives, but also to a good many of her own subjects. In a few cases, she seems to have done so for people of modest backgrounds—ones wishes to know the story behind her becoming godmother to Thomas Atkinson the scrivener's child'.<sup>49</sup> She became godmother to one young adult woman in her court, 'our dear and well-beloved...Ipolita the Tartarian', whom Anthony Jenkinson had bought as a slave on his expedition to Muscovy and presented to the queen.<sup>50</sup> Some of her godchildren were the offspring of regional powerholders, not least the children of Irish lords such as Thomas Butler, Earl of Ormond, and Henry Fitzgerald, Earl of Kildare. Many of the baptisms were for members of her family on her mother's side, and, in an overlapping circle, many were for the children of courtiers and ladies of her household.<sup>51</sup> In each case she gave money to the midwife and nurse, gifts to the family, and a name to the infant. Of the 56 girls whose names can be firmly identified, Elizabeth gave 44 her own name. (From December of 1562 she seems to have had a bit of a classical phase, though, naming the next four children Philadelphia, Penelope, Theophila, and Atalanta.) The boys' names varied, with many Williams, Henrys, and a perhaps not insignificant number of Roberts. In some cases, at least, she gave a family name—for example, Algernon, son of Henry Percy, Earl of Northumberland—but whether at her behest or the families', a good many young women in her reign came to carry her own name as a lasting token of the bond forged at the baptismal font.<sup>52</sup>

Helena was not all that unusual, then, in being marked out for favour by having the queen as godmother to her child, but she also entered a distinctive relationship with Elizabeth through the baptismal ceremony in another way: she sometimes served as her proxy. Within months of her own daughter's christening, Helena became the queen's deputy at the baptism of a child of George, Lord Audley and his wife Lucy (née Mervyn, a daughter of two members of the queen's household).<sup>53</sup> Having the queen do the honours clearly showed special favour—her chief minister, William Cecil, was delighted when the queen personally christened his daughter Elizabeth in 1564—but a deputy of the queen still carried a certain prestige.<sup>54</sup> When Elizabeth had asked the Countess of Argyle to stand in her stead at the christening of Queen Mary of

<sup>49</sup> TNA, E351/541, m. 37d.

<sup>50</sup> ECDbD, '1561', 22. The young woman was also called 'Aura Soltana', in some accounts; Kruse 2018, 190; Howey 2007, 40–2.

<sup>51</sup> Kruse 2018, 187–9.

<sup>52</sup> Listing as per ECDbD, 'Court: Women at Court: Royal Household', 81–4. For Algernon Percy's baptism, for which Helena acted as the queen's deputy, see also TNA, SP12/285, f. 59d, John Chamberlain to Dudley Carleton, 14 Oct. 1602.

<sup>53</sup> TNA, E351/541, m. 224d. Bradford mentions this Feb. 1578/9 baptism but misdates it to 1578, before the christening of Helena's baby, rather than the year following. The daughter was christened Maria, presumably because the couple already had an Elizabeth.

<sup>54</sup> Nichols 1823, i. 149.

Scotland's son James in 1566, she noted her regret that she could not travel north to 'make demonstration of our sisterly affection toward our good sister', but said that 'we have made a special choice of you before all others for many good respects, to hold our place and in our name and for us to do all those things that shall belong to the part of a godmother'.<sup>55</sup> When Elizabeth sent the Earl of Sussex to be her proxy at the baptism of King James's son Henry in 1594, she admonished him to discharge his duties with full 'remembrance of the person who you shall represent, together with care for your own honor and commendation'.<sup>56</sup> A queen's deputy partook in something of her qualities. Contemporaries saw it as a privilege to serve in such a role or to receive a person so endowed. That said, the financial accounts from which we glean most of our information about the queen's godmothering often just mention the charges incurred by the grooms who delivered rewards to the nurses and midwives or who accompanied 'her Grace's Deputies', without naming the latter. Even so, at least five entries in the surviving accounts specify that 'the Lady Marquess' served as royal proxy, more often than any of the other ten women named.<sup>57</sup>

