



The Ormond women: family, power and politics

c. 1450s–1660

by

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This thesis is dedicated to my father, Thomas Duffy

(1948–2015)

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ABBREVIATIONS

<i>AFM</i>	<i>Annála ríoghachta Éireann: Annals of the kingdom of Ireland by the Four Masters from the earliest period to the year 1616</i> , ed. and trans. John O'Donovan (7 vols, Dublin, 1851)
<i>Anal. Hib.</i>	<i>Analecta Hibernica including the reports of the Irish manuscript commission</i> (Dublin, 1930)
<i>Ann. Conn.</i>	<i>Annála Connacht (A.D. 1224-1544)</i> , ed. A. Martin Freeman, (Dublin Institute of Advanced Studies, 1944)
<i>Archiv. Hib.</i>	<i>Archivium Hibernicum: or Irish historical records</i> (Catholic Record Society of Ireland, 1912–)
Bod. Lib.	Bodleian Library, Oxford University
<i>Butler Soc. Jn.</i>	<i>Journal of the Butler Society</i> (1968–)
<i>Cal. Carew MSS</i>	<i>Calendar of the Carew Manuscripts preserved in the archiepiscopal library at Lambeth, 1515–1624</i> (6 vols, London, 1867-73)
<i>Cal. S.P. Ire.</i>	<i>Calendar of state papers relating to Ireland</i> (24 vols, London, 1860-1911)
<i>Cal. papal letters</i>	<i>Calendar of entries in the papal registers relating to Great Britain and Ireland: papal letters, 1198–1304</i> (London, 1893–)
<i>Cal. S.P. dom., 1580-1625</i>	<i>Calendar of state papers, domestic series, Elizabeth I and James I, 1580–1625</i> (London, 1872)
<i>Cal. Ormond deeds</i>	<i>Calendar of Ormond deeds</i> , ed. Edmund Curtis (6 vols, Dublin, 1932-43)
<i>Collect. Hib.</i>	<i>Collectanea Hibernica: Sources for Irish history</i> (Dublin, 1958–)
CUL	Cambridge University Library
ODNB	<i>Oxford Dictionary of National Biography</i>
DIB	<i>Dictionary of Irish Biography</i>
GO	Genealogical Office, National Library of Ireland
HMC	Historical Manuscripts Commission
<i>Hist. Studies</i>	<i>Historical Studies</i> (Dublin, 1971, Belfast, 1974–)

<i>IHS</i>	<i>Irish Historical Studies</i>
IMC	Irish Manuscripts Commission
<i>Ir. Geneal.</i>	<i>The Irish Genealogist</i>
<i>Kildare Arch. Soc. Jn.</i>	<i>Journal of the County Kildare Archaeological Society</i> (1891–)
<i>Louth Arch. Soc. Jn.</i>	<i>Journal of the County Louth Archaeological and Historical Society</i> (1903–)
<i>Cork Hist. Soc. Jn.</i>	<i>Journal of the Cork Historical and Archaeological Society</i> (1892–)
MS/MSS	Manuscript/Manuscripts
NAI	National Archives, Dublin
NLI	National Library of Ireland
<i>PMLA</i>	<i>Publications of the modern language association of America</i>
PRO	Public Record Office, London
PRONI	Public Record Office Northern Ireland
<i>R.I.A. Proc.</i>	<i>Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy</i> (1836–)
<i>R.S.A.I. Jn.</i>	<i>Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland</i> (1850–)
<i>SP</i>	<i>State Papers</i>
<i>S.P. Henry VIII</i>	<i>State Papers, Henry VIII</i> (11 vols, London, 1830-52)
TCD	Library of Trinity College, Dublin
TNA	The National Archives, Kew
BL	British Library
<i>Rot. parl.</i>	<i>Rotuli parliamentorum, 1278–1503</i> (7 vols, London 1783-1832)

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Introduction

I – Context

The death of Joan Fitzgerald countess of Ormond Ossory and Desmond at Askeaton County Limerick on 2 January 1565 represented more than the demise of one of the most politically influential and wealthy women in late sixteenth-century Ireland; it also heralded the collapse of the peace between her husband and her son that she had brokered and maintained in her native province of Munster during the previous decade. In the generation before Joan, her mother-in-law Countess Margaret Fitzgerald, wife of Piers Butler eighth earl of Ormond, also held a key position within the Ormond dynasty and among the small coterie of influential aristocratic women in late medieval Ireland. The two women operated in very different spheres; Joan was active in political circles in Munster, Dublin and London and was a personal confidante of Queen Elizabeth I, whereas Margaret concentrated her energies on stabilising and strengthening the Ormond dynasty as well as modernising the patrimony. Yet, in different ways, each played a very significant role in determining the fortunes of the family and of the earldom. Joan and Margaret were, of course, outstanding though not exceptional among their peers in terms of the influence and control they exerted; for that reason, they are familiar figures in modern histories of late medieval and early modern Ireland.¹ Less visibly influential but equally deserving of scholarly attention are the other nineteen Ormond women featured in this study, each of whom left a distinctive mark on the family and the earldom during the period c.1450-1660 (see fig.1) As will become evident, their ambitions, achievements, activities and failures were no different than those of their contemporaries in

¹ See Christine Meek and Katharine Simms (eds.), *'The fragility of her sex'?* (Dublin, 1996), also, Peter Crooks and Seán Duffy *The Geraldines and medieval Ireland: the making of a myth* (Dublin, 2016); David Edwards, *The Ormond lordship in County Kilkenny, 1515-1642* (Dublin, 2003); Mary O'Dowd, *A history of women in Ireland, 1500–1800* (Harlow, 2005).

England, their lifecycles and lifestyles in many ways also mirroring those of their counterparts on the Continent.

Throughout the period under review when Ireland was a colonial society consisting of three distinct groupings – Gaelic Irish, Old English, and the English court or Crown administration centred on Dublin Castle – the family unit was of paramount importance in holding this complex lattice together, ‘with familial alliances in effect holding the balance of power and spanning the island’.² This study shows that marriage was not only crucial to Ireland’s leading Old-English aristocratic families in forging alliances and subjugating former rivals; it also enhanced family status, titles, land holdings, familial and patronage networks, and provided aristocratic families such as the Butlers of Ormond and the Fitzgeralds of Kildare and Desmond with propitious opportunities for political advancement and dominance.

The political and social changes that occurred in Ireland across the two-hundred-year span covered in this study, and in particular the political upheavals that resulted from growing government centralisation of the sixteenth century³, wrought lasting changes on this diverse and divided landscape of regional lordships. Arising from the fall of the house of Kildare in 1534, the introduction of reformation legislation from 1534, the Act of Kingly Title in 1541, the Henrician policy of Surrender and regrant in the 1540s, and successive lord deputies’ policies aimed at curbing the power of overmighty magnates in Ireland, the collapse of the semi-feudal world of lordships and dynastic alliance by the end of that century impacted

² Carol O’Connor, ‘The Kildare women’: family life, marriage, and politics’ (unpublished PhD thesis, National University of Ireland Maynooth, 2008), p. 2.

³ These include, most notably the fall of the house of Kildare in 1534, the reformation of the established church also in 1534, the Act of Kingly Title in 1541, the Henrician policy of Surrender and regrant in the 1540s, together with the relentless pursuit by successive lord deputies to curb the power of overmighty Old English magnates in Ireland.

profoundly and irrevocably the lives of the island's aristocracy, both women and men. As this study will show, the Butlers were no exception.

II - Focus

The aim of this study is to ascertain the importance of the contributions made by successive countesses of Ormond and their daughters to the overall advancement of that dynasty's interests primarily in Ireland, but also in England, across six generations. It explores how the women of Ireland's leading Old English aristocratic family reacted to and shaped wider political, societal, economic, cultural and confessional changes of their day. The significance of marital and non-marital alliances contracted by successive earls of Ormond, mainly (though not always) for the overall advancement of their dynastic interests, is assessed. The contributions made by the Ormond women individually and collectively in both the domestic and public spheres of the Ormond territories, specifically in their capacities as countesses, wives/mistresses, mothers, daughters, sisters and perhaps most importantly of all, as widows, are evaluated. Attention is also focused on the various ways in which the particular personalities, familial connections, dowries, agendas, tastes and interests of individual women left a distinct imprint on the family, its assets, standing reputation in the Ormond territory in Ireland and beyond. The astuteness of several of the women in drawing upon the legal system, government authorities and the crown when defending and asserting their rights to dynastic properties, securing legitimate succession, exacting tribute and punishment, and lobbying on behalf of their husbands and other male relatives is also highlighted. Finally, this study traces the various ways in which domestic, social, economic and political roles played by these women evolved across generations throughout this period, gauging how instrumental individual countesses were in redefining those roles and assessing the degree to which their

outlooks and behaviours reflected changes experienced by aristocratic women of Old English families more generally, as well their peers in England and Continental Europe.

Mary O'Dowd has observed that 'there are still extraordinary gaps in our knowledge, particularly in relation to the history of the family, marriage and private life'.⁴ This study of the Ormond women attempts to address that historiographical lacuna by exploring the lives and roles of six generations of Ormond women throughout the transition from the late medieval era of the Wars of the Roses, through the Tudor period, down to the Restoration of the monarchy in England in 1660, during which time in Ireland, as in England and continental Europe, the family unit 'was the basis for the framework within which Ireland's elite constructed its politics', although its significance was diminishing.⁵ Since within that unit, the Ormond women exercised various levels of influence as daughters, wives, mothers, sisters and widows, each of the earls' wives and several of their daughters is discussed, beginning with Avise Stafford (d. 1457), first wife of James Butler fifth earl, and the analysis concludes with Elizabeth Preston (1618-1684), wife of the twelfth earl, James Butler.

Examining the activities of these women in greater detail leads to a deeper understanding of how, at various stages in their life cycles, such aristocrats strove to achieve authority within the family, accumulated property and wealth - particularly when they became widows - and entertained the possibility of attaining political influence. Whether as daughters, wives, mothers, mistresses or widows, to varying degrees the Ormond women were important and influential figures in domestic (and increasingly) public and political spheres where they operated within male-dominated networks. Furthermore, as this study will show, the Butler women, like the majority of aristocrats, actively assisted their fathers, husbands and sons in

⁴ O'Dowd, *A history of women*, p. 3. According to O'Dowd, 'In other countries, women's history has been in a position to build on studies of the family and social structure. In Ireland, studies of the history of women have preceded rather than followed the social investigation of the past'.

⁵ O'Connor, 'Kildare women', p. 1.

supporting the status quo in gender relations, and were essential to the ‘social reproduction of their families and class by executing a wide range of tasks that perpetuated the existing patriarchal regime’.⁶ In pursuing their own interests and the interests of their families, they frequently acquired significant status, influence, and wealth, especially when they remarried. This thesis will therefore reveal how the activities of several Ormond women were driven by political as well as familial agendas.

III. Conceptual framework

Power is at the heart of the conceptual framework of this thesis. During this period women did not have access to power which was formally recognised and legitimated by the laws of society.⁷ Nonetheless, as Merry E. Wiesner Hanks has emphasised, political power may also be defined as an ability to shape and influence political events.⁸ Throughout this thesis there is a heavy emphasis on the multiple and overlapping ‘roles’ through which Ormond women exercised power both within dynastic circles and on the changing political stage. In tandem with exploring these women’s roles through the prism of family, their contributions within the dynasty and in their wider social and political orbit as advocates, patrons, negotiators, peace keepers and trouble makers, are the subject of close examination.

In late medieval and early modern societies considerable political power resided in elite families who monopolised political leaderships and government office. This thesis approaches studying the Ormond women through the prism of ‘family’, highlighting its

⁶ Barbara Harris, *English aristocratic women, 1450–1550: marriage and family, property and careers* (New York, 2002), pp 3-17.

⁷ O’Dowd, *A history of women*, p. 17.

⁸ Merry E. Weisner Hanks, *Women and gender in early modern Europe*, 2nd edn (Cambridge, 2000), p. 240.

importance to operations within political circles in Ireland and England and bearing out historian Christiane Klapisch-Zuber's observation that women were far more than just 'passing guests in their natal and marital families'.⁹ It also presents an in-depth exploration of the contradiction that defined family life for late medieval and early modern women – the anomaly between their power, influence and status on the one hand, and the constraints imposed in the patriarchal society in which they lived operated and negotiated, on the other. As members of aristocratic families, women could influence and, at times, directly shape political events, as is evidenced by the women in the Tudor and Stuart courts. As O'Dowd has stressed, in Ireland too elite women exercised power and influence¹⁰: this study highlights the various ways the Ormond women did so through their fulfilment of major roles in the lifecycle of most aristocratic women, namely wife, mother, and widow. Through their marriages these women contributed to the development of the house of Ormond's connections and influence within Ireland and between Ireland and England. As countesses, they had control over the running of their households, management of domestic staff and hospitality. Several worked closely with their husbands in managing the estate and developing its infrastructure. Some such as Margaret Fitzgerald Butler (1472-1542) created a cadet branch of the Butler family owing to her development of a personal estate on her jointure lands.¹¹ Certain women, notably Katherine Butler (d. 1552), played a very prominent role in running the estate, including the imposition of coign and livery. Several were also directly involved in legal proceedings concerning ownership and occupancy of holdings. As aristocrats, the Ormond women were regarded as representatives of their family and during their husbands' absence, either as wives or widows, occasionally they fulfilled leadership

⁹ Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, *Women, family and ritual in Renaissance Italy* (Chicago, 1985), p. 118.

¹⁰ O'Dowd, *A history of women in Ireland*, pp 17-18.

¹¹ *Ibid*, p. 18.

roles in the earldom. O'Dowd has shown that there was an obligation on aristocratic women to take political action.¹² They demonstrated leadership by acting as spokeswomen and intermediaries on behalf of their husbands, sons or families in political negotiations with Dublin, London and even the Crown, mainly by means of writing petitions and personal representations.

They also showed leadership in more subtle but nonetheless important ways. Several of the women featured in this study played an indispensable role in maintaining peace between rivals to whom they were related, the importance of their role in maintaining political stability in Munster only emerging when hostilities broke out following their death or departure.¹³ During their husbands' absence in England or elsewhere, many of the Ormond women maintained the peace in their territories. During times of crises, several of these women exerted significant influence over the direction in which events developed around them by doing nothing – a form of agency in itself. This is perhaps best exemplified in the case of Elizabeth Sheffield countess of Ormond whose restrained and unprovocative conduct throughout the kidnap of her husband, the tenth earl, in 1600 was significant in ensuring his safe return and the restoration of stability in both the household and the earldom. At the other end of the spectrum, some of the women played a very active leadership role in responding to crises: this is perhaps best exemplified by Countess Elizabeth Preston's strenuous efforts to safeguard Protestants and arrange for their transportation out of Kilkenny following the outbreak of the 1641 rebellion. Their capacity to influence their husbands was widely recognised both by Crown officials and Gaelic figures who, for that very reason, at different times denied countesses permission to leave Ireland or targeted them with requests to

¹² Ibid, p. 20.

¹³ Ibid, pp 18-20.

intercede on their behalf. As countesses, they accompanied their husbands in choreographed public shows of support for – and on occasion defiance of – the Crown and presided at receptions in honour of distinguished visitors, including government officials and poets. When war and political turmoil caused dislocation, land transfers, lengthy absences of husbands and separation, these women had no option but to assume the roles of head of the Ormond family in Ireland and protector of the family estates. As this study will highlight, such crises presented the women with new obligations as they took on responsibilities of estate management and head of household, and political circumstances also frequently forced women in the family to assume legal responsibility for property.¹⁴ The Butler and Fitzgerald women who operated in the hybrid world of Hiberno-Norman and Gaelic lordships were accustomed to using a mixture of English and Irish law and as this study will show, several of them were extremely adept in their handling of legal affairs.¹⁵

As mothers of legitimate offspring of the earls of Ormond, successive countesses played a vitally important role in ensuring legitimate succession to the earldom, thereby contributing to its stability and prosperity. By virtue of having oversight of their children's upbringing and education and later, their succession and marriages, they had considerable power over the next generation. As the case of Renalda Ní Bhriain demonstrates, despite being Gaelic and possibly the mother of an illegitimate son of an Ormond earl, motherhood, independent of marital status, had the potential to confer privileged status and longstanding connections with the family.

¹⁴ Ibid, pp 92-3.

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 21.

As heiresses, four Ormond women who feature in this study demonstrated the potential for aristocratic women who asserted their claim to the earldom to precipitate serious succession crises and threaten the stability of the dynasty. By deploying their full arsenal of familial and political connections, wealth, marriage and the legal system, these women demonstrated their agency in pursuing what was rightfully theirs. The exploration of their experiences is also very revealing in relation to the treatment of women in the context of a patriarchal system of inheritance. As will become apparent, far from being hapless pawns, these heiresses proved themselves to be shrewd agents in complex factional disputes that involved, among others, the monarchs of the time.

As widows, some of the Ormond women enjoyed welcome if temporary autonomy and influence while they exercised control over their heirs and other offspring, acting as protectors during minorities, although many were subjected to pressure from resentful and impatient members of the family (including their heirs) during the minority and following their succession. As this study will highlight, widows also enjoyed significant scope for exercising control over their own personal fortunes, either by ensuring their legal entitlement to personal assets was honoured after their husbands' death, or by asserting their independence when selecting another husband, or both.

Another central concept underpinning this thesis is patriarchy. Throughout this period, both English and Gaelic laws and structures were fundamentally patriarchal. However, Barbara Harris has demonstrated how within the patriarchal structure of early Tudor England, aristocratic women found space to negotiate 'considerable power, resources, and prestige'.¹⁶ Both she and O'Dowd assert that the regional power vested in the Tudor aristocracy

¹⁶ Quoted in *ibid*, p. 271.

compelled men to rely on their wives as partners in the enterprise of enhancing their families' social, economic and political status. They have emphasised how integral aristocratic women were to the very fabric of English and Anglo-Irish patriarchal society. In both, young women were educated to assume responsibility for management of large aristocratic households and extensive estates and for the creation and maintenance of political networks. Aristocratic mothers were responsible for childcare, including the arrangement of economically and politically propitious marriages. While in English common law women were subordinate to men, in reality female heiresses, widows and remarried women enjoyed considerable economic power.¹⁷ O'Dowd's contention that sixteenth-century dynastic politics in Ireland was impossible without the co-operation of aristocratic women is strongly supported by evidence presented in this study which shows that far from remaining secluded in the private world of the home, elite women were compelled to participate in political affairs and responded to that imperative in a variety of ways. Equally, her assertion that women are less visibly involved in Irish political life in the seventeenth century as regional and dynastic networks diminished in importance is borne out by this case study of the Ormond dynasty. Thirdly, in exploring the lives and contributions of Ormond women to the dynasty's standing and influence from the early fifteenth down to the mid-seventeenth century, analysis of the interplay between personal, familial, local and dynastic concerns is set within the wider interpretative framework of the major political, social and economic changes that were in train in Ireland and England. Thus, the roles played by these women are interpreted in a context of growing centralisation of government during the sixteenth century which gradually eroded the importance of dynastic politics. In the case of the Ormonds, this became especially evident during the lifetime of Thomas Butler, tenth earl of Ormond, whose political strength derived more from his family connections with the queen and members of her court than

¹⁷ Ibid, pp 271-2.

from his ability to command an extensive factional network in Ireland. Furthermore, the semi-feudal world of lordships and dynastic alliances that formed the bedrock of the society featured in the early chapters of this study had disappeared by the early decades of the seventeenth century. O'Dowd emphasises that marriage by that time was only one of a number of ways through which families developed connections and influence. Control of government patronage, holding office and having direct personal access to the monarch were also essential.¹⁸ As this study shows, these profound changes impacted directly the lives of the Ormond women and the roles they played in shaping the future direction of the Ormond family and earldom throughout this almost two-hundred-year period. Underpinning all of this analysis, therefore, are the following recurrent concepts: female agency; matriarchal authority; female victimhood; frontier women; chatelaines; dynastic roles (wives, widows, daughters); legal status, rights and prerogatives; legitimacy; patriarchal structures and norms. Throughout, the analysis is constructed around 'family' and 'roles' and through these, it is possible to explore female agency, advocacy, representation and the perpetuation of the Ormond dynasty.

IV - Literature review

Although the subject of this thesis has been largely neglected in Irish historiography, beyond Ireland, the study of aristocratic women during this period has been a fruitful field of research with historians including Theodore Evergates (through his work on aristocratic women in medieval France) and Barbara J. Harris (in her work on English aristocratic women) demonstrating the viability and importance of scholarly examination of female aristocracy. As in France and England, many aristocratic women made significant contributions to the

¹⁸ Ibid, pp 273, 23-4, 28, 11-12, 17.

domestic, communal, economic, financial, political, cultural and confessional affairs of their dynasty, their patrimony and the lordship/kingdom of Ireland more generally. For the first time, therefore, this thesis seeks to develop a new understanding of aristocratic women from Old English families in Ireland through the prism of the Ormond women.

The historiography of medieval aristocratic women in general has been slow to develop and scholarship relating to the Irish context is only in its infancy. Katherine Simms has shed some valuable light on medieval Irishwomen in their European context. Other scholars including Mary O'Dowd, Margaret McCurtain, Marie-Louise Coolahan, Jane Ohlmeyer, Margaret Murphy, Clodagh Tait, Mary Ann Lyons and Dianne Hall have explored specific aspects of the lives of women in Ireland in the medieval and/or early modern eras: their contributions have significantly informed the approach adopted in this study. Carol O'Connor's unpublished doctoral thesis on the women of the house of Kildare (the great rival of the house of Ormond in this period) broke new ground by virtue of its singular focus on the women of this one family. As such, it provides a useful model and an excellent foil to the present study of the women of Ireland's other great Old English dynasty.

Traditional histories of the Butlers of Ormond have focused almost exclusively on male family members, with only scant or fleeting remarks made in relation to the women.

Biographical works on especially prominent heads of the dynasty include Thomas Carte's *The life of James, first duke of Ormonde* (3 vols, London 1735-6; 6 vols, Oxford, 1851), Lady Burghclere [Winifred Gardiner's] *The life of James, first duke of Ormonde* (2 vols, London, 1912), and J.C. Beckett's much more recent *The cavalier duke: a life of James Butler, first duke of Ormond* (Belfast, 1990). Several articles in the Butler Society journal also document the lives of individual earls, namely Piers Butler, eighth earl (d. 1539) and his son and heir

James Butler (d. 1546).¹⁹ More recently scholars including David Edwards, C.A. Empey, Mary Ann Lyons, and John Bradley have incorporated analysis of various aspects of the Ormond dynasty in the late medieval and early modern eras in their work.²⁰ Short biographical profiles of Margaret Fitzgerald and her husband, Piers Butler by Mary Ann Lyons,²¹ Terry Clavin²² and C.A. Empey,²³ have been useful in elucidating the political, social and familial structures within which the Ormond women operated, and have provided useful leads for contemporary source material. While to date no comprehensive scholarly study of the Ormond women as a collective has been undertaken, individual articles on Countesses Margaret and Joan Fitzgerald, as well as a considerable volume of work on the life of Elizabeth Preston, twelfth countess and first duchess of Ormond, exists. This material has been particularly useful in the identification of primary sources relevant to the present study.²⁴ Karen Holland's doctoral thesis on Joan countess of Desmond, Ormond and Ossory

¹⁹ See C.A. Empey, 'From rags to riches: Piers Butler, eighth earl of Ormond, 1515-39' in *Butler Society Journal*, ii, no. 3 (1984), pp 299-314; David Edwards, 'Malice a forethought? The death of the ninth earl of Ormond, 1546' in *Butler Society Journal*, iii, no. 1 (1987), pp 30-41.

²⁰ Mary Ann Lyons, *Gearóid Óg, the ninth earl of Kildare* (Dundalk, 1998); Empey, 'From rags to riches'; John Bradley, 'The precinct of St John's Priory, Kilkenny, at the close of the middle ages' in *Peritia*, xxii-xxiii (2011-12, 2013), pp 317-45; David Edwards, 'Elizabeth Butler countess of Desmond, Lady Dingwall (d. 1628)' in *Dictionary of Irish Biography*, ed. James McGuire and James Quinn (Cambridge, 2009) [<http://dib.cambridge.org.jproxy.nuim.ie/viewReadPage.do?articleId=a1310> [29 Aug. 2017]].

²¹ Mary Ann Lyons, 'Butler, nee Fitzgerald, Margaret, countess of Ossory and Ormond (d. 1542)' in *ODNB* (Oxford, 2004) [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/69168> [29 Aug. 2017]].

²² Terry Clavin, 'Lady Margaret Fitzgerald countess of Ormond' in *Dictionary of Irish Biography*, ed. James McGuire and James Quinn (Cambridge, 2009) [<http://dib.cambridge.org/viewReadPage.do?articleId=a1269>] [29 Aug. 2017]].

²³ Empey, 'From rags to riches'.

²⁴ Imelda Kehoe, 'Margaret Fitzgerald, wife of Piers Butler, eighth earl of Ormond and first earl of Ossory' in *Old Kilkenny Review: Journal of the Kilkenny Archaeological Society*, iv (1991), pp 826-41; John Kirwan, 'Lady Joan Fitzgerald, Countess of Ormond, Ossory and Desmond' in *Journal of the Butler Society*, iv, no. 2 (2000), pp 292-302; Karen A. Holland, 'Joan Desmond Ormond and Ossory: the world of a countess in sixteenth-century Ireland' (unpublished PhD thesis, Providence College USA, 1996), available at www.digitalcommons.providence.edu/dissertations/AA19839486 [26 July 2017]; also, Lyons,

(1995)²⁵ proved very helpful, suggesting ideas for the interpretative framework and thematic approach adopted in this study as well as providing references to relevant primary source material. Works on the history and architecture of Kilkenny city, for instance, James Graves and R.M. Prim's *History architecture and antiquities of the Cathedral Church of St. Canice, Kilkenny*²⁶ have been mined for sources and information on several Ormond women.

Historians Margaret MacCurtain and Mary O'Dowd pioneered the study of Irish women of all backgrounds during the medieval and early modern periods in their landmark 1991 publication *Women in early modern Ireland* which features essays on the lives and experiences of women from a wide range of backgrounds. MacCurtain and O'Dowd stated the case for Irish women's history as a field of serious scholarly study and scoped out unexplored aspects of the lives of Irish women ranging from peasantry to nobility.²⁷ A year later, in the 'Agenda for women's history in Ireland' published in *Irish Historical Studies*, Maria Luddy, MacCurtain and O'Dowd encouraged research on the social roles of women and in that context, emphasised the importance of marriage alliances in facilitating upward social mobility.²⁸ This thesis in turn explores each of these factors in considerable detail,

'Butler Margaret'; M. Perceval-Maxwell, 'Butler, Elizabeth, duchess of Ormond and suo jure Lady Dingwall (1615-84)' in *ODNB*

[www.oxforddnb.com/view/article67044 [accessed 4 Aug. 2017]]. For further accounts of the life of Elizabeth Preston see, Thomas Carte, *The life of James, first duke of Ormonde* (3 vols, London, 1735-6; 6 vols, Oxford, 1851), J.C. Beckett, *The cavalier duke: a life of James Butler, first duke of Ormond* (Belfast, 1990), and Lady Burghclere [Winifred Gardiner] *The life of James, first duke of Ormonde* (2 vols, London, 1912).

²⁵ Holland, 'Joan Desmond, Ormond & Ossory'.

²⁶ James Graves and J.G.A. Prim, *The history, architecture and antiquities of the cathedral church of St Canice, Kilkenny* (Dublin, 1857).

²⁷ Margaret MacCurtain and Mary O'Dowd (eds), *Women in early modern Ireland* (Edinburgh, 1991); see also O'Dowd, *A history of women*.

²⁸ Maria Luddy, Margaret MacCurtain and Mary O'Dowd, 'An agenda for women's history in Ireland, 1500–1900' in *I.H.S.*, xxviii, no. 109 (1992), pp 1-19.

embracing Elizabeth McKenna's argument that 'marriage was one of the most potent weapons in the battle for family aggrandisement'.²⁹

Further progress came about in 1996 when Christine Meek and Katharine Simms published a collection of essays by a broad range of scholars setting the experiences of Irish women from the early and late medieval periods in their European contexts. A comparative approach illuminated two prominent themes; firstly, the importance of marriage, and secondly women's capacity as individuals to navigate the challenges they faced in the patriarchal society of medieval western Europe, and from which they frequently emerge as powerful individuals. The present study attempts to build on this scholarship within an Irish context, especially Elizabeth McKenna's essay 'Was there a political role for women in Medieval Ireland?'³⁰ Less than a decade later and building on the 1996 publication, Christine Meek and Catherine Lawless co-edited a collection of eleven essays exploring women's lives in medieval and early modern Europe. Although this volume also adopted a comparative approach, its scope was distinctive from the previous collection. Here, the contributors explored the significance of gender and womanhood as well as under-researched aspects of the history of women in Ireland, including their religious and cultural experiences and their roles as advocates within their families.³¹

In 2005 Mary O'Dowd's *A history of women in Ireland, 1500-1800* set out to investigate what women in early modern Ireland did and presented an invaluable longitudinal study of the experiences of women from all backgrounds in Ireland. This thesis endeavours to

²⁹ Elizabeth McKenna, 'Was there a political role for women in medieval Ireland?' in Meek & Simms (eds), *The fragility of her sex?* p. 174.

³⁰ Ibid, pp 163-75.

³¹ Christine Meek and Catherine Lawless (eds), *Pawns or players? Studies on medieval and early modern women* (Dublin, 2003).

replicate her comparative approach to the analysis of Irish and English women along with her exploration of how women's authority and political influence changed between the late medieval and early modern periods. The validity of O'Dowd's assertion that dynastic politics in the sixteenth century relied upon the co-operation of aristocratic women is borne out by this study.³² Furthermore, her analysis of how marriage presented women with opportunities to exercise power, of how the shifting political importance of marriage impacted women's public roles, and of their ability - particularly as widows - to control their futures, has inspired similar and further related questions and analysis in this study.³³

As the first scholarly study of the Ormond women, it is intended that the present thesis will make a significant contribution to the historiography of late medieval and early modern Ireland specifically and that of gender relations in Ireland more generally, primarily through its exposition on the multiple and changing roles fulfilled by very different aristocratic women operating within dynastic circles in a society that was undergoing a fundamental transition from medieval to early modern. It aims to shed new light on the part played by women in shaping relations between dynasties both within Ireland and between Ireland and England. By integrating the experiences and contributions of the Ormond women into the narrative of that dynasty's history for the first time, not only is that history altered and enhanced, so too our understanding of gender relations and the dynamics of domestic, communal, and dynastic relations in Anglo-Irish aristocratic society more generally in this period is deepened as the case study of the Ormonds is used to elucidate more widespread trends.

³² O'Dowd, *A history of women*.

³³ *Ibid*, pp 9-43.

As indicated above, Carol O'Connor's doctoral thesis on the Kildare women³⁴ is especially pertinent to this study. Through her exploration of their private and public lives, she revealed that these women impacted public life, but not in the same capacities as men.³⁵ O'Connor also jettisoned the notion that aristocratic women were oppressed and incapable of playing any role in public affairs in Ireland during this era.³⁶ Having shown that these women, acting as individuals, forged their own public role, independent of precedents set by previous generations, she asserts that any attempt to ignore their activities and contributions to the Kildare dynasty is 'unconscionable'.³⁷

Historian David Edwards's 1998 monograph, *The Ormond lordship in County Kilkenny, 1515–1642*, has been indispensable in informing this author's understanding of the political machinations surrounding the earldom throughout much of the period covered in this thesis. His comprehensive study of the Butler family and of the factors influencing succession, his exposition on dynastic politics, and his multi-generational approach have been invaluable in providing a modern history of the Ormond dynasty which forms the spine of this thesis. Edwards has also been a vital source of references to relevant primary source material. While it was not Edwards' stated intention to analyse the role of the Ormond women, there are, nonetheless, several missed opportunities for representing their contributions in his analysis; it is this lacuna that the present study seeks to address.

³⁴ O'Connor, 'Kildare women'.

³⁵ Ibid, pp 181–91.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

More broadly within the Irish context, scholarly studies by Ciaran Brady, Cliona Murphy, Mary Cullen and Clodagh Tait provide particularly revealing explorations of how ‘women did not exist alone in the past’ and, over successive generations, frequently subverted the ‘sex roles’ expected by society: again, these have inspired the approach adopted here.³⁸ Thus, for example, Ciaran Brady has suggested that excessive focus on the military and political side of the Tudor conquest has resulted in neglect of Irish women’s experiences in this period.³⁹ He also argues that as the Tudor conquest advanced in Ireland, women could ‘no longer be seen merely as the marginal accessories to or victims of a great military confrontation, they appear rather as crucial elements within the existing Irish political system, central to the maintenance of its stability’.⁴⁰ The extent to which this was borne out in the experiences of the Ormond women will be explored in this study.

Similarly, historians Kenneth Nicholls and Katherine Simms have demonstrated in their scholarship how some women of this era exercised significant political influence, both directly and indirectly. While the lives of such women were of course affected by the political decisions of their husbands, fathers or brothers, this should not lead one to conclude that women’s participation in, or contribution to, politics was negligible.

³⁸ Cliona Murphy, ‘Women’s history, feminist history or gender history?’ in Alan Hayes and Diane Urquhart (eds), *The Irish women’s history reader* (London, 2001), p. 24; see also, Mary Cullen, ‘History women and history men: the politics of women’s history’ in *ibid.*, p. 15; also Ciaran Brady, ‘Political women and reform in Tudor Ireland’ in MacCurtain & O’Dowd (eds), *Women in early modern Ireland*, pp 69-90; Clodagh Tait, ‘Safely delivered: childbirth, wet-nursing, gossip-feasts and churching in Ireland, 1530–1690’ in *Irish Economic and Social History*, xxx (2003), pp 1-23.

³⁹ Brady, ‘Political women & reform in Tudor Ireland’.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

Simms contends that while the three most significant movements that changed Ireland in the sixteenth century (the Renaissance, the Reformation and the Tudor conquest) had similar influence on men and women, owing to their different social circumstances the impact of all three on men and women was correspondingly different. This distinction is noteworthy in the context of this present study which explores Simm's assertion of the ensuing impact on aristocratic women at the end of the sixteenth-century in comparison with their predecessors a century earlier. Simms highlights how, in a context of rapid and fundamental changes being introduced in Gaelic Ireland, making it virtually impossible for many among the Gaelic ruling classes to adapt to life in the new colonial order, several female members of these aristocratic families had an altogether better experience. She shows that as a result of certain settlements jointures and alliances (or in exceptional cases, pensions) some women appear to have been spared the negative consequences of their husbands' political or fiscal failures. Simms's hypothesis is tested in this thesis, particularly from chapter four onwards.

As the sixteenth century progressed and the Tudor conquest advanced, the roles assumed by aristocratic women took on a new dynamic. Women were no longer merely shadow personalities or 'just' the wives of their husbands or daughters of their fathers; rather, they were emerging as significant agents contributing in different circles and through a variety of means to the political metamorphosis that was happening around them. The pivotal role played by individual aristocratic women in maintaining stability in the Irish political system as highlighted by Katharine Simms, Ciaran Brady and Mary O'Dowd is central to this thesis.

In a similar vein, but in the context of France, Theodore Evergates, in *Aristocratic women in medieval France* (Philadelphia, Pa, 1999) also demonstrates that far from being powerless, high-born women were accepted as full members of both their birth-family and of the

families they married into, and that they were not usually excluded from inheriting and controlling property. He suggests that women of the landholding elite, from countesses to the wives of ‘ordinary knights’, availed of a range of social and political roles open to them. Drawing upon ecclesiastical and secular sources, he claims that noble women in medieval France were regarded as full members of both their natal and affinal families, and were not usually excluded from inheriting and controlling property; nor did these women have their share of family property limited to dowries. Furthermore, he shows that women across medieval France exchanged oaths for fiefs and assumed responsibilities for enfeoffed knights while as feudal ladies, they settled disputes involving vassals, fortified castles and, on occasion, led troops into battle. Evergates has therefore lent his voice to the increasingly strong assertion that it is no longer appropriate to depict well-born women as powerless in medieval society and that it is, as a consequence, necessary to reframe one’s perspective on and understanding of the Middle Ages in general.

Historian Barbara J. Harris’s 2002 publication, *English aristocratic women, 1450–1550: marriage and family, property and careers* has shaped this thesis in a number of important respects. Firstly, Harris’s comprehensive study focussed on English female aristocrats who were contemporaries of the women featured in this thesis. Secondly, her analysis of the stages in the lifecycle of aristocratic women, notably widowhood, has been invaluable as both a useful interpretative framework and a source of many of the concepts that underpin the present study. The relevance in the Irish context of Harris’s contention that the family unit was simultaneously the foundation of aristocratic women’s careers and the main source of their dependent status is also explored. Furthermore, her challenge to historians of women ‘to recover and articulate the balance between oppression and agency’ has informed the approach adopted in this thesis.

In the English context, Harris⁴¹ shows that such women became more important as they matured, widowhood being the most powerful stage of their lives as they were legally independent and often financially secure. She also stresses that wifely obedience did not involve passivity and that such women often actively pursued their husband's goals and interests. Lastly, Harris contends that the lives of aristocratic women in England did not necessarily change with the end of the War of the Roses and the dawn of the Tudor era. This thesis explores the extent to which this also applied to the Ormond women in an Irish context. The chronological parameters that Harris chose for her study (1450–1550) reflect not only the availability of contemporary sources but also her desire to gauge continuity and change in fundamental areas of English women's lives. Her concentration on two institutions that were most important in defining aristocratic women's lives - family and household - is replicated in this thesis and her contention that both remained fundamentally unchanged throughout that period explored.

By placing women at the centre of the medieval aristocratic family, Barbara J. Harris has revealed some significant findings. Firstly, she has reached the conclusion that patriarchal theory was frequently unsuitable when examining what elite women did and were expected by men to do in this era. She highlights how aristocratic men circumvented the legalities of patriarchy and ignored patriarchal ideologies when it served their families' best interests to do so. She also issues a reminder that aristocratic women tended not to be complete outsiders; neither did they tend to be completely assimilated into their marital families. Consequently, she emphasises the importance of studying the relationships that married women maintained with their natal kin, both parents and siblings.

⁴¹ Harris, *English aristocratic women*.

At times, Harris poses more questions that she seems able to answer. For example, she frequently argues that in practice, aristocratic women were not always slaves to patriarchy; yet she acknowledges that marital conflicts exposed the inequality between husbands and wives. This begs questions such as - how much freedom, influence or agency did elite women really have in their families? And was female agency purely familial and not personal? In short, therefore, Harris' work has contributed significantly to this study in terms of methodology, interpretative framework and themes. Thanks to her innovative, challenging and stimulating scholarship, a growing number of historians are embracing a more female-centred perspective on the aristocracy, one that clearly shows that without the work, influence, political and business acumen of their female members, elite families would not have done as well as they did. As this study will demonstrate, this was certainly true of the Butlers of Ormond, and most especially Margaret Fitzgerald and her husband, Piers Butler.

V - Primary sources

Many of the contemporary sources drawn upon in this thesis are familiar to scholars of both medieval and early modern Ireland. Yet, as is evident from the above literature review, to date no one has conducted a systematic interrogation of these sources with a view to discovering the roles and contributions of the Ormond women. By reading these 'against the grain' in order to make visible the countesses of Ormond and their daughters, the evolving positions and roles of these individuals and of aristocratic women in general in Ireland are elucidated. This substantial corpus of fragmented primary documentary material, much of it in manuscript form, is stored in approximately ten repositories in Ireland and Britain.

Among the most relevant guides to sources consulted were the *Handbook and select calendar of sources for medieval Ireland in the National Archives of the United Kingdom* edited by Paul Dryburgh and Brendan Smith⁴², Philomena Connolly's *Medieval records sources*⁴³, *British sources for Irish history, 1485-1641: a guide to manuscripts in local, regional and specialised repositories in England, Scotland and Wales*⁴⁴ by Brian Donovan and David Edwards, R.D. Edwards and Mary O'Dowd, *Sources for early modern Irish history 1534–1641*⁴⁵ and Mary Ann Lyons's 'Maynooth: a select bibliography of printed sources'.⁴⁶

In order to construct as comprehensive a picture of the Ormond women during the period covered in this thesis as possible, the following examples of primary source material have been located and consulted. The Carew Manuscripts held at Lambeth palace Library contain for example, Sir George Carew's Irish genealogies; details of the marriage of Anne Butler St Leger; and the appointment of Piers Butler and Margaret Fitzgerald as earl and countess of Ossory in 1528. In addition, the Carew Manuscripts document the downfall of Thomas Boleyn and the subsequent creation of Piers and Margaret as earl and countess of Ormond in 1538. Two of Countess Margaret Fitzgerald's letters to King Henry VIII are also held at Lambeth Palace library. The visit of Lady Mary Burke granddaughter of Margaret Fitzgerald to the Council of Ireland in Dublin in 1579 is also documented in the Carew Manuscripts. The Talbot papers held at Lambeth Palace library have provided source material for the

⁴² Paul Dryburgh and Brendan Smith (eds), *Handbook and select calendar of sources for medieval Ireland in the National Archives of the United Kingdom* (Dublin, 2005).

⁴³ Philomena Connolly, *Medieval record sources* (Dublin, 2002).

⁴⁴ Brian C. Donovan and David Edwards (eds), *British sources for Irish history, 1485–1641: a guide to manuscripts in local, regional and specialised repositories in England, Scotland and Wales* (Dublin, I.M.C., 1997).

⁴⁵ R.D. Edwards and Mary O'Dowd, *Sources for early modern Irish history, 1534-1641* (Cambridge, 1985).

⁴⁶ Mary Ann Lyons 'Maynooth: a select bibliography of printed sources' in *IHS*, xxix, no. 116 (1995), pp 441-49.

marriages of the earls of Ormond in the period before those covered in this study, and details of Elizabeth Butler's (daughter of Thomas, tenth earl) time in London before her court visit to Queen Elizabeth in 1602.

The majority of sources for this thesis are held in repositories in England, including The National Archives in Kew. The will of Thomas Butler seventh earl of Ormond, a letter from Shane O'Neill to Queen Elizabeth I – in which he documents a list of characteristics he believed a suitable wife should possess before marriage – as well as correspondence from Piers Butler, eighth earl of Ormond to King Henry VIII recommending his nephew Richard Power to be appointed to a Baronetcy, are all held at The National Archives in Kew. In addition, several letters documenting accounts of Countess Joan Fitzgerald's time spent in London during her first widowhood in the years after 1546, Lord Chancellor Alen's private correspondence with his brother expressing his fears over the countess's intentions to remarry, as well as correspondence between Queen Elizabeth I and Countess Joan, in particular about Joan's role as peacekeeper between her husband and her son in the 1550s, are also held in Kew. Letters from the Dublin Council complaining about the dowager countess Joan maintaining a personal army in Kilkenny during her widowhood; evidence of families who supported the countess, and grants of full possession of disputed lands from the queen to Thomas Butler, tenth earl of Ormond in July 1562, are all held in The National Archives in Kew in SP 63.

The British Library in London, contains the Harleian Manuscripts which have been necessary for researching the Boleyn family, while *The Book of Hours* of Thomas Butler, tenth earl of Ormond is held in the Royal Manuscripts in the British Library. A highly significant source,

it is useful in providing the chronology of the deaths of several members, male and female, of the earl's family in the fifteenth century.

Also in England, the Berkeley Castle muniments in Berkeley, hold records of the Hankford inheritance, the Carey estate, and the Butler inheritance, necessary for researching the lives of Margaret and Anne Butler, daughters of Thomas, seventh earl. The Carte manuscripts at the Bodleian Library in Oxford have provided significant source material on Piers Butler and several of the earls of Ormond from the sixteenth century in particular.

In Ireland, the National Library of Ireland holds the will of Renalda Ní Bhriain, mistress of John Butler sixth earl of Ormond, and who subsequently married into the Butler family. The records of the Ulster King of Arms containing the funeral details of members of the aristocracy in Ireland are held at the Genealogical office of the National Library and hold obituaries of Countess Elizabeth Sheffield in 1600 and Countess Ellen Butler in 1633.

Records of correspondence between the Abbott of Osney Abbey near Oxford in England and Piers Butler and Margaret Fitzgerald are also held at the NLI among Ormond estate papers and correspondence.

The National Archives in Dublin, hold the Ferguson and Lodge Manuscripts which contain records of the rolls of the Irish chancery and the Irish Court of Exchequer. The Prim Manuscripts held at the National archives, provide useful records of genealogical information on Kilkenny families and antiquarian notes on Kilkenny city and county.

Access to the State Papers of Ireland is available on microfilm in Maynooth University library and the National Library of Ireland. These proved a vital source for exploring a virtual behind-the-scenes record of events across the period covered in this study. Not least,

they provide valuable accounts of the state's encounters with individual women, including for example Countesses Margaret Fitzgerald, Joan Fitzgerald, Elizabeth Berkeley and Helen Barry. However, although a necessary source of evidence in providing glimpses into women's activities and experiences, they nevertheless offer a one-sided perspective on women's lives and therefore have their limitations.

The depositions of Ireland available online at Trinity College Dublin, contain over 3,000 witness testimonies largely reported by Protestants.⁴⁷ These have provided useful and important glimpses into the experiences of women during the 1641 rebellion and provide several anecdotes of Countess Elizabeth Preston's involvement in the protection and shelter of Protestant families. However, they are also to be interpreted with caution and circumspection, as the majority of depositions were provided by Protestant victims, and do not exclusively contain witness accounts, at times relying on hearsay as evidence.

In St Canice's Cathedral in Kilkenny City, the tombs of several of the Butler family including the elaborate and preserved tomb of Piers Butler and Margaret Fitzgerald afford detailed insight into their position, influence and legacy in local, and in Irish history.

A systematic trawl through administrative records comprising State Papers (and *Calendars of State Papers*)⁴⁸, *Chancery rolls*, *Patent rolls*, the *Carew Manuscripts*, the *Patent and Close Rolls of Chancery of Ireland*, the Extents of Monastic possessions and the *Fiants* of the Tudor and Stuart period was necessary to extract references, inferences, and anecdotal information on the women featured in this thesis.

⁴⁷ The depositions are available to access online at the Trinity College 1641 Depositions project website www.1641.tcd.ie

⁴⁸ *Calendar of state papers, Ireland, Tudor period 1571–1575*, revised, ed. Mary O'Dowd (Dublin, 2000).

As a counterpoint to the formal evidence recorded in such official source material, contemporary histories and commentaries have been consulted. Among these is one of the most frequently used sources for Margaret Fitzgerald, namely Richard Stanihurst's '*The historie of Irelande*' in *Holinshed's Irish Chronicle*.⁴⁹ Stanihurst displayed a rather misogynistic approach to women. He was not alone in this. The ambivalence of Christopher St. Lawrence, seventh baron of Howth (d. 1589) and author of the *Book of Howth* (c.1570)⁵⁰ in representing women is also clearly evident, most notably in relation to Margaret Fitzgerald's status and background. There were others too, including Barnaby Rich, who exhibited contempt for aristocratic women such as Margaret and her contemporaries. He wrote at length about how sexually immoral and generally useless these women were and claimed that they only used their control over their husbands and families to create and exacerbate disorder.⁵¹ On the other hand, the English poet Edmund Spenser offered an alternative, much more complimentary perspective on Countess Elizabeth Sheffield and her daughter, Elizabeth.⁵² In a similar vein, an anonymous sixteenth century bard in his praise poems of the Butlers of Ormond, pays particular attention to Countess Elizabeth Sheffield as wife of Thomas Butler, tenth earl of Ormond.⁵³ H.F. Hore and James Graves's *The social state of the south east of Ireland in the sixteenth century*⁵⁴ features a transcript of witness reports against the alleged maltreatment of tenants and subjects by Margaret Fitzgerald's

⁴⁹ Richard Stanihurst, '*The Historie of Irelande*' in Liam Miller and Eileen Power (eds), *Holinshed's Irish Chronicle* (Ireland, 1979).

⁵⁰ See Valerie McGowan Doyle, *The Book of Howth, Elizabethan conquest and the Old English* (Cork, 2011).

⁵¹ Barnaby Rich, *A new description of Ireland* (London, 1610).

⁵² Edmund Spenser, *Colin Clouts Come Home Again* (London, 1595), line 526, cited in Christopher Highley, *Shakespeare, Spenser and the crisis in Ireland* (Cambridge, 1997), p. 28. Spenser's sonnet number 7, appended to the faeire queen, was dedicated to 'The Right Honourable, The Earle of Ormond and Ossory'.

⁵³ *Poems on the Butlers of Ormond, Cahir, and Dunboyne, AD 1400–1650*, ed. James Carney (Dublin, 1945), pp 81-83.

⁵⁴ *The social state of the south east of Ireland in the sixteenth century*, ed. F. Hore and James Graves (Dublin, 1879).

daughter Katherine Butler, during her widowhood and the absence of her son from their County Waterford estates.

Among family records, the best surviving and most important are the Ormond deeds: the calendar of the deeds may be accessed online via the website of the Irish Manuscripts Commission, they are also available at Maynooth University library.⁵⁵ D.B. Quinn's edition of the Ormond papers for the period 1485–1535⁵⁶ was invaluable in the research of the second and third chapters dealing with the Ormond women who were based in England. The following genealogical reference works proved valuable for garnering details on individual women featured in this study: Burke's *A genealogical and heraldic history of the landed gentry of Ireland*,⁵⁷ Cockayne's *Complete peerage of England, Scotland, Ireland, Great Britain and the United Kingdom*,⁵⁸ and Richard Lawless' *The pedigree of the most noble house of Ormond*.⁵⁹ Also useful were a number of online reference resources, principally the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography (ODNB), the Dictionary of Irish Biography (DIB), and Medieval and Early Modern Sources Online (MEMSO). In addition to dedicated entries and several references to individual Ormond women, these provide biographies of many of the husbands and fathers of the countesses featured in this thesis.⁶⁰

⁵⁵ *Calendar of Ormond deeds*, ed. Edmund Curtis (6 vols, Dublin, I.M.C., 1932–43) [www.irishmanuscripts.ie [25 Oct. 2014]].

⁵⁶ 'Ormond papers, 1480–1535 in the Public Record Office, London, and the British Museum', ed. D. B. Quinn, appendix to *Cal. Ormond deeds*, ed. Curtis, iv (1509–47) (Dublin, 1937).

⁵⁷ J.B. Burke, *A genealogical and heraldic history of the landed gentry of Ireland* (London, 1899).

⁵⁸ George Edward Cockayne, *Complete peerage of England, Scotland, Ireland, Great Britain and the United Kingdom* (8 vols, Exeter, 1887–98), iii.

⁵⁹ Richard Lawless, 'The pedigree of the most noble house of Ormond' as quoted in Graves & Prim, *The history, architecture and antiquities of the cathedral church of St Canice, Kilkenny*.

⁶⁰ ODNB [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/>]; *Medieval and early Modern Sources Online available (MEMSO)*. [<http://sources.tannerritchie.com/browser.php>]; *Dictionary of Irish Biography available* [<http://dib.cambridge.org>].

VI – Methodology

The methodology underpinning this thesis is fundamentally empirical (research) and qualitative (analysis) in nature. While it is an in-depth case study of female members of a single family, a comparative framework is used throughout to permit contextualisation of their experiences alongside those of their peers in colonial and Gaelic Ireland, and further afield in England, France and other west European countries. Another defining feature of the methodology is the use of a set of core concepts (see conceptual framework section above) throughout in an attempt firstly, to enhance the overall coherence of the thesis and secondly, to facilitate the aforementioned comparative, contextualised analysis of the Ormond women. The analytic approach is gendered. Although the women's experiences, roles, contributions, and conduct are necessarily to the fore, these are explored with reference to the experiences, roles, contributions and conduct of male members of the Butler family. When mining primary source material, a methodology that involves 'reading against the grain' was used in an attempt to identify women and interrogate the evidence as exhaustively as possible. Another feature of the methodology is the cross-generational approach which enables an examination of the relative significance and contribution of individual Ormond women (particularly countesses) in serving Ormond interests.

Exploring various manifestations of 'transformation' from 'medieval' to 'early modern' in the Ormond dynasty is central to the analytic approach. In terms of approach and structure, the treatment is chronological, with each chapter focussing in sequence on the lives of the countesses and their daughters. Countess Margaret Fitzgerald is positioned at the centre of this case study which argues that it was she who brought stability and modernising influences

to the house of Ormond and its patrimony, and who in many important respects re-defined the role and influence of those countesses and daughters who came after her.

Key frameworks for shaping my research into the lives of these women include such areas as agency, frontier women, maintainers of continuity stability and order, chatelaines, wives, widows, daughters, patrons, property developers, to name a few. This study also highlights how they adapted to changing family and social situations, and used and functioned in the various male networks within which they were connected and involved. While there were many similarities between medieval women in England and France, Ireland consisted of smaller numbers of not just aristocratic women but aristocratic families.

This study aims to explore the concept of 'agency' and how it was related to power and influence. To do so, it is necessary to study their inherently ambiguous lives which were uneasily balanced between public authority and private influence, between governance and subjugation.

Through this methodology, this thesis is concerned with researching and examining whether these particular women: typified traits of historiographical trends, for example how the roles and positions of each of the countesses changed over the specific time frame researched here. Secondly, whether they embodied a noteworthy interpretative theory individual to an Irish or Old English experience at that particular time, or if their experiences were by and large, identical to their English and European peers. Thirdly, whether the Ormond women demonstrated a methodological concern, for example were their social and private roles and experiences predictable, and did the women at the end of this study achieve any greater roles or influence than those who featured at the beginning.

Therefore, through a study of the life cycle of these individual women, tracing their actions through their successive life stages from daughter to widow, and indeed future marriages, this thesis aims to elucidate the experiences of these noble women. In carrying out my research, it is important to be aware of societal and aristocratic roles and duties in the medieval period, observing them in that context, and not through a modern lens.

VII - Structure

This study is organised chronologically, with each of the seven chapters focussing in sequence on the lives of Ormond women. Countess Margaret Fitzgerald (1472-1542) occupies a central place in the thesis to emphasise how she brought stability and modernising influences to the Ormond earldom, and to highlight the fact that in many important respects, she re-defined the role of countess and the influence of Ormond women in later generations. To set the interpretative context for this study, the first chapter outlines the position, lifestyle and outlooks of aristocratic women in late medieval and early modern Western Europe. Chapter two narrows the lens to focus on the Ormond women, exploring the lives of the fifth and seventh countesses during the last half of the fifteenth century. It examines the impact that the turbulence surrounding the Wars of the Roses had on their lives and on the earldom, and explores the immediate and long-term significance of the sixth earl's relationship with a Gaelic mistress with whom he had a son. War, absenteeism, death, instability, illegitimacy, marriage and succession are the dominant themes underpinning this opening section of the study. Chapter three presents an in-depth analysis of the first succession crisis in the earldom's history. Central to this controversial episode are Margaret and Anne Butler, daughters of Anne Hankford, countess of Ormond and her husband Thomas Butler, seventh earl of Ormond. After the death of the earl in London in August 1515, a succession crisis

ensued between his two legitimate daughters – his heiresses – and the wider extended Butler family in Ireland, in particular Piers Butler and his wife Margaret Fitzgerald. It lasted for almost three decades and involved the intervention of King Henry VIII who married the great-granddaughter of the seventh countess. This chapter traces the origins and course of the succession dispute, highlighting in particular its significantly negative impact on the stability of the earldom.

The focus shifts in the fourth chapter to examine the life of Margaret Fitzgerald, Countess of Ormond and Ossory, whose term in that role marked a crucial phase not only in the history of Ormond dynasty which was scarred by a lengthy succession crisis and the fallout from decades of absenteeism but also in Ireland's political and social transformation from a medieval to an early modern world. To emphasise her pivotal importance, Margaret's life and career are examined in comparison with those Ormond women who preceded and succeeded her. In particular, her role in guaranteeing the stability and legitimate succession of the earldom, her political acumen, and her cooperation with her husband in the expansion and redevelopment of manor houses, castles, and the establishment of a school within the Ormond patrimony are highlighted. The appropriateness of her sobriquet 'Great Countess' is critically assessed as is the basis for her reputation as one of the most remarkable women of her era and country in the estimation of nineteenth-century writers such as Rev. James Graves. Chapter five explores the lives of the daughters of Margaret Fitzgerald and Piers Butler, emphasising how each contributes to a deeper understanding of the roles played by aristocratic women in colonial Ireland during the mid-to-late sixteenth-century. Where possible, their lives are traced from childhood to widowhood and particularly close attention is focussed on their marriages within the wider context of the advancement of central government control through policies of surrender and regrant, plantation and military conquest. In recognition of her

aforementioned exceptional profile and influence in the political arena, Joan Fitzgerald, Countess Margaret's daughter-in-law, is the focus of chapter six. Joan's three marriages to James Butler, ninth earl of Ormond, Sir Francis Bryan, an Englishman and confidante of Henry VIII, and finally Gerald Fitzgerald, fourteenth earl of Desmond are closely examined. In addition to uniting the houses of Desmond and Ormond, the marriage propelled Joan as countess of Ormond, Ossory and Desmond into the role of peacemaker in Munster, earning her the sobriquet 'angel of peace' from Queen Elizabeth I.

The seventh and final chapter examines six Ormond women, all of them related to Black Tom, tenth earl, namely his three wives, his daughter Elizabeth Butler, and his granddaughter Elizabeth Preston, subsequent first duchess of Ormond. It also explores the life of Ellen Butler, wife of Walter Butler, eleventh earl whom Black Tom nominated as his heir. As in previous chapters, this explores how these six women adjusted to political and social challenges that confronted them at a time of major political, social and cultural change in Ireland. In an effort to trace changes in the position and power of women in the Ormond family throughout this two-hundred-year period, the chapter also compares and contrasts the position of the Ormond women in the mid-seventeenth century with that of their predecessors in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

Mary O'Dowd has observed that recognition of the presence of women in past events should not be considered simply as a politically correct balancing of the historical record. Rather, she contends, 'an analysis of women's involvement subtly changes our understanding of the event itself. Seeing the women, therefore, widens our perception of the whole picture'.⁶¹ It is hoped that this study sheds light on the nature and extent of the contribution that the women

⁶¹ O'Dowd, *A history of women in Ireland*, p. 274.

associated with the house of Ormond during this period made to its distinctive history and character. During the period c.1450-1660, the earldom of Ormond changed irrevocably, with women not only at the centre of these changes, but frequently operating at the forefront of the challenges and crises it faced. This thesis illuminates how these factors impacted on the Ormond women across a multi-generational and chronological perspective, and thus aims to reveal an overdue and pioneering fresh examination of an integral aspect of Irish history.

Chapter 1

Aristocratic women's lives in late medieval

And early modern Western Europe

During the last three decades research into the history of female aristocracy has led to significant strides towards deepening our understanding of the lives and roles of medieval women, notably through exploration of their agency, creativity, advocacy, and increasingly probing analysis of their private, public and political lives. Whereas in the past anthologies and studies on noble women, including queens, throughout England and Western Europe, was 'largely focused on rigid periodisation centred on either the early medieval or early modern periods'¹, a particularly fruitful emerging area within this recent burgeoning scholarship is the study of the lives of aristocratic women during the transition between the late medieval and early modern eras. This is the historiographical context for the present thesis.

A significant challenge facing scholars working in this field stems from the fact that, as the English medievalist Eileen Power puts it, 'the position of women is one thing in theory, another in legal position, yet another in everyday life'² with the reality for most women,

¹ Carole Levin, Jo Eldridge Carney and Debra Barret-Graves (eds), *High and mighty queens of early modern England* (Basingstoke, 2003); Clarissa Campbell Orr (ed.), *Queenship in Europe, 1660–1815* (Cambridge, 2004); Malcom Vale, *The princely court: medieval courts and culture in North West Europe* (Oxford, 2001); Liz Oakley and Louise J. Wilkinson (eds), *The rituals and rhetoric of queenship, medieval to early modern* (Portland, 2009); James Daybell (ed.), *Women and politics in early modern England* (Aldershot, 2004); Barbara Harris, 'Aristocratic and gentry women, 1460-1640', available at *History Compass*, iv, no. 4 (2006), www.blackwell-compass.com/subject/history [17 May 2017]; Katherine Lynch, *Individuals, families and communities in Europe, 1200–1800: the urban foundations of Western society* (Cambridge, 2003). For Ireland, see Thomas Herron and Michael Potterton (eds), *Ireland in the Renaissance, c.1540–1660* (Dublin, 2007); Christine Meek (ed.), *Women in Renaissance and early modern Europe* (Dublin, 2000). See also Tait, *Death, burial & commemoration*.

² M.M. Postan (ed.), Eileen Power, *Medieval women* (London, 1975), p. 9.

being ‘a blend of all three’.³ Nonetheless, scholars (including some focussing on Ireland) have demonstrated that through the adoption of resourceful strategies in research and interpretation of sources, it is possible to give visibility to aristocratic women who have, heretofore, been left in the wings of narratives on their families and patrimonies. Among these are historians Sara Mendelson and Patricia Crawford who, in their study of women in early modern England, emphasise the importance of ‘reading sources against the grain, of asking where women were absent as well as present in the documents’.⁴ This new wave of scholarship, together with the development of gender and sexuality studies, is giving rise to a more rounded, balanced representation of the past – in the words of Mary O’Dowd, ‘seeing ... women ... widens our perception of the whole image’.⁵ This is certainly true in the case of the present study which, through its focus on the Ormond women in their multiple and overlapping contexts, highlights their distinctive contributions through their exercise of influence and/or power in various private and public capacities. