

The Widowhood of Alice Spencer, Countess Dowager of Derby, 1594–1636¹

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The date and location of Alice Spencer's birth are unknown and next to nothing is known of her childhood, yet she became one of the leading figures of late Tudor and early Stuart society. For the modern historian, the details of her married life—and more particularly her widowhood, remarriage to Sir Thomas Egerton, and second widowhood from 1617—are better documented than her earlier years. Alice Spencer's concerns were the same as those of other aristocratic widows of the time. She was interested in estate management, land transfer through the generations, finding marriage partners for her daughters, and the education of children; she was also a source of preferment and patronage. The two contemporary stereotypes of women in her position, as described by Sir Thomas Overbury in his book *A wife* (published in 1614)—the 'virtuous widow' who shunned remarriage for the benefit of her children and the honour of her late husband's family, and the 'ordinary widow' who took pride in entertaining a vast array of suitors and remarried for selfish financial gain—did not apply to her.²

Although Alice married the future earl of Derby, Ferdinando Stanley, in 1579, she was not herself the daughter of a peer. A writer

¹ I would like to thank Dr Tim Thornton for his advice during the preparation of this paper.

² For some sixteenth- and seventeenth-century attitudes towards widowhood see, for example, N. H. Keeble, *The cultural identity of seventeenth-century woman* (London, 1994), pp. 252–4; K. Aughterson, *Renaissance woman: a sourcebook* (London, 1995), pp. 61–2, 73–4, 175–7, 225–6, 279.

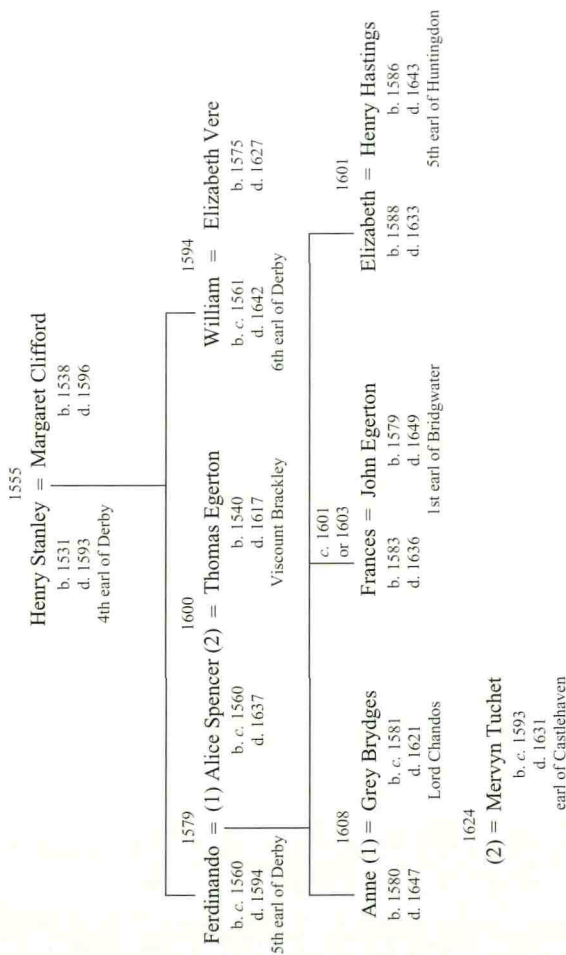


FIGURE 1 The family of Alice Spencer

identified only as 'R.F.' described her as 'the daughter of a mean knight', but her father Sir John Spencer was not as lowly a person as this description suggests.³ The Spencers were a prominent family in Northamptonshire and had acquired vast wealth, so that Alice Spencer's early life was probably not drastically different from that of more highly-born contemporaries. The fact that Alice and her two sisters, Elizabeth and Anne, were able to catch husbands as high up the social scale as Lords Strange, Hunsdon, and Monteagle (all three of whom were from families with influence in the North of England), demonstrates that at least the younger members of the Spencer family were moving in noble circles. Unfortunately, as Mary Finch has discovered, records of the financial provision made for the marriages of the Spencer sisters survive for only one of them, Margaret, who received a portion of £1,000 in order to marry Giles Alington.⁴ We may presume that as Alice married a man much further up the social ladder, she commanded a higher portion than her elder sister. 'R.F.' also wrote that the earl of Leicester was a major influence behind the Stanley-Spencer marriage. As Leicester was also deeply involved with the marriage of George Clifford, earl of Cumberland, to Lady Margaret Russell (a daughter of the Puritan earl of Bedford) two years earlier in 1577, it is tempting to view Alice and Ferdinando's union as part of a bolstering of Protestantism in the North of England in the years after the 1569 rebellion.

Three daughters were born to Alice and her husband: Anne in 1580, Frances in 1583, and Elizabeth in 1588 (Fig. 1). There was no male child to inherit any of the Stanley lands or titles, but instead three girls who needed financial provision as they grew older, in particular money for marriage portions. When Earl Ferdinando succeeded his father in 1593, the male heir to the extensive Stanley properties in Lancashire and Cheshire was his brother William.

The premature death of her husband on 16 April 1594 heralded the start of legal difficulties for Countess Alice. Rumours that Earl Ferdinando was poisoned have been neither proved nor disproved.⁵ It was common for such hearsay to accompany sudden deaths, but in this case it was evidently accompanied by some attempt in the

³ *Calendar of state papers, domestic: addenda (1580-1625)*, ed. Mary A. E. Green (London, 1872) [hereafter C.S.P.D.], p. 138.

⁴ Mary Finch, 'The wealth of five Northamptonshire families, 1540-1640', *Northamptonshire Record Society*, XIX (1956), pp. 59-60.

⁵ D.N.B.

highest legal and governmental circles at an enquiry into the earl's demise. Sir George Carey wrote to Sir Thomas Heneage (the vice-chamberlain) and Sir Robert Cecil on 28 April that,

I find . . . greater presumptions that the Earl of Derby was 'bewitched' than poisoned. A vehement suspicion may also be gathered by a letter found by chance, that the younger brother of Dowtie, this lord's secretary . . . can discover much of this matter, . . . therefore I beseech you to direct your warrant to me or any of my officers for the apprehending of the said Dowtie now in London, that on his apprehension he may be brought before the Master of the Rolls [Sir Thomas Egerton] and me.⁶

Egerton himself had already written to Heneage, on 22 April 1594 (only six days after the earl's death), to say that he had spoken to some of the late earl's servants, 'and find that those five names in the paper enclosed I have specially marked are fittest to be employed in the present service intended'. The nature of that service is unstated. Egerton continued, 'they shall . . . devise new questions . . . against all persons whom they shall see in any way touched by proof or probability'.⁷ No suggestion was made of a Catholic plot, but if the earl had indeed been poisoned, Countess Alice and her daughters may have been at risk too. The earl's state of mind when he made his will, five days before his death, is uncertain, an important point in light of the dispute which shortly broke out between his widow and his brother.

We know neither how much Sir John Spencer had paid as Alice's marriage portion, nor what Alice expected in return when the marriage settlement was brokered in 1579. Under the terms of Earl Ferdinando's will, however, the Stanley estates were to be held in trust for her, descending after her death to their eldest daughter Anne. Ferdinando's brother and successor, Earl William, nevertheless believed that he was entitled to the bulk of the family estates, to descend with the title to the earldom, and the two interested parties soon came to loggerheads over possession of the inheritance.

Barry Coward has indicated the complicated state of English land law at the time and has given a narrative of the dispute.⁸ As he points out, Alice was not the only influential Northern dowager

⁶ Hist. MSS Com., *Salisbury manuscripts* (24 vols, London, 1883-1976) [hereafter *Salisbury MSS*], IV, p. 517.

⁷ *Ibid.* p. 515.

⁸ Barry Coward, *The Stanleys, Lords Stanley and earls of Derby, 1385-1672*, C.S. 3rd ser. XXX (1983), pp. 41-55.

countess who campaigned through the law courts in London during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries on a daughter's behalf. Between 1605 and 1616 Margaret Russell, countess of Cumberland, questioned the inheritance of her brother-in-law, Earl Francis, on behalf of Lady Anne Clifford. In 1587 Isabella Holcroft, countess of Rutland, initiated a lengthy legal saga when she challenged her husband's will in order that her daughter could claim the barony of Ros. And although in 1616 the three daughters of the earl of Shrewsbury had to rely upon their husbands' influence during their legal difficulties, since their mother was imprisoned in the Tower of London, the dowager countess would probably have assisted them had she been able. Coward attributes this situation to the courts' confused interpretation of the land law, and to the dichotomy between the collateral descent of peerage titles and the right of daughters to inherit estates from their fathers. Another factor may be that in this period noble widows were more numerous, more assertive, better educated, and more readily able to find allies within the legal profession than their predecessors had been.

Countess Alice was thus one among several articulate and determined dowagers who sought to uphold the rights of their daughters on the basis of legal argument. These ladies did not necessarily believe that they were acting in a radical way in challenging their husband's dynastic settlements (though in some cases that is how their behaviour could be interpreted), and indeed Countess Alice was fighting to uphold her husband's will, not to protest against it, as the others were. At no time did any of them challenge the right of the new earl to accede to the peerage title. They were able to argue their cases on the basis of how land had formerly descended by employing previous settlements restricting the transfer of land and titles to specific descendants. By attempting to claim land for daughters in the absence of sons, however, they seemed to be seeking to overturn the interests of their late husbands' families in favour of their own descendants. If estates were successfully claimed by daughters, they would become attached to the property of those daughters' husbands. Although that would secure inheritance by the dowagers' descendants in later generations, the land would be alienated from the original owners, in this case the Stanleys. The attitudes displayed by these widows towards the descent of property through their own bloodline—rather than

through a collateral branch of their husbands' families—may illustrate a changing perception of dynastic responsibility within female aristocratic circles. It is at this point that the haziness of the law became apparent and each side had to dig further back in time to discover agreements which proved their case and pre-dated those of their opponents.

Before her husband was even dead, Countess Alice wrote to Cecil on 11 April 1594 in order to canvass his support: 'It hath pleased God to visit my Lord with sickness . . . and therefore must entreat your favour and assistance both of yourself and to my Lord your father, in the behalf of me and my poor children.'⁹ Countess Alice also wrote to the earl of Shrewsbury on 17 June 1594 to ask for his aid 'in any quarrel with her brother-in-law'.¹⁰ The phraseology used in both letters indicates that she had foreseen potential problems with her late husband's estate and wished to gain powerful allies. She wrote again to Cecil in May 1594, 'I hope my Lord your father's wonted favour will not be drawn from me by any means or persuasions, albeit I hear of a marriage between the earl my brother and the Lady Vere your niece.'¹¹ Alice evidently feared that Cecil's support would be undermined by that marriage. In a letter written in 1595, Cecil indicated that the two parties had come to a settlement, but also showed that his ultimate allegiance lay elsewhere: 'as far as I shall see that by this agreement no titles or interests of her Majesty's shall be prejudiced'.¹²

Although the support of the Cecils was not forthcoming, Countess Alice did find a powerful patron (and later a second husband) in Sir Thomas Egerton. The illegitimate son of Sir Richard Egerton of Flint, he had already risen by sheer hard work to become Attorney-General, Master of the Rolls, and legal adviser to Henry, earl of Derby, Countess Alice's father-in-law. In 1600 he married Countess Alice as his third wife, and shortly afterwards his son John married her middle daughter Frances. As Lord Chancellor (from 1603), he took the title Viscount Brackley in 1616 from a property in Northamptonshire which had formerly belonged to the Stanleys.

Initially, however, Egerton was probably viewed as a neutral party in the dispute between Countess Alice and Earl William, and a trunk

⁹ *Salisbury MSS*, IV, p. 508.

¹⁰ *A calendar of the Talbot papers in the College of Arms*, ed. G. R. Batho (London, 1971), p. 255.

¹¹ *Salisbury MSS*, IV, p. 527.

¹² *Ibid.* XIII, pp. 557–8.

containing legal documents was delivered to him on 23 September 1594, 'to be kept by the said Sir Thomas Egerton by entreaty of the said Earl and Countess as he would keep his own Evidence'.¹³ Given Egerton's position as legal adviser to the Stanley family, he perhaps saw himself as the upholder of Earl Ferdinando's will, and in light of this he sided at first with the heirs general, Countess Alice's daughters. In March 1595, however, Alice agreed to halt her legal proceedings in return for £5,000 and her dower lands, plus financial provision for her daughters. Unfortunately, this settlement did not last. Coward blames increased demands by Countess Alice, and the ambiguous position of the Isle of Man within the Stanley estates. He also argues that the situation was complicated by the fact that both the earl of Derby and the dowager countess had made leases within the disputed property.¹⁴ In 1600, the year of Countess Alice's marriage to Egerton, Earl William was granted the Stanley estates. This would appear superficially to be a defeat for Alice and her daughters, but the earl agreed to pay them £20,400, plus £2,000 for the girls' maintenance. This was not confirmed until 1607, after the earl had been forced in 1601 to sell lands to the value of £478 19s. 1d. in the traditional Stanley heartlands of Lancashire and Cheshire, in addition to outlying properties in Devonshire, Dorset, and Brackley in Northamptonshire.¹⁵ This was only a tiny contribution towards the £30,000 which Ralph Wilbraham estimated in 1599 would be needed to settle the matter and 'prevent the overthrow of the House of Derby'.¹⁶ Countess Alice thus acquired a large income for herself and her daughters at the cost of great expense to Earl William and the erosion of the Stanley lands. Wilbraham's sentiment in the same letter—that 'if those that formerly had been agents for the Earl may alone in this sale be used they will sell lands worth four score thousand before they bring thirty clear to my Lord's use'—points to corruption within the ranks of those working for the earl.

The question of ownership of the Isle of Man continued to be vexatious, Countess Alice arguing that it was part of her dower land, and Earl William claiming that not only had Alice herself assured him of her estates and the island for £5,000, but that his ancestors

¹³ *The Egerton papers*, ed. J. Paine Collier, Camden Soc. XII (London, 1840), p. 205.

¹⁴ Coward, *Stanleys*, p. 45.

¹⁵ *Salisbury MSS*, XXIII, p. 90.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* IX, p. 405.

had appointed trustees to hold the land for the use of the male heirs.¹⁷ In 1594 the Privy Council took the opportunity to grab the island for the Crown, and it had to be regranted by James I. The heirs general benefited most, as the earl had to pay £2,000 to the Crown in order to gain half the island, the other half going to his three nieces. Coward further indicates that the island was worth a total of over £1,000 a year in 1600, more than double the total value of Countess Alice's dower land and therefore well worth fighting for.¹⁸ Earl William was forced to purchase the rest of the island before he could claim it for himself, thus spending even more money in order to guarantee ownership of land he argued was already his. The Stanley position within the Isle of Man remained a source of personal prestige as well as being financially lucrative, and Countess Alice (albeit jointly with Earl William) seems to have maintained some degree of influence over local politics. For example, letters concerning the choice of a Manx archdeacon were received by religious and lay officials on the island from both of them in 1595. The fact that she was consulted in the matter shows that her views could not be ignored.¹⁹

In the early years of the seventeenth century Alice may have allowed her new husband Egerton to be more involved in her legal affairs, though the marriage was not a success, and after his death in 1617 she challenged his will.²⁰ She certainly took more of a background role in her daughters' affairs after they acquired husbands to represent their interests. Her sons-in-law—John Egerton, Lord Chandos, and Lord Huntingdon—appear to have taken collective responsibility for their wives' business: it is noticeable that in a letter of 1609 to Lord Huntingdon relating to the Isle of Man, Salisbury referred to Egerton, Chandos, and Derby, but not to Countess Alice or her husband.²¹ Over time, Countess Alice thus found not just one, but a series of patrons who had the connections, the means, and the abilities to defend her daughters' interests.

Countess Alice had also managed to retain some degree of control over her daughters' marriages, despite the fact that they were viewed by domestic and foreign officials as valuable political and diplomatic

¹⁷ Coward, *Stanleys*, p. 47.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* pp. 206–7.

¹⁹ *Salisbury MSS*, V, pp. 425–6.

²⁰ Northamptonshire Record Office, Ellesmere MSS, I, 149, 400–1.

²¹ *Hist. MSS Com.*, *Hastings MSS* (4 vols, London, 1928–47), II, pp. 52–3.

pawns during the latter years of Queen Elizabeth's reign. The reason for that was that on one interpretation, Henry VIII's will should have excluded James VI of Scotland from the succession and given a strong claim to the eldest of the Stanley girls. As the ageing Queen Elizabeth continually refused to name a successor, foreign monarchs toyed with the idea of claiming the English throne for themselves or their relatives through marriage to a suitable lady. In 1599 Francesco Contarini, the Venetian ambassador in Paris, reported to the doge and senate that

the Huguenots also suggest a wife for His Majesty [the King of France] as they wish him to marry one of their sect, among others they suggest . . . an English lady, the daughter of the Earl of Derby, a relation of the Queen of England through whom the King would acquire a certain claim to the throne.²²

In 1603 the Spanish council reported that 'they proposed the Duke of Savoy might marry the Lady Arabella [Stuart] or a daughter of the Earl of Derby, the latter being preferable as the lady was a Catholic and had a larger following.'²³ Ironically, the Stanley sisters were thus viewed as desirable in mainland Europe by both Catholics and Huguenots. Although the claim to the English throne came to them through Stanley rather than Spencer blood, if these and other plans had come to fruition, Countess Alice would have been in a powerful position in terms of patronage and political influence as the mother-in-law of the king. The smooth transition of sovereignty on Elizabeth's death to James VI of Scotland, however, rendered all such plans obsolete, and Anne, Frances, and Elizabeth Stanley were never close to occupying the throne. Quite what Countess Alice would have thought about these plans had she known about them is impossible to say.

Another problematic matter is the possible marriage of a daughter of Countess Alice to the son of the tsar of Muscovy, Boris Godunov. Elizabeth I wrote to Godunov on 11 September 1601 in order to retract an undated and unspecified offer of one of them in marriage.²⁴ This proposal at first appears surprising, but the unidentified

²² *Calendar of state papers, Venice, 1592-1603*, ed. Horatio F. Brown (London, 1897) [hereafter C.S.P.V.], pp. 366-7.

²³ *Calendar of state papers, Spain, 1587-1603*, ed. Martin A. S. Hume (London, 1899), pp. 719-22.

²⁴ *Salisbury MSS*, XI, pp. 387-8.

daughter was only one of a handful of English women whose existence and proximity to the throne had been brought to Godunov's attention. Elizabeth I herself had rejected the hand of Ivan IV, and she was less than enthusiastic about the same tsar's advances in the direction of Lady Mary Hastings in 1583.²⁵ In Lady Mary's case, the tsar's ambassador Pissemsky did actually meet her. Unfortunately, no record survives stating whether any of the Muscovite representatives met Countess Alice or her daughters, but an alliance between a Stanley and Fyodor Borisovich Godunov may have been given greater consideration because Ivan IV was dead and the son of the regent would be more attractive. The queen also stated in her letter that the Muscovites were considering an alliance with the Austrians. Interestingly, some nobles had already offered the throne of Muscovy to the Austrian Archduke Maximilian only eight years earlier, in 1593, and English politicians and merchants may have feared for their trading rights and privileges if an Austrian had ascended the throne. The proposal to transform one of Countess Alice's daughters from an English lady to potential tsarina has been described as an attempt by Cecil to limit the damage of a diplomatic bungle by an English representative in Moscow, but Godunov was aware of the existence of the Stanleys, as he had been presented with a genealogical chart illustrating the royal descent of the queen's relations.²⁶ A Stanley was one of several potential candidates who could have shared Godunov's throne. Nor was it was the final attempt by English officials to influence Muscovite affairs, since in spring 1613 there was great excitement in English court circles that the Muscovite nobility would invite James I to rule their kingdom.²⁷ The Stanley marriage plan can thus be seen in the context of attempts by the Muscovite state to take a place in western European politics, and by the English side to have a more influential role in the government of Muscovy. The marriage never took place, but the situation illustrates that powerful government figures wished to use Anne, Frances, and Elizabeth Stanley for the furtherance of foreign policy, regardless of the wishes of the girls or their mother.

A letter in the Hastings manuscripts concerning the marriage of

²⁵ Claire Cross, *The Puritan earl* (London, 1966), pp. 29–30.

²⁶ N. E. Evans, 'The Anglo-Russian royal marriage negotiations of 1600–1603', *Slavonic and East European Review*, 3rd ser. LXI (1983), pp. 376–80.

²⁷ C.S.P.V. 1610–13, pp. 537–8; C.S.P.D. 1611–18, pp. 181–2; Inna Lubimenko, 'A project for the acquisition of Russia by James I', *E.H.R.* XXIX (1914), pp. 246–56.

Lady Elizabeth Stanley and Henry Hastings, grandson of the fourth earl of Huntingdon, demonstrates that both Countess Alice and the earl worked hard to overcome the objections of the queen and members of the court in order to ensure that the wedding went ahead. In December 1600 Countess Alice wrote to the earl 'about the finishing of that with your grandchild which both of us have so much desired and so long laboured for at her Majesty's hands, which in my opinion is the best course I could take to prevent those that might go about to cross our proceedings'. This demonstrates that she was an active advocate of the union and exercised complete control over the choice of bridegroom.²⁸ Those who were opposed to the match are unnamed; Sir Robert Cecil can be ruled out, as Huntingdon wrote to him in September 1600 requesting that he support the marriage.²⁹ He was hardly likely to do this if he knew Cecil was actively opposed. As for the reasons for opposing the match, the dashes of royal blood possessed by both Lady Elizabeth and Henry Hastings may have proved too dangerous a threat to those who had already thought about backing James VI of Scotland in the race for the throne after the queen's death. As a younger daughter, however, her claim was secondary to that of her sister Anne; perhaps that is why the queen agreed after at first being somewhat wary.

The circumstances surrounding the marriages of Countess Alice's elder daughters are more mysterious. John Chamberlain wrote to Dudley Carleton on 30 March 1603, stating that 'The Lord Chandos that hath secretly married the Lady Strange and young Egerton the Lady Frances her sister do now publish their marriage and make no more dainty.'³⁰ If Countess Alice knew about and sanctioned the secrecy it may emphasize the lengths to which she was prepared to go in order to control who married her daughters and therefore who would have access to their inheritance once her dispute with Earl William was settled. She had to consider the situation of her daughters with regard to their royal blood and status, and also their position as heiresses.

In addition to fighting for her own rights, Countess Alice wrote to Cecil on behalf of at least two of her sons-in-law, Lord Chandos and

²⁸ Hist. MSS Com., *Hastings MSS*, II, p. 47.

²⁹ *Salisbury MSS*, X, p. 314.

³⁰ *The letters of John Chamberlain*, ed. N. E. McClure (2 vols, Philadelphia, 1939), I, p. 190.

the earl of Huntingdon. Chandos wished to hold the office of Lord Lieutenant of Gloucestershire, and Countess Alice duly wrote to members of the Cecil family in support of him.³¹ As there was another candidate in the person of Lord Berkeley, the pair held the office jointly, despite an incident in which Chandos apparently took forcible possession of Sudeley Castle, although Countess Alice wrote to Robert Cecil in his defence.³² Chandos probably gained the office on the grounds that his father had held the same appointment. At the very least we can say that even though Countess Alice did not receive much help from the Cecils over her land claims, she was not averse to asking for help again, even while married to a figure as powerful as Egerton.

Huntingdon felt sure enough of his mother-in-law's goodwill to entrust her with a matter 'in which he has been injuriously dealt with'.³³ Countess Alice duly supported him, and wrote, 'the report is merely a colour to cross her son for private ends'. The same cannot be said of her daughter Anne's second husband, the earl of Castlehaven. Countess Alice wrote of him very disparagingly in 1618, 'that if it should please God to call me I might have a place to lay my stuff in out of my Lord Castlehaven's fingering'.³⁴ She wrote of her 'sons' Chandos and Huntingdon, but not Castlehaven, probably indicating that she genuinely disliked and mistrusted him.

Castlehaven was ultimately tried and executed for sodomy in 1631 and was a thoroughly unpleasant character. His execution, however, meant that Countess Alice had to take some responsibility for her daughter and grandchildren, who seem to have made life difficult for her. In May 1631 Alice wrote that she feared her granddaughter Lady Audley's misbehaviour might spread to other grandchildren in her care.³⁵ Nevertheless, Countess Alice had to pay Lady Audley an annuity of £200 a year as she and her husband refused to live with each other.³⁶ Countess Alice became keen to secure a reconciliation between them, if only for financial reasons. From the tone of the letters she wrote to government officials on the subject (which of course may have exaggerated the truth), the presence of her

³¹ *Salisbury MSS*, XV, pp. 230-1, 371; XVII, p. 185.

³² *Ibid.* XVII, p. 185.

³³ *Ibid.* XXI, p. 57.

³⁴ *Hist. MSS Com.*, 11th rep. appendix, part VII, *Bridgewater Trust MSS* (London, 1888), p. 136.

³⁵ *C.S.P.D.* 1631-3, p. 52.

³⁶ *Ibid.* p. 95.

daughter and granddaughter proved to be a financial and personal trial for her. In August 1631 she wrote that

unless the King's mercy be obtained for the Dowager Lady Castlehaven and her daughter, they are left most miserable; the mother by secret conveyance of the late Earl and by wasting the estate she had by Lord Chandos her former husband; the writer's grandchild being left without comfort or any estate at all.³⁷

She thus made her sympathies quite plain: her daughter had ruined the dower lands conveyed to her by Lord Chandos, but for the sake of her family she appealed for some kind of financial provision for them. We must also remember that Countess Alice was by then an elderly lady, and these events did not make for a peaceful old age.

As if the activities of her children and grandchildren were not trouble enough, Countess Alice is named in 1607 as one of the people who laboured to make a separation agreement between her sister Anne and her husband Lord Buckhurst.³⁸ Again there is a parallel with Margaret, countess of Cumberland, whose sister Lady Warwick requested in 1603 'that the case of the Countess of Cumberland be brought to the attention of the King'.³⁹ We therefore have a small amount of evidence which indicates that the sisters of women whose marriages had run into trouble took an active role in negotiating and enforcing separation settlements, although a deeper study of this subject is required.

It could be argued that Countess Alice did not see her family as limited to those who were her flesh and blood kin. She was keen to advance the careers of members of her household too. She wrote to Cecil on behalf of at least six men, Edward Barnes, Geoffrey Osbaldeston, Francis Tunstall, her chaplain Mr Phillips, Captain Phillips (possibly a relation of the chaplain), and Sir Thomas Hanmer. We do not necessarily know how successful her petitions were, but the lack of repeated appeals implies success. In 1601 she wrote to Cecil requesting that Captain Phillips be granted a command in Yorkshire, but in October the same year she lobbied him to give Phillips command of a company. It may be that she revised her demands after the initial petition failed. In the case of Osbaldeston, she petitioned Cecil for him to be granted the position of serjeant-at-law in Ireland, only for him to find the vacancy filled by

³⁷ Ibid. p. 129.

³⁸ *Salisbury MSS*, XIX, pp. 341-2, 361.

³⁹ Ibid. XXIII, pp. 110-11.

somebody else once he arrived there. Countess Alice was thus obliged to appeal to Cecil for him to be made Chief Justice of Connaught.⁴⁰ Countess Alice's wrangle with Earl William over the parsonage of Hawarden also shows that she was a patroness with influential connections who was unwilling to see her rights transgressed.⁴¹

Throughout her life, Countess Alice was also associated with the patronage of writers and poets. Edmund Spenser was, unsurprisingly, keen to point out some kind of kinship when he dedicated the *Tears of the muses* to her.⁴² Earl Ferdinando was renowned at the Tudor court for his love and patronage of the theatre, which included the sponsorship of a company of actors associated with early Shakespearean productions, known as Lord Strange's men.⁴³ It is highly likely that an intelligent and astute lady such as Countess Alice was influenced by a childhood which included music lessons and later by those around her at the Elizabethan court. A love of poetry encouraged by her husband, coupled with an appreciation of the power of dramatic display, probably remained with her throughout her life. The writers Henry Lok, Sir John Harrington, and John Davies all paid tribute to her in the years before 1612. It is also thought that she participated in court masques during the early years of her widowhood. These spectacles used music, poetry, costume, dance, and elaborate stagecraft in order to present the central character, usually the monarch, in the most idealistic way possible, emphasizing the power of the divinely appointed monarch. The masques did not have a general audience but were limited to those who frequented court circles and could afford to enact them within their own households. It had been claimed that she danced in a masque of beauty written by Ben Jonson in 1608, when she would have been nearly fifty.⁴⁴ Countess Alice also participated in other courtly festivities such as the masque of blackness, also written by Jonson.

As Egerton's wife, Alice would have been expected to provide lavish entertainments, as in 1601 or 1602 when the queen visited her

⁴⁰ *Salisbury MSS*, VIII, p. 164; X, p. 103; XI, pp. 247, 354, 410, 515, 545; XXIII, pp. 174-5.

⁴¹ *Ibid.* XXIII, p. 205.

⁴² *The Stanley papers*, ed. Thomas Heywood, C.S. [old ser.] XXIX (1853), p. 37.

⁴³ *Ibid.* pp. 30-7.

⁴⁴ C. Brown, *John Milton's aristocratic entertainments* (Cambridge, 1985), p. 15. It may actually have been Countess Alice's younger sister-in-law, Elizabeth, who took the role.

at Harefield. Naturally, the focus of attention was the royal visitor rather than the hostess, and a dialogue was commissioned by either Egerton or his wife to provide a background for the presentation of valuable jewels and other gifts to the queen.⁴⁵

In 1607 Countess Alice visited her daughter Elizabeth at Ashby, and a masque by John Marston was performed, presumably commissioned by her daughter or son-in-law, in which Alice took the role of queen. She was greeted at the gate with the address:

Woman, Lady, Princess, Nymph, or Goddess
For more you are not, and you seem no less . . .⁴⁶

In the language of extreme flattery employed by the writer, Countess Alice was elevated to a spiritual and moral position far beyond that of her origins. Such elevation was probably possible only after the death of Elizabeth I, who may have been sensitive to any references to royal kinship, especially given the circumstances of Earl Ferdinando's death.

Between Egerton's death in 1617 and the early 1630s Countess Alice does not seem to have acted as a literary patron. It is difficult to say why this should be. One possibility is that when she was widowed for the first time she was still a young woman and expected to take part in courtly activities, but as a more elderly survivor of two marriages she had to cut a more dignified figure in society. While this may explain why she did not take a leading role in masques, balls, and banquets, it does not mean that in the early years of her second widowhood Countess Alice was cut off or remote from literary or cultural influences. Harefield was not very far from London, and in March 1617 she was searching for a house in London to replace York House, which she had to give up on Egerton's death.

Countess Alice's last major literary commission, in the 1630s, was to John Milton: in his *Arcades*, Countess Alice's family is guided to her sitting in state on a throne. Again regal imagery is used, transforming the countess, by now elderly, into a glorious monarch. The final royal idealization of Countess Alice came after her death, when Robert Codrington sought the patronage of Lady Alice Hastings by writing a long elegy, referring to her grandmother as

⁴⁵ *The Hutton correspondence*, ed. James Raine, Surtees Soc. XVII (1843), pp. 278–86; Hist. MSS Com., 3rd rep. (London, 1872), p. 264.

⁴⁶ *Stanley papers*, ed. Heywood, p. 44.

'Queen in the Isle of Man'.⁴⁷ Although Alice was not the most renowned patron in literary circles, and there is no evidence to suggest that she put quill to paper herself in pursuit of poetic expression, she did receive a number of dedicatory addresses, and provided Milton with his first chance to write for an aristocratic audience.⁴⁸ Milton received further patronage from Countess Alice's family, as he wrote *Comus* for the earl of Bridgwater (John Egerton), and there has been some scholarly debate about the links of *Arcades* and *Comus* to the Castlehaven scandal.⁴⁹ The account books from Harefield show payments for harpsichord and viol strings, and it is likely that Countess Alice was musically accomplished and educated the grandchildren in her care to be similarly appreciative.⁵⁰

Countess Alice's final artistic statement was her fantastic tomb in Harefield church, which in its original form represented how she wished to be viewed and remembered by the world after her death. Despite depicting her three daughters and commemorating four of their five marriages, it referred neither to Anne Stanley's marriage to the earl of Castlehaven nor to Countess Alice's own marriage to Egerton. Countess Alice herself is portrayed as a young woman with long flowing hair, not the very elderly widow she really was at the time of her death. It was as the wife of Ferdinando, earl of Derby, daughter of Sir John Spencer, and mother of three daughters that she wished to be remembered.⁵¹

In conclusion we can say that Countess Alice was faced with problems common to other aristocratic dowagers of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, and was a capable and successful defender of her own interests and her children's inheritance. Although the relationships with her daughter Anne and granddaughter Elizabeth became strained after the Castlehaven scandal, Countess Alice took a practical interest in their welfare and in that of other descendants. She was genuinely concerned about the upbringing of all her grandchildren on a day-to-day level, and did not advertise any royal blood they may have possessed

⁴⁷ Hist. MSS Com., *Hastings MSS*, IV, pp. 341-2.

⁴⁸ French Fogle, 'Such a rural queen', in *Patronage in late Renaissance England* (Los Angeles, 1977), pp. 3-28.

⁴⁹ e.g. Barbara Breasted, 'Comus and the Castlehaven scandal', *Milton Studies*, III (1971), pp. 201-4.

⁵⁰ Hist. MSS Com., *Hastings MSS*, I, pp. 375-7.

⁵¹ Brown, *Milton's entertainments*, plate 4 at pp. 52-3.

through Earl Ferdinando, possibly due to the circumstances surrounding his death. In this respect Countess Alice was far more realistic than Bess of Hardwick, who milked the royal antecedents of her granddaughter Arabella Stuart as much as she possibly could, ultimately to the detriment of both of them. Countess Alice was a practical, intelligent, trustworthy, and well connected individual whose influence was sought by members of her immediate family, her household, other members of the aristocracy, and those seeking patronage, such as musicians and poets. She remained a lively figure within noble society during her first widowhood, but despite advancing age her links with courtly society remained strong thanks to her extensive family connections. The surviving documents, portraits, and dedications, and her funerary monument all point to an ambitious, articulate, energetic lady, a formidable adversary, a diligent parent and grandparent, a prominent participant in courtly activities, and a generous patroness, complete with a fearsome temper and a sharp tongue for those who displeased her.