Helena continued to spend much of her time at Elizabeth's court despite her remarriage. Not all of it, of course: she had several more children—eight, in total—and she took charge of rebuilding work at her Longford estate, ordering a remarkable triangular construction said to symbolize the Trinity and in which she included a special suite for any visits the queen might make.<sup>58</sup> Whether Elizabeth visited Longford is unknown, but she did dine with Helena at the property at Sheen she had given her, near at hand to the queen's Richmond Palace.<sup>59</sup> Elizabeth sent Helena's husband on repeated expeditions of special trust, not least as ambassador to Sweden in 1582; in his absences, as at other times, Helena rejoined the queen.<sup>60</sup> A letter from court in 1590 mentions the two women tending together one of the queen's godchildren, the 6-year-old Alethea Talbot, with what the letter writer deemed surprisingly affectionate playfulness ('which her Majesty seldom useth to any').<sup>61</sup> Helena was listed as bearing the queen's train at the opening of parliaments, accompanying her on the 1592 visit to Oxford, dancing at various court festivities, and attending the queen's New Year's celebrations.<sup>62</sup> Edmund Spenser referenced Helena in one of his works, in which 'Cynthia' stands in for Elizabeth: 'Best known by bearing

<sup>55</sup> TNA, SP 52/12, f. 110, the Queen to the Countess of Argyle, 31 Oct. 1566.

<sup>56</sup> BL, Cotton MS Caligula D.2, f. 181, Memorial for the Earl of Sussex, Aug. 1594.

<sup>57</sup> TNA, E351/541, r. 224d; TNA, E351/543, r. 17d, 98d, 99. The other most frequent proxy seems to have been Anne (Russell) Dudley, Countess of Warwick.

<sup>58</sup> Bradford 1936, 73, 78; see also Sjögren 1978, 601.

<sup>59</sup> ECDbD, 'Court: Women at Court: Royal Household', 31.

<sup>60</sup> Bradford 1936, 80–5. She knighted him and made him Gentleman of the Robes in 1586, too.

<sup>61</sup> *Illustrations of British History*, ed. Edmund Lodge, 3 vols. (London 1791), i. 13, Richard Brackenbury to Lord Talbot, 20 Nov. 1590, quoted in Bradford 1936, 112.

<sup>62</sup> ECDbD, 'Court: Women at Court: Royal Household', 31.



up great Cynthia's train | ... The pattern of true womanhood | And only mirror of femininity | Worthy after Cynthia to tread | as she is next her in nobility.<sup>63</sup> In 1596, the queen wrote to the father of a prospective groom for Helena's second daughter, who seemed to think the proffered marriage portion too small; Elizabeth noted that while she did not usually interfere in such matters, she thought he might keep in mind just how highly she esteemed the girl's parents, noting 'the long and faithful service of the gentleman and the nearness unto us of the Lady Marquess his wife, a lady of our privy chamber well favored by us.'<sup>64</sup> In October 1602, Helena served as Elizabeth's proxy at the grand christening of the French ambassador's daughter: 'she, with the other gossips [the Countess of Worcester and the Lord Admiral], attended on by many ladies and courtiers, rode thither with great state and pomp.' On the queen's behalf, she named the child Elisabeth.<sup>65</sup>

Not long after, in April 1603, Helena performed her final service for the queen, as mourner-in-chief at her funeral. Helena's place in the procession arose largely from her status as senior marchioness, but as she had cared for Elizabeth on her deathbed—along with two other women, also bound to the queen through baptismal rituals—she likely did not see it as a mere formality.<sup>66</sup> Helena may have attended the coronation of King James, but thereafter retired from court. At her own death in 1635, her son had an elaborate monument built for his parents in Salisbury cathedral that also memorialized Helena's relationship with the late queen: the inscription recorded that Elizabeth had chosen the young Helena to serve among the 'ministers of her sacred body in her private bedchamber', pleased by her 'virtue and beauty'.<sup>67</sup>

