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“HOUSE AND CHILDREN”: LADY BRILLIANA HARLEY AND THE EXPANSION
OF DOMESTIC AGENCY

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“House and Children”: Lady Brilliana Harley and the Expansion of Domestic Agency

ABSTRACT

The letters of Lady Brilliana Harley remain the most detailed account of life in the home during the English Revolution. Harley used these letters to work within a domestic role while still gaining a great deal of agency. Harley’s letters contain what one might consider “traditional” content when writing to her son, but it is this domestic role that allowed Harley to take radical actions once the Civil War began to threaten Harley’s house and children. In order to carry out these radical actions, Harley relies on the language of the family and household. By tracing the development of Harley’s letters, we see the progression of agency, with Harley becoming a leader of the local Parliamentary cause. Although we see drastic changes in the subject matter of the letters, Harley never wavers in her commitment to protecting the home and her family.

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“Grow old along with me, the best is yet to be” -Old Main Sundial.

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“House and Children”: Lady Brilliana Harley and the Expansion of Domestic
Agency

I should become a prisoner in my own house, which I cannot yield to, for so I should speak myself guilty; and thus much more I say, my dear husband hath entrusted me with his house and children, and therefore I cannot dispose of his house but according to his pleasure...and surely Sir, I never will voluntarily betray the trust my husband reposeth in me.

-Lady Brilliana Harley to Sir William Vavasour, July 31, 1643

This letter, written by Lady Brilliana Harley in July 1643, reveals the radical role which she is forced to undertake as a result of the turmoil of the English Revolution.

When Royalist commander Sir William Vavasour demands access to Brampton Bryan Castle, the staunchly Parliamentarian Brilliana Harley refuses, protecting her household and her family. Yet while Harley bravely resists, she does so using the language of the household, citing her responsibility to her husband and children. The domestic language that might seem to place Harley in a subordinate role actually fosters her agency and courage.

Lady Brilliana Harley was born just before the turn of the sixteenth century at her namesake in Brill, Netherlands. Her parents were Edward Conway, first Viscount Conway and first Viscount Killultagh, of Ragley, Warwickshire, and Dorothy, daughter of Sir John Tracy of Toddington, Gloucestershire. Brilliana was joined by two sisters and a brother. In July of 1623, Brilliana married Sir John Harley of Brampton Bryan,

Herefordshire. When Harley married Brilliana, it was his third marriage. In 1624, the couple welcomed their first child, Edward “Ned” Harley, followed by Robert, Thomas, Brilliana, Dorothy, Margaret, and Elizabeth. Although very little is known about Harley’s life prior to marriage, the later years of this interesting woman are documented through the 375 letters that she wrote to her husband and son. These letters were written between the years of 1623 and 1643, the year in which Brilliana died suddenly. In the early years Harley wrote mainly to her husband, but letters to her son grew more frequent after Ned went to school at Oxford and later left Oxford for London and Parliament.

During the time that the letters were written, Brilliana was forced to become the head of house as both her husband and eldest son were in London. The Harley family was firmly Parliamentarian, and their household was threatened when much of Herefordshire was occupied by Royalist forces after civil war broke out in 1642. In March of 1643, Harley refused to surrender her home of Brampton Bryan Castle to these Royalist forces. After this refusal, Sir William Vavasour ordered a siege, which began in July 1643. Following attempts to call off the siege, Harley turned Brampton Bryan Castle into a safe haven for her family and supporters, taking in over fifty soldiers, and resisting the siege for more than six weeks.

Only a few scholars have written about Brilliana Harley. In “Patriarchy, Puritanism and Politics: the Letters of Lady Brilliana Harley,” Jacqueline Eales points out that Harley’s letters provide the most detailed first-hand account of the English Revolution extant, as seen in the over 200 news-filled letters. However, Eales also asserts that Harley works well within her gender constraints. Eales recognizes Harley’s

involvement in politics, but she asserts that “the implications of patriarchy within the family and her own gendered role as a wife were not contested areas” (Eales 2001, 150).

Similarly, in “Katherine Paston and Brilliana Harley: Maternal Letters and the Genre of Mother’s Advice,” Raymond Anselment looks at how Harley’s letters show “the newly acknowledged responsibilities of motherhood the potential for personal fulfillment” (Anselment 2004, 431). Anselment argues that Harley’s maternal letters “reflect a spirituality common to published maternal advice; their spontaneity, however, conveys a new dimension of intimacy and affection...Each mother reveals a distinctive individuality as a woman who defines herself by her son’s development” (Anselment 2004, 433-434). According to Anselment, Harley far more concerned herself with the welfare of her absent son than with her religion or with the political situation. Anselment sees Harley as being well within her gendered role, and does not recognize the increasing agency which Harley gained.

Finally, Susan Wiseman explores Harley’s letters in the essay “Private, Public ‘Puritan,’ Political: Brilliana Harley’s Letters.” Wiseman tracks the information that Harley writes in her letters, noting the vast array of public and private issues including the articulation of women’s political actions, and her thoughts on religion, law, and property. Yet for, Wiseman, “Harley’s words offer an example of the importance of wifely obedience, household, kinship, property, locality, and religion in the writings of early modern women” (Wiseman 2006, 79). Wiseman, like Anselment and Eales, stresses wifely deference.

