

## CONCLUSION

### **The Female Succession, Elite Households, and Further Research**

The 1544 Act of Succession mandated that, in the event Edward VI were to die childless, his half-sisters Mary and Elizabeth should succeed him; but there was no enforcement mechanism. After the passage of this act, and its reluctant acknowledgment in Henry's will, there was no guarantee that the female succession would take place should Edward die without issue. Indeed, Edward himself attempted to bar the princesses from the throne. Interestingly, Edward nominated Jane Grey—another woman—to succeed him. She thus enjoyed a combination of powerful assets: the personal nomination of the king; the support of most of the ruling elite, including her father-in-law, John Dudley, Duke of Northumberland; and the resources of the capital city and of the crown. Yet even with all these advantages, her reign lasted a mere nine days. Jane Grey lacked the one thing that her rival, Mary Tudor, had possessed during significant periods of her life ever since childhood, and throughout the previous six years: an independent household.

1

Exploiting her role as head of household and property-owner, Mary Tudor was in a position to insist on her succession rights. Without her household, it is almost certain that Mary would have not been able so easily to supplant Jane Grey's putative regime. Mary had already established herself as an authority figure by presiding over her own independent household since 1547, and had established herself as a patron, landlord, neighbor, and magnate in East Anglia. Although her attempt to preserve the religious autonomy of her household during her brother's reign had ultimately failed, she had nevertheless established herself (via her defense of her household) as the undisputed leader of his Majesty's loyal Catholic opposition. Unlike Jane, Mary had once enjoyed viceregal status as the *de facto* Prince of Wales. In 1553, Mary was clearly a fully independent authority figure in her own right, whereas Jane (rightly or wrongly) was widely assumed to be the puppet of Northumberland's.

2

With an independent household of her own, even had she merely managed it as Guilford Dudley's wife rather than headed it in her own right, Jane Grey would have been able to acquire clients, tenants, servants, and neighbors whose loyalty would have been as much to her as to her husband and his family. A few years as a household manager prior to 1553 would have endowed her with some individual political status, rather than that of mere dependent that she held through her natal and marital ties. As David Loades noted in 1989, of the two women, "It was Mary who represented self-determination, not Jane."<sup>1</sup>

3

Elizabeth was not directly challenged for the throne, as Mary had been, but she was prepared to fight for her succession rights when it was her turn to accede in 1558. Like Mary, she was able to draw on support from her servants, clients, neighbors, and tenants. Both Tudor princesses recognized and exploited the opportunities provided to them by virtue of their roles as heads of household. Without their households, there is reason to doubt that either princess could have acceded to the throne. **4**

The main reason for this is that the political system of Tudor England was patriarchal. Women were excluded—not simply subordinated within—major social, educational, legal, and political systems. Yet, despite this, two women consecutively assumed the highest position of authority as reigning monarchs. **5**

The traditional explanation for this curious happenstance, as mentioned in the Introduction, is that Mary and Elizabeth were the last eligible members of the royal family. In France, whenever the direct royal line died out—in the sense that male heir remained alive—the custom was that males from collateral branches of the royal family would accede to the French throne, through marriage to the most senior female representative of the previous royal line. Thus, François I became the first Valois king of France when he married Claude, daughter of Louis XII. Marrying Mary or Elizabeth off to collateral royal males was a viable option in Tudor England, and would have spared the patriarchal state the embarrassment of a female succession. **6**

Until Henry took steps to disinherit Mary in 1527, England's foreign and domestic policy centered on ensuring that Mary would in due course be married to a man who either held a credible claim to the throne in his own right, or else possessed enough political stature to rule England as Mary's husband. James V of Scotland was Mary's first cousin, the son of her paternal aunt, Margaret Tudor. The close blood relationship would have called for a papal dispensation to make their marriage acceptable, but it also indicates how credible a candidate for the English throne James was. In 1536, James indicated that his marital and diplomatic ambitions lay in France, when he married first a French princess and, after her death, a French noblewoman. By this time, Mary's value on the marriage market had been considerably undermined by her parent's "divorce," the birth of her half-sister Elizabeth in September 1533, and the Acts of Succession in 1533 and 1536, which declared her illegitimate and ineligible to inherit the throne. **7**

Other domestic candidates for the throne, or for marriage either to Mary or Elizabeth, were Edward Courtenay, earl of Devon; Henry Darnley; and Henry Hastings earl of Huntingdon. None were ideal: Courtenay was Catholic, and a prisoner in the Tower until 1558; Darnley appeared on the scene relatively late, being born in 1545; and Huntingdon was descended from a rival royal house, the Plantagenets, whom the Tudors had supplanted. It was possible—indeed, desirable from a patriarchal standpoint—to marry off either Mary or Elizabeth into a **8**

foreign royal house. Negotiations for Mary to wed Charles V, the Habsburg emperor, were a feature of Anglo-Habsburg diplomacy in the 1520s. Before Henry took steps to disinherit Elizabeth in 1536, he entered into negotiations to wed Elizabeth into the French royal house.

If Tudor England had clamored for a male monarch, there were options available, either in the form of collateral royal males, or else through the marriages of Mary and Elizabeth to foreign royalty. For various political and religious reasons, these options were not exercised. The existence of these male candidates, along with the statutory illegitimacy of Mary and Elizabeth, meant that neither princess could simply wait passively for the throne to come to her should Edward VI die childless. **9**

Their anomalous roles as heads of elite households and property owners empowered Mary and Elizabeth to adopt a proactive approach toward their political goals, agendas, and futures. As heads of their own independent establishments, the Tudor princesses had more control over their own destinies than previous English princesses had possessed. In theory, the monarch could contract a marriage for them outside of the realm without their consent. In practice, however, Mary found it impossible to force her half-sister Elizabeth to marry outside the realm, since Elizabeth's refusal would be supported by her clients such as William Cecil and Edward Fiennes (Lord Clinton) with whom she had cemented a relationship by granting them either household appointments or reversionary interests in her lands.<sup>2</sup> **10**

Elite households could provide this level of protection and power because they were much more than mere domestic establishments. As seen in this study of the Tudor princesses, elite households were the means by which Tudor England was governed. As scholars have been documenting for the last twenty years, Tudor England was not a centralized state.<sup>3</sup> The monarch governed by means of the nobility and the gentry who, in turn, presided over establishments that employed local people as servants. Households of regional magnates or gentry JPs were centers of patronage, culture, religious instruction, production, and politics. National policy may have been determined by the crown, but the policy was implemented (or not) at the level of the elite household. England was governed by households—from the royal one in London, to the vertical and horizontal network of households spread across the land like fine mesh. **11**

By heading their own households, Mary and Elizabeth were able to exploit perhaps the single most important element of social organization in late medieval Western Europe. All but the very poor were members of a household. The household was a marker of identity as socially important as name, gender, family, and profession. As mentioned in the Introduction, a grocer to Princess Elizabeth's household considered a slur on her to be an insult to him, because he identified her interests so strongly with his own as a member (even though non-resident) of her household. In the Introduction, I stated that the household was greater than the sum of its parts. It was not simply a collection of individuals, but a Geertzian meeting **12**

ground where individual identities were articulated within a larger social hierarchy. The poor and the rich understood their roles in relation to each other within a Tudor household. The elite household in sixteenth-century England was predicated on the smooth interaction between the head/manager of household and the servants up and down the ranks.

This description of a decentralized state governed loosely by inclusive households applies not just to Tudor England.<sup>4</sup> Across Western Europe, late medieval/early modern elite households functioned as regional political and cultural centers accessible to people of nearly all economic backgrounds. As David Herlihy pointed out, for fifteenth-century Florentine households "a large proportion of the population—more than could otherwise be expected—[gained] some exposure to elite society and its way of life" via membership in the elite household.<sup>5</sup> **13**

None of this is to claim that the elite household was a force for social or gender egalitarianism. Those of divergent economic status interacted in the elite household, but not on terms of equality. Mary and Elizabeth might know the names of their kitchen servants, but that did nothing to equalize relations between themselves and their servants or even between the ranks of the servants. The household was very strictly hierarchical. **14**

It is possible to argue that one form of social inequality—specifically, the economic—helped to mitigate (without entirely eliminating) prevailing gender inequality for *some* women. Women of high social status, wealth, and property such as Mary and Elizabeth could (and certainly did) exercise authority over their male servants, tenants, and neighbors. Later, they would reign in similar manner over their male subjects. Women of lower socioeconomic status suffered the double penalty of gender and social subordination in keeping with widely articulated pejorative attitudes toward gender and economic deprivation. Women and men endowed with natural gifts could, with luck, negotiate, and even overcome such attitudes—but this was extremely rare. **15**

This study of the preaccession households of Mary and Elizabeth Tudor indicates that the elite household provided a forum in which elite women did not need to negotiate with or circumvent patriarchal attitudes. The household, as both a public and private space, occupied a conceptual space in which formal and informal power overlapped. As the wife of an elite male householder, a widow, or (like Mary and Elizabeth) an heiress, elite women were expected to exercise authority over all servants, to dispense patronage (even if in some cases this meant little more than influencing their husbands), and catechize the children of the household "family." **16**

This study of the preaccession careers of Mary and Elizabeth Tudor has revealed the similarities between the ways in which they functioned, and the ways in which other elite women of the time lived. Like other noblewomen, the Tudor princesses ruled over their servants, tenants, and neighbors. They were responsible for the religious and secular **17**

education of their dependents, as were other elite female household managers/heads. The princesses exploited, as did other high-born women, the patronage opportunities attendant on elite household, in order to secure clients and to implement their political and religious agendas.

To put it in unfashionable terminology: the elite household endowed these noblewomen with agency. Furthermore, it did not oblige them to purchase this agency through sly manipulation of loopholes within patriarchal legal and social norms. The exercise of authority by elite women within the household was not only expected, but encouraged. Writers of most prescriptive literature, even those who accepted without question a wife's subjection to her husband's authority, assumed that the elite housewife would undertake serious responsibilities within the "domestic sphere" that could have political and religious ramifications. **18**

More research is needed to flesh out more fully the *informal* articulation of political and religious power. The informal, the private, the domestic was neither hidden nor subordinate. Building on all the many fine studies of families of sixteenth-century England, future researchers would make a useful contribution to our understanding of this period by focusing on the household as public center of political and religious patronage. For a period so well studied as Tudor England, the practical application of power and patronage, usually emanating from households, is poorly understood. **19**

This study of Mary and Elizabeth as property holders has underscored the importance of conveyancing documents as sources of political-patronage relationships, and of insights into the participation of women in these relationships. This discussion has focused necessarily on Mary and Elizabeth Tudor, but future studies would add greatly to the overall picture of Tudor England by examining the ways in which women of property (as owners and/or managers), both real and moveable, participated in significant social, economic, cultural, and political trends of the period. **20**

Whereas this study has focused on the means by which Mary and Elizabeth Tudor transitioned from *informal* to *formal* power, from heads of household to heads of state, an important caveat must be kept in mind. Most sixteenth-century noblewomen were not able to make this transition. This was an important distinction between men and women of this period. A man could head his own household and serve in public office. In many cases, a woman could do neither. Elite women usually managed their households, but did so in the name of their husband (even if the husband was dead) or of their son. It was rare for a woman to hold public office. **21**

Studying the preaccession careers of Mary and Elizabeth can provide insight into the opportunities available to other elite women. Like the two princesses, noblewomen dispensed patronage and ruled over their servants. The experiences of the Tudor half-sisters, however, can also highlight the immovable obstacles women faced in this period. A noblewoman might exercise authority over her servants, but she rarely did so in her own name—usually it was an authority she exercised in the name of her husband, son, brother, or father. In some ways, Mary and Elizabeth had this also in common with other women of their time. They would each consecutively claim the throne as the last representative of their patriline. **22**

The centerpiece of this study is the transition that Mary and Elizabeth made from heads of household to heads of state. The mechanism for this transition was made up of many factors: patrilineal descent, parliamentary statute, and the elite household. The last was a platform available to other noblewomen, but only the Tudor princesses could exploit its full potential. By itself, the elite household was not enough to propel Mary and Elizabeth to sovereign power; but without it, neither princess could have acceded to the English throne as an established authority figure. **23**

## Notes

**Note 1:** Loades, *Mary Tudor*, p. 182

**Note 2:** For details of the proposed marriage for Elizabeth, and Mary's ambivalent attitude toward it, see S. Doran, *Monarchy and Matrimony* [London, 1996], pp. 19–20; for grants to Fiennes, Cecil, and an early one to Northumberland, see *CPR*, III, pp. 88, 112, 198; V, p. 171

**Note 3:** See essays on the court as household in *The English Court from the Wars of the Roses to the Civil War*, ed. D. Starkey [London, 1987]; S. G. Ellis, *Tudor Frontiers and Noble Power: The Making of the British State* [Oxford UP, 1995]; M. K. McIntosh, *Controlling Misbehavior in England 1370–1600* [Cambridge UP, 2002]

**Note 4:** See, in particular, the problem of discussing the "state" or "state-building" within a sixteenth-century Western European and colonial context in A. Cañeque, *The King's Living Image: The Culture and Politics of Viceregal Power in Colonial Mexico* [New York, 2004], pp. 4–11

**Note 5:** D. Herlihy, *Medieval Households* [Harvard UP, 1985], p. 156