60

Can we call the relationships between Elizabeth and her Swedish gossips *friendship*? Much lay in a name, of course—as the christenings remind us, and so too Protestants' disputes over whether the people who raised the infant from the font should be called godparents or witnesses or something else. One might hesitate over the differences of rank and power that can complicate genuine friendship or the contemporary notions that reserved real friendships

for men. While colloquial usage ranged more broadly, the elite discourse of friendship in the sixteenth century was gendered male, rooted in the classical *amicitia* of free and disinterested communion and respected for its links with civic virtue.<sup>68</sup> 'Gossip', in contrast, was coming to be gendered female and denigrated, increasingly associated with the supposedly idle, disruptive talk of women who gathered at childbeds and christenings.<sup>69</sup> But not wholly, not yet. 'Gossiping' in these years still valorized relationships between both women and men, relationships within and that crossed gender lines. It did so not with the language of friendship, though, but *kinship*. Given the wider, everyday usage of the term 'friendship' at the time, yes, we might justifiably retrieve this word from the enclosing writings of early modern male authors, but we should pause to collect the familial label, too.

Godparenting evidently served to knit connections diplomatic, political, and personal through ceremony and ritual, even in Protestant England. A weakening tie, perhaps, but it remained a tie nonetheless; one woven from strands spiritual and familial and capable of holding together both instrumental and affective aspects of personal relationships. Elizabeth, Cecilia, and Helena left nothing like the letters exchanged between King James and George Villiers, the favourite for whose son James became godfather, in which both invoked their relationship forged at the font amongst their familial terms of endearment: James signed letters addressed to his 'sweet child and wife' as 'thy dear dad and Christian gossip', while Villiers responded to his 'dear dad and gossip'.<sup>70</sup> We cannot know quite what meaning the never-married Elizabeth and her Swedish gossips found in their own baptismal ties, but the ritual bonds they crafted should at least serve as a reminder that, for women as for men, in the past—as now again in the present—not all kinship came from blood or marriage alone.

<sup>63</sup> Quoted in Bradford 1936, 178.

<sup>64</sup> TNA, SP12/260, ff. 34–35v, the Queen to Mr Griffin, 26 Sept. 1596.

<sup>65</sup> *Records of the English Province of the Society of Jesus*, ed. Henry Foley, 7 vols. (London 1875–83), i, 50, Father Rivers to Robert Parsons, 1602, cited in ECDbD, '1602', 51.

<sup>66</sup> Arabella Stuart, the highest-ranking noblewoman at the time, refused; heralds denied claims made by or on behalf of the Marchioness of Winchester: Bradford 1936, 177. Also at the deathbed: Anne (Russell) Dudley, Countess of Warwick, who had no children of her own but had also served as Elizabeth's proxy at baptisms, and Philadelphia (Carey) Scrope, a goddaughter to whose child in turn the queen was godmother.

<sup>67</sup> Howey 2007, 259–60, n. 82: 'Hic sita sunt ossa Hellene Schnachenberg/Swedanae quae Dornina Caeciliam filiam [sic]/Erici Regis Suetiae in hoc regnum comitata/propter venustatem pudicitiamque qua/clari grata Reginae Elizabethae per eam/inter Honorarias Ministras sacrae suae/personae intimo cubillo attendentes assita/tuit et locata.'

<sup>68</sup> See, for example, the introduction to Christina Luckyj & Niamh J. O'Leary (eds.), *The Politics of Female Alliance in Early Modern England* (Lincoln, NE, 2017).

<sup>69</sup> See, for example, Megan Inbody, 'The Political Role of the Gossip in *Suzannah the Woman-Hater, Arraigned by Women*', in Luckyj and O'Leary 2017, 48–67. Though 'gossip' was initially gender neutral, a similar shift in meaning over time might be heard in the French *commérage* Bossy 1973, 197.

<sup>70</sup> Mentioned in Bray 2003, 111–12; for examples, see King James and *Letters of Homosexual Desire*, ed. David Bergeron (Iowa City 1999), 150, 162, 173, 175, 186, 205.