In addition to these scholars who directly consider Harley, other critics comment more generally on women’s letters during the English Revolution. Helen Wilcox and

Sheila Ottway's essay, "Women's Histories," points out that other forms of writing during the period, such as biographies and autobiographies, give a glimpse of life after the events have happened. Conversely, letters and diaries give present-time information "in a more fragmented and everyday manner" (Wilcox 2001, 155). James Daybell also comments on the genre of letter-writing in his introduction to Early Modern Women's Letter-Writing, 1450-1700. He notes that letters written during the time period of 1450-1700 can be analyzed through many different lenses, including historical, lexical, literary, palaeographic, and gender-based. Letters provided an outlet for women to express themselves in a typically patriarchic society.

While all of these critics recognize Harley's contribution to the genre of letter writing, they fail to track the development from prewar to the siege or to notice the changes in her faith and maternal role. Yet it is that very faith and maternal role that give Harley the courage to undertake such bold and radical action.

Lady Brilliana Harley was a fascinating individual. Remaining at home during a tumultuous time in British history, Harley worked within a domestic role while still gaining a great deal of agency. Harley's early letters contain what one might consider "traditional" content for a mother writing to her son. Yet this same domestic role led to Harley's radical actions once the English Revolution was in full force. Health, religion, and material things such as food and clothing dominate the banter in early letters. However, the later letters take on a much darker and serious tone. By the early 1640s, the letters primarily address the impending siege and threats to Brampton Bryan Castle. The critics who have commented on Harley's writing have overlooked the bravery of this remarkable woman. By the time of her death in October 1643, Harley not only runs the

household, but commands men under this role of keeping house. Additionally, during the siege, Harley not only writes to the King, but also refuses soldiers access into her home. This type of behavior was radical and required an incredible amount of moxie. Yet what is most striking is that Harley carries out these radical actions using the language of the family and the household.

Harley's main form of communication came through the use of letters. This mode of communication typically aligns with the feminine role of mother and wife. Letter writing arguably gives us the best understanding of what life was like for these women during the days of the English Revolution, as James Daybell notes:

As social documents they are useful as indicators of female literacy, the quality of familial and other relationships, and of women's social interactions in general.

They offer details of women's lives, roles, and their engagement in a variety of activities, social and religious, literary and political (Daybell 2001, 3).

The letters of Lady Brilliana Harley certainly give us insight into each of these areas, with quite surprising results. Harley acquires new agency within the traditional domestic role of wife and mother, at the same time as the English Revolution is threatening her every way of life.

Early Letters: 1625- July 1639

Brilliana Harley's first recorded letter to her son, Edward "Ned" Harley is written on October 28, 1638. These early letters reflect a standard domestic role. There is neither challenge to authority, nor is there any reason for Harley to break out of her maternal role. The topics addressed include religion, health, education, material items, and news of the family and surrounding community. Ned has gone off to Oxford, leaving Harley to

miss her eldest son, the first child to leave home. One of Harley's earliest letters, from November 1638, expresses longing for her son: "I was dublly glad to reseae your letter...I am glad you like Oxford; it is true it is to be liked, and happy are we, when we like both places and conditions that we must be in...Bee not forgetfull to to rwit me" (Harley 8). Harley realizes that Ned's experiences in Oxford will give him new life experiences, but she wishes Ned to be in touch often, and continue to accept her motherly advice.

Harley's letters show a mother's concern for the spiritual condition of her children. Throughout all of her letters, Harley remains steadfastly devoted to God and her Puritan religion, although the function of this religion changes drastically from early letters to the last letters. In the earliest of letters Harley uses her religion to impart wisdom to Ned as he embarks on a new journey. Harley states: "You are now in a place of more varietyes then when you weare at home; therefore take heede it take not vp your thoughtes so much as to neglect the constant sarius you owe to your God" (7). Harley understands the risks and temptations that can be associated with entering a new situation in life, and she fears for her son. She recognizes that it is imperative that he remain devoted to God in order to thrive spiritually: "I blles God you are well, beseeching the Lord in mercy to keepe his feare in your harte, that so you may walke in the ways that leads to life, and avoide all the bye paths that tend to death" (25). Harley also uses her belief that God has a hand in all things.

Although, as we shall see, Harley focuses on health a great deal in her writings, her primary concern is for spiritual health. Harley discusses spiritual health in her November 24, 1638 letter by saying:

As I much reioyce to be assshured of your health, such as I inoye my owne, so much more dous it reioyce me that the Lord dous so in mery incline your hart to seeke him, and that you finde sweetness in his ways. The Lord, whoo on only has the harts of men in his hands, keep your hart close to his feare; that you may remember your Creator now, in the days of your youth; that in youth and old agge you may haue that joye which surpasses the joy of the world, that so in your old agg you may say, Lord, remember thy sarvant whoo has always desired to sarue thee (12).

Everything went back to being a good Puritan. If one lived to love and serve God, then God would in return look out for the health and well being of his followers.

Another maternal responsibility that Harley focused on was caring for the physical health of her children. Although Harley addresses the topic of health quite frequently in these early letters, her discussions are well within a traditional domestic role. Interestingly, Harley focuses her discussion to mainly reflect the health of others, and not her own. She briefly states “All the rest are well, and I thanke God I am reasnabell well” (12). In one of the longer discussions of her own health, Harley writes on January 26, 1638: “I haue not bine very well theas three days, and so enforced me to keepe to my beed, as I haue doune many times, when you weare with me. I hope I shall be able to rise to day” (24). Harley remains insistent that even though she is not in good health, Ned should not be concerned with it. Harley cares, first of all, for the health of her children at home, which she regularly discusses with Ned. She oversees the treatment of her children, and takes note of the variations in their health. On November 17, 1638 Harley writes, “I thanke God your father is well, and your brother Robert has had no fitte

sence you went. He goos to schoule and eates his meate well; and I hope the Lord will spare him” (11). She also cares deeply for Ned’s health: “It is my great comfort, that you inioye your health, which I was assured of this day by your letter” (28). Harley’s maternal concern for health extends to her entire family.

Additionally, Harley is not shy to offer up remedies of her own in order to aid her son Ned’s health and well being. Although Ned is away at the university, Brilliana continues to give advice on medicines and exercise. Ever a concerned mother, Harley wants nothing but the best health for her eldest child. She sends “some juice of licorich, which you may keepe to make vse of, if you should haue a coold” (9). She anticipates that Ned may need some sort of remedy, and therefore is happy to send it along.

Additionally, Harley relishes news from Ned on his own health,

I giue God thankes that you are recouered from that indisposition you feltt, and thanke you that you did send me word of it; for I desire to know howe it is with you in all conditions. If you are ill, me knoweing of it stire me vp earnestly to pray for you. I beleeeue that indisposition you felt was caused by some violent exercise: if you vse swinge, let it not be violently; for exercise should be rather to refresch then tyer nature. You did well to take some bolsome; it is a most sufferren thinge, and I purpose, if pleas God, to write you the vertues of it (13).

In this November 30, 1638 letter, Harley expresses her maternal role of caregiver.

Although Ned is away at university, his mother still maintains the deepest concern, commenting about the course of action he took and offering up suggestions for the future.

Many of Harley’s letters from the late 1630s focus on Ned’s education; this concern reaffirms her motherly role in the fact that she is much interested in Ned

becoming academically successful. Harley often extends her motherly attention to Ned's tutor. On January 14, 1638, Harley writes "I have sent your tutor a smale token. I can not but desire to sheawe thanks to him, who sheawes so much love to you" (20). Harley also often asks about the tutor, and wants to hear how Ned's education is progressing. In the April 22, 1639 letter, Harley writes: "I hope your worthy tutor is returned before this. I much reioyce to heare he is so carefull of you" (45). Harley values education, and is thankful that Ned's tutor shares her concern.

Harley's motherly role also leads her to send Ned material items which he might need as he is away from home. These range from clothing to food, and Harley takes great care to deliver these goods to Ned on a regular basis, as she tells him "If you wante any thinge, let me knowe it" (9). Her letters detail the items she has sent: "I haue sent you vp a litell hamper, in which is the box with the rytings and boockes you bide me send vp, with the other things, sowed up in a clothe, in the bottom of the hamper. I haue sent you a partriche pye, which has the two pea chikeins in it, and a litell runlet of meathe, it will be very good drinke" (3). Not only is Harley showing concern for his physical health by sending the food, but she shows concern for Ned's education with these gifts as she sends him books and other intellectually stimulating items.

In these early letters, Harley begins to show signs of her interest in the political situation. She appreciates that Ned involves her in giving news:

I hope the news of the Sweeds is not true; but in all theas things we must remember the warneing, which our Sauour has giuen us, when he had toold his decipels theare must be wars and rumors of wars;...greate trubells and wars must be, both to purg his church of ipocrits, and that his enemies at the last may be

vtterly destroyed, but you my saurants be not carefull for your selfs, you are my jewels, and the days of trubbell are the days when I take care of jewels; and my deare Ned, tho I fermely beleeeue theare will be great trubells, yet I looke beyond those days of trubell, considering the glory that the Lord will bring his church to; and happy are they that lieu to see it, which I hope you will do (10).

With her maternal optimism, Harley looks beyond the impending political turmoil to offer up the thought that the end will justify the means during the conflict.

Tensions Mount: July 1639- January 1641

As the tensions between Parliamentarians and Royalists began to mount, Brilliana's maternal attentions shift from the family to concerns with affairs outside of the familial circle. These new concerns are soon intertwined with the more traditional maternal concerns that Harley focused on in her early letters.

In the last letters of the 1630s, Harley again takes the opportunity to let Ned know that her motherly role places great emphasis on spiritual and physical health:

I blles God that you are well, and my deare Ned, be carefull of yourself; be carefull of the health of your body for my sake; and aboue all be carefull of your soule for your owne and my sake; and as to the body, thos things doo most hart which are of a deadly quality as poison, so nothing harts the soule like that deadly poison of sinn; thearefor, my dearest, be watchfull against thos great and suttile and vigilant enimys of your presious soule. (61).

As is typical in the Harley letters, spiritual health takes precedent and influences physical health. Harley often reminds Ned that

the Lord blles you and giue you that heanenly wisdome to remember your Creator in the days of your youth, that you may sarufe your God with an vpright hart, and the Lord in mercy teach you to profet from wisdome, and leade you in the way in which you should walke (65).

Religion dominates Harley's maternal advice, and Harley believes that God and religion influenced all areas of life.

Harley's concern for physical health, although overshadowed by her concern for spiritual health, is still prominent. Harley views the health of her family and friends as an extension of her own health. If Ned's health is poor, it takes a great toll and weighs heavily on Harley. She worries even about a cold: "blles my God that illness which you found, heald you no longer; I beleeeue it was some coold you had taken. Be careful, my deare Ned, of your health, for my sake, and let me know still how it is with you" (72). Similarly, Harley links her own health back to the health of her family, and the health which God bestows upon the Harley family. Ned expresses concern for his mother's health, but ever the doting mother, Harley responds "I thanke you for your earnest desire for my health. I am, I think, better for your prayers" (80). By giving Ned credit for her good health, Harley keeps Ned actively engaged in the things that are happening at home, keeping him very much connected to the rest of the family. Harley also engages Ned in matters of the family by updating him on their health: "Your brother Tome had a sharpe fitte on saboth day night, but I thanke God his last fite was but short; he is cheerfeull and and hungry, but I suffer him to eate no meate, and I giue him glisters, which I thanke God has doun him much good" (117-18). Harley's comments on health of others keeps Ned informed about the home life.

Education also remains high on Harley's scale of importance, as she writes: "I am very glad that your tutor he judges may be fitt for the scoule. I knowe his father; if he be alike, he is a very worthy man" (77). Harley's thoughts on the tutor go well beyond the typical relationship and on November 1, 1639 she states: "Remember my loue to your worthy tutor" (70). Harley wants Ned's tutor to accompany him on many journeys, so as not to interrupt Ned's education:

I am glad your worthy tutor will come with you, by which I see, he is not an obstinate man. A pare of rideing stokens I haue prouided for you, which I purpose, if please God, to send you by the horses that shall be sent for you; and knoweing your tutors minde for a hors and saddell, I will endeour to haue him fitted, that tho the ways may fooule yet his seate may be essay (75).

Harley recognizes the importance of Ned's tutor and treats him with kindness and concern.

As a good mother, Brilliana Harley continues to send Ned care packages of items that he might need while he is away from home. Food is a popular item for Harley to send, including more pies: "[I] haue sent you by this carry another turkey pye, with 2 turkys in it; I hope the cooke has backed it well" (85). Harley often adds in the fact that she sends pies and other foods as an afterthought: "I haue made a pye to send you; it is a kide pye. I beleue you haue not that meate ordinarily at Oxford; on halfe of the pye is seased with on kinde of seasoning, and the other with another. I thinke to send this by carrier" (53). Harley thinks to take such care in sending the comforts of home to Ned at Oxford.

Beginning in 1639, Harley's letters begin to include the language and concerns of war. She places a great deal of emphasis on likening the political situation to a spiritual situation. Harley, for instance, compares the physical war to a spiritual war:

I beleeeue you knowe that one of the best parts of a soulder is to stand vpon his garde, and his greatest shame (next to running away) not to be found so; so it is in spiritual warfare; if Sathen surprise vs, he takes vs at his will, and if we turne our bakes and rune away, o! he will persue till we ben taken" (61).

As seen in previous letters, Harley values a pure soul and spiritual health above all. By comparing spiritual warfare to actual warfare, Harley elevates the status of the political situation. These passages force Ned to consider the comparison of spiritual to actual warfare, and encourage him to take this situation as seriously as his mother does. Harley further develops as a political informant:

[F]rom whence he brought this intelligence, that the Scots weare intrenched 12 miles of Barek, and that is difficulle thinge to know what they doo; for if any inglische man goo to them, thay are vsed kindly, but they returne as wise as they came, for none discouers theaire counsills to them (57).

Harley sends Ned information on a regular basis so that he is well educated on the turmoil that England faces.

As she adjusts to the political turmoil, Harley's maternal role expands to the climate of the country. Harley now undertakes a duty to know about what dangers her family and home may face as a result of the tensions between King and Parliament. Harley begins to inquire about politics: "I should be glad to heare from you a relation how the king went to parlament, and at what ease you hard his speche..." (90). Although

Harley wants to hear about the situation, she admits: “I did feare theare would be a great crowde, which made me desire your father not to be theare” (90). Harley takes great comfort when Parliament and the King are getting along, and expresses relief after Ned has gone to be with his father in Parliament in 1640, “On thursday night Miller came home, and brought me the welcome aschurance of your being well, with your father: and I should be glad you weare of the parliament. I much reioyce that the parlement goos one so well. I trust the Lord will finisch this good works begoone” (107). Parliament’s progress in implementing reforms brought, in Harley’s view, safety not only to the nation but to her family.

As 1640 continues, Harley’s interest in Parliament grows as now not only her husband resides in London, but Ned as well:

This morning I reseued your letter by Raphe, and I hope theas lines will finde you with your father, where I had rather haue you be then at Oxford. I am very glad that the parliament has deferred priuet biusnes for a time, to settell the publike; in which I beseach the Lord direct them and giue them a vnanimous consent in thos things which may be for the glory of God, and the peace of His Church; that all these thinges, without which God may be sarfed without burdening the conscience of any of Gods children, may be cast out, as thos things which haue longe trubelled the peace of the church (110).

Harley senses the trouble at hand and informs Ned of her concerns for the future.

A Brewing Storm: January 1641-July 1643

With the breakdown of social and political alliances and the coming of war, Harley’s maternal role expands and changes. Harley’s transition to a woman with a great

deal of agency is not one that she is initially comfortable with. The tensions between the Parliamentarians and the Royalists trouble Harley. Clearly Harley would much rather live in a state of calm, as evidenced in a letter written in early February of 1641:

Deare Ned, to see you will much reuiue me in the midst of many sad thoughts. It has very much trubelled me to see the affections of this cuntry so against your father that is worth thousands of them; and he has desaruied so well of them: but you are in the right. It is for Gods caus and then it is an honor to suffer (145).

With Ned's assurance that the ideals of Parliament promote the just cause, Harley takes the same position as her son: "We must all say, if the Lord dous not speare in His almighty power to ouer-rule the actions of men, we may feare wooful dayes. If such dayes should befalle vs, the woo would light on those that haue not walked with God, and Gods children should only tast of the sorrow of them" (123). Harley slowly but surely begins to accept the fact that she must sacrifice for the cause. As a staunch Puritan, Harley believed that the rule of Charles I violated many of the religious beliefs that she held dear, and thus she was more willing to take the actions necessary to protect Brampton Bryan and the Harley family.

Harley's maternal role causes allows her to give and send information to her son and husband. On March 25, 1641, Harley expresses "I neuer more longed to heare how things goo then I did this weake. Many rumors we heare, but I build vpon nothing tell I heare it from you or your father" (121). Additionally, Harley often comments on the news that she receives from London as she tells Ned on July 16, 1641: "I desire to guie our gracious God the glory of thos great things that has bine doun in the parlament; that the king has past the 3 bills, in which the high commisiton goos downe; and that they haue

proceeded so fare against the bishchops” (140). Just as Harley craves to hear news from abroad, she begins to be a political informant to her son, providing any information that she can in the hopes that it will help protect the household and family. On July 21, 1641, Harley shares her knowledge with Ned: “I must reioyce that there is hope of pasing the bill against bishchops; the Lord say Amen to it; we doo not desarue to see such a mercy; but our God, I hope will worke for His owne name sake” (141). Not only does Harley comment on matters of Parliament, but she also informs Ned about the interactions of others with the Royalists, as in her May 17, 1642 letter: “Sr William Pelham rwites me word he has giuen vp his liftenatcy and his going to Yorke, to the king; being his saraunt, as he rwites me word, and so bound by his oth” (161). In her June 20, 1642 letter, Harley also supplies Ned with information about political demonstrations closer to home:

This day Mr. Daus came from Heareford, wheare he went to preach, by the intreaty of some in the town and this befell him: when he had ended his prayer before the sermon, which he was cut short in, because he was loth to tire them, 2 men went out of the church and cryed “pray God blles the kinge; this man dous not pray for the kinge;” vpon which, before he read his text, he toold them that misters had that liberty, to pray before or after the sermon for the church and state; for all that, they went to the bells and range, and a great many went into the church-yard and cryed “roundheads,” and then some said “let us cast stones at him!” and he could not looke out of doors nor Mr. Lane but they cryed “roundhead.” In the afternoon they would not let him preach; so he went to the cathedral. Thos that had any goodness weare much trubelled and weepe much (171).

Harley's maternal role enables her to pass on any information that she finds pertinent to the cause that her husband and son support. Harley passes along news of the turmoil that the troubles between Parliament and the King has produced even on a local level, hoping to help Robert and Ned.

During this period, Harley continues to write about material items, though in a much different context. She continues to send food items: "I haue sent your father by this carrier a box, in which is 6 pise, Mrs. Obersons pise" (138). However, with increasing tensions throughout the country as a result of the English Revolution, Harley sees material items and money as a way to aid in the cause, rather than as a comfort to the recipient: "I am griued with all my hart that the tenants doo not pay theaire rents, that I might send it to your father, whous ocations I hard rather a hundred times weare supplied then my owne" (234). Harley's wifely dedication continues to inspire her to put Robert and Ned's needs before her own. Harley later recognizes the potential need to sell off her material possessions to gain the money that Robert wants to use to support Parliament, as she discusses on June 17, 1642:

I purpose, and pleas God, to send Martane with the horses your father sent for, on munday next. I doute not but that your father will giue to his vtmost for the raiseing theas hoors, and my opinion it weare better to borrow mony, if your father will giue any, then to giue his plate; for we do not know what straits we may be put to, and therefore I thinke it is better to borrow whilst on may, and keepe the plate for a time of neede, without your father had so much plate, that he could paret with some, and keepe some to sarue himselfe another time. this I doo not say, that I am vnwilling to part with the plate or any thing ells in this case; if

your father cannot borrow mony, I thinke I might finde out some in the cuntry to lend him some” (169).

Harley’s deference to her husband’s request reflects her wifely role. She hesitates to part with items of the home. Yet Harley recognizes the need to give up some of the domestic items in order to support Parliament. Additionally, Harley at this time begins to receive items that might protect the household as well as sending items to Robert and Ned that might be helpful to their cause:

I haue recued the box with 20 bandeleres, but the boxes with the muskets and rests the carrier has left to come in a wagon to Woster; he promises I shall haue them shortly. I pray you tell your father the reson, why I did not send the trunck of plate by Lemster carrier was, becsus the last time I sent to Lemster, they said it was plate; but Bagly, that went with it, not knowing what it was, only I toold him theare was a cake in it and he told the carriers wife (178).

At this point in time, Harley faced great danger in sending these materials to Robert and Ned, but did so because of her role.

Immediately before the siege on Brampton Bryan, Harley’s motherly role is taken to a new level. The letters which she sends Ned seem to be pure gibberish, the actual message to them only being revealed by using a code. It is interesting to note, however, that even the gibberish portions of the letters deal with the language of the domestic. These letters, which begin to be written on March 1, 1642, speak nothing about health or any of the other topics typical of Harley’s letters. She solely passes on information to Ned that is necessary to be known, and urgently asks his advice on matters of the household: “I desire you would pray your father to send me word what he would haue doo: if I put

away the men I shall be plundered and if I have no rents I know not what cours to take” (191). Harley’s discomfort with remaining at Brampton Bryan is obvious, yet she refuses to give up her role of protecting the household. It is at this point that Harley is truly a political informant as she tells Ned about the impending siege on March 3, 1642: “This day I heare that Sr Wm Cro has sent forth that somens, 24 to come into Her: on munday next, to witness to dismanors and crimes laide to the charge of your father” (193). Harley also informs Ned of the proceedings against others in the community on March 11, 1642: “They say that they gaue half a crowne to every soulder to looke for enimyees every day. They haue taken Mores lad, prison at Heariford, because he was with me. If I had mony to buy corne and meale and malt I should hope to hold out” (197). Harley’s loyalty to her home never wavers, even as the siege approaches.

Siege on Brampton Bryan: July 23, 1643-October 9, 1643

The final grouping of letters takes a drastically dark and serious tone. When Brampton Bryan castle was finally attacked on July 23, 1643, Brilliana Harley, her three children, and over one hundred others were inside. Sir William Vavasour, the Royalist Governor of Hereford surrounded the castle with over seven hundred soldiers. Harley only managed to send three letters to her son during the actual, yet these letters showcase the authority that Harley now commanded as she transitioned into her role as head of a vastly expanded household.

Harley’s letter dated August 25, 1643, ends her role as a political informant. Weary of her letters being intercepted by the Royalists, Harley switches from her feminine means of communication through letter writing. Harley states only that “the gentillmen of this cuntry haue affected their desires in bringing an army against me”

(207). The details of the situation Harley leaves to the messenger to reiterate to Ned; thus, Harley takes it upon herself to protect the family's property by any means necessary, and that includes not letting any sort of information that could be used against the family be leaked.

Harley's final letter gives her son a clear idea of the dire circumstances that Brampton Bryan faces, and Harley does not try to hide what is happening. She, rather, lets her son know that she is forced to defend the castle. In her final letter, dated October 9, 1643, Harley informs her son "I am now againe threatned; there are some souldiers come to Lemster and 3 troopes of hors to Heariford with Sr William Vauasor, and they meane to viset Brompton againe" (209). Yet, throughout the siege Harley continues to rely on the hand of God to steer her through the troubling times. As a woman thrust into the unfamiliar position of heading a household, Harley looks to a familiar source of comfort. In an August 25, 1643 letter, she states, "the Lord in preserue me, that I will fall not unto theair hands...The Lord in mercy blles you and giue me the comfort of seeing you and your brother" (207). In the next letter, the penultimate letter of the series, Harley writes, "and deare Ned, pray for me that the Lord in mercy may oresarue me from my cruell and blood thirsty enemys" (208). Harley clearly has some strong descriptions of her enemies, as she believes that her cause is the just and true cause. This thinking leads Brilliana Harley to see the Royalists in a negative light, but also bolsters her resistance.

Harley now encourages her son in his cause against Royalist forces. On October 9, 1643, Harley writes that "it has pleased God to intrust you with a greater charge, as to change your trope into a regiment, so the Lord in mercy blles you with a dubell measure of abillitys, and the Lord of Hosts be your protector and make you victorious" (209).

Harley's belief that her cause is the righteous one permeates these last letters. Unusual for a woman, even during the Civil War, Harley makes bold statements about the political situation and staunchly supports her husband and son in their endeavors. Harley asks advice of Ned to "let me know your minde wheather I have best stay or remoue" (208). Harley flat out refuses to submit to the troops which threaten her. Instead, she seeks the council of her son, and continues to protect the safety of her castle and family.

In her last three letters, Harley focuses primarily on the business that is at hand. The one extended reference that she makes to her own health, however reflects her dire situation. She notifies Ned that "I haue taken a greate coold, which has made me very ill these 2 or 3 days, but I hope the Lord will be mercifull to me, in giuing me my health, for it is an ill time to be sike in" (209). Harley's return to speaking about health, particularly her own, is interesting because this topic has been left out of her correspondence for quite some time. Harley's description of health takes up nearly one third of the letter. However, this inconsistency is easily explained, as her being sick impedes her new role as head of house and is thus an important factor in the safety of the castle and its inhabitants. And, as we shall see, the illness proved to be very serious.

In her final letters, Harley's domestic role has transformed from speaking about clothing and schooling to managing an entire household and community within. Harley's narrative voice shifts into one of desperation for her son to return home. Harley states "My deare Ned, how much I longe to see you I cannot expres, and if it be possibell in parte meete me desires in desireing, in some measure as I doo, to see me; and if pleased the Lord, I wisch you weare at Brompton againe" (209). Harley longs for her old role when the Harley Family was safe and Brampton Bryan was not under attack.

Letters to Others During the Siege

Ned is not the only recipient of letters from Lady Brilliana Harley. Harley also found herself having to write to the high ranking military men and political officials of the time. These letters did not showcase the same motherly care and concern that Ned received, but they are an important clue to the breadth of Harley's influence during the siege on Brampton Bryan. Significantly, Harley makes use of the language of the home in her correspondence, and everything comes back to the idea of protecting the home and the people inside.

The letters written back and forth to influential members of the community span the course of the siege, most being written in July and August of 1643. In this case, we have both Harley's letters and the responses she received, and one can glimpse the desperate situation that Brilliana Harley faced. None of the men to whom Harley was writing shared any concern for the home that Harley so desperately was trying to preserve. The July 26, 1643 letters written by Henry Lingen, Sir W. Pye, and William Smallman exhibit none of the language of the home, but rather the language of battle. Quite alarmingly, the men think

Our relations to your Ladyship make us careful to prevent if we can any further inconvenience to you, and therefore to that end we think fit to acquaint you that [as] Sir William Vavasour by his Majesty's command hath drawn his forces before your castle, with resolution to reduce it before he stirs you thence, your ladyship may do well take into your consideration the posture you are in (Historical Manuscripts Commission 1904, 8).

Admittedly, it is the woman's role to care more about the home, but these men see it merely as some place where Harley lives, and not the home full of life that it has become to her. These men do not even mention any aspects of home and the wifely duty to preserve it. Rather, they warn about the dangers facing Harley if she refuses to evacuate.

Sir William Vavasour, the officer in charge of the siege, also disregarded Harley's concern for her home. While seemingly respectful, Vavasour uses compliments about Harley's "wisdom and virtue." Vavasour questions Brilliana Harley "How your ladyship can term yourself one of the King's loyal subjects, when either by your command or connivance at least, your rebels in your house have committed many thefts, murders, and taken so many prisoners for no other cause than for being good subjects" (Historical Manuscripts Commission 1904, 9). Harley maintains that she is, in fact, a good subject, but Vavasour uses this claim against her. Vavasour sticks to his orders: "if you remain still willful, what you may suffer is brought upon you by yourself, I having by this timely notice discharged those respects due to your sex and honour" (Commission Historical Manuscripts Commission 1904, 9). This exchange is especially interesting because Vavasour recognizes Harley's agency. Although Harley claims that protecting the home motivates her actions, Vavasour does not recognize this motivation as valid.

Yet, Harley's concerns about the home subsequently sway Vavasour to sympathize with her. Vavasour even promises "For your cattle truly I gave a strict command they should be preserved, to the end, if your ladyship shall approve yourself loyal, they may be restored and shall, or satisfaction of they shall not be forfeited to the king" (Commission, Historical Manuscripts 1904, 11). Vavasour pushes Harley into a difficult situation as he claims "If your ladyship shall please to command your servants

and all others within your house to lay down their arms, and suffer me to send in a guard, I will wait on your ladyship, and upon the word of a gentleman you shall not receive violence to yourself or family, or anything within your house by the said guard...”

(Historical Manuscripts Commission 1904, 12). Harley’s must now choose whether to concede and trust that Vavasour will keep his word or to maintain her position to protect the home and refuse to give in to Vavasour’s demands. At this point, Harley’s authority comes into play as it is solely her decision.

As tensions increasingly mount, Harley expands the boundaries of her authority under the maternal role of protecting the home and goes so far as to appeal to the King. The response to this appeal comes from Lord Falkland. In this case Harley’s gender works in her favor. Had a man made such requests, the response most certainly would not have been as polite as “yet his Majesty is yet once more graciously pleased, so far to reflect with pity upon the sex and condition of the petitioner, and to afford the best interpretation to what hath passed, as hereby once more to offer unto the petitioner and also the persons with her, full pardon and free license to depart out of the castle whither and with what arms and ammunition” (Historical Manuscripts Commission 1904, 18). In this respect, Harley’s sex and gender role work in her favor. While The King and his supporters “reflect with pity” on Harley’s feminine sex, they leave Harley with the final word as to the matter of the home, and in large part, the conditions upon which she would consider leaving her home.

Harley’s response foregrounds the language of the home and concern over the well being of the home and its occupants. Her reply to Henry Lingen, Sir Walter Pye, and William Smallman, indicates some surprise “For Sir William Vavasour’s drawing his

forces before my house by the King's command, I dare not, I cannot, I must not, believe it, since it has pleased our most gracious King to make many solemn promises that he would maintain the laws and liberties of this kingdom. I cannot then think he would give a command to take anything away from his loyal subject, and much less to take away my house" (Historical Manuscripts Commission 1904, 8). Under this framework, Harley justifies protecting her home. The sentiments which Harley utters are bold in that she challenges the practices of the king. But her role in the domestic sector also allows Harley to challenge the King's authority under the cover of protecting the home. Interestingly, Harley never challenges the authority in any other sector, such as political policies or taxes. This would clearly have been outside of the realm of possibility for a woman, but the concern over home and the occupants of Brampton Bryan allows Harley to speak boldly without severe consequences.

Harley's domestic role also allows her to maintain that she is on the right and just side. Harley quite boldly states "I must endeavor to keep what is mine as well as I can, in which I have the law of nature, of reason, and of the land on my side, and you none to take it from me" (Historical Manuscripts Commission 1904, 8). This quotation borders on treason against the King, yet Harley protects her home, the accepted role of a woman, wife and mother of the time. Harley maintains her position when writing Sir William Vavasour on July 28, 1643 "I wrote the gentleman word I would endeavour to keep what was mine as long as I could and I know that does not make me an ill subject, nor give anyone warrant to take it from me" (Historical Manuscripts Commission 1904, 9). Harley additionally dispels rumors that those in her home have done anything to break the laws. The motherly concern to protect those living in her home takes over and Harley

passes on the information to those that might try to question their actions. She even notes that “Let me obtain the common right that you will believe myself and my family to be to be the King’s most faithful subjects” (Commission, Historical Manuscripts 1904, 10). Harley’s correspondence with those in authority over her home’s situation revolves around protecting Brampton Bryan and those inside. She assures those in authority that the Harleys are faithful followers of the King, although they are disobeying his orders.

Ever embracing the maternal role, Brilliana Harley eventually appeals to the highest authority that she can in order to protect her family, the King himself. Harley’s desperate pleas to save her home have fallen on deaf ears, and she maintains:

believe me, that my house is not, nor never was, to my knowledge, a receptacle for any disloyal person, nor was any condition such, as to be a terror to any, much less did any by my command or privity either kill or any of your Majesty’s subjects, or fire any houses, or commit any outrages to bring our cause the forces under the command of Sir William Vavasour against me, but only kept such a number of servants with arms in these woeful times might defend me against pillaging and plundering, a thing your Majesty hath in several proclamations expressed your dislike of (Historical Manuscripts Commission 1904, 17).

Harley appeals to the fact that no harmful crimes have been committed even as she continues to resist the orders of the King and those that carry out his orders. While this argument does not hold up, Harley’s actions are well within her domestic role, and she takes a radical approach to protect the things that fall under this role.

Shortly thereafter, in September of 1643, the Royalist forces were called away from the castle. Although Harley’s husband implored her to leave the castle, Harley

staunchly refused and set out to thwart the possibility of another attack by demolishing royalist structures surrounding the castle. Even while battling an illness, Harley recognized the importance of protecting the home: "I haue taken a very greate coold, which has made me very ill these 2 or 3 days, but I hope the Lord will be merfifull to me, in giuing me my health, for it is an ill time to be sike in" (Historical Manuscripts Commission 1904, 209). Then, still protecting her family and home, Harley died on October 29, 1643, a mere twenty days after her final letter to Ned.

Conclusion

Harley's agency in the final letters of the series comes largely from her domestic role. As a wife and mother, Harley keeps her family together, as is typical of a domestic figure. However, this domestic role allows Harley to become a leader of the Parliamentarian cause. She successfully houses hundreds in Brampton Bryan. She is a political informant. She goes so far as to write the King. Harley functions successfully in the domestic, motherly, and wifely roles, yet also protects the household and community that reside within its walls.

Harley steadfastly refuses to concede to the besieging troops and the various male authorities aligned against her. This is a radical notion for the time. Harley's behavior goes against all social norms, however, these social norms also give her such authority over her home. By tracing the journey that Harley makes from her initial letter to Ned on October 28, 1638 to the final letter dated October 9, 1643, we see dramatic changes in the subject matter of the letters. Yet there one constant remains. Brilliana Harley never wavers in her commitment to protecting the home and her family. Her faith and maternal

role give Harley the courage to undertake a radical position in the home and against those who threaten it.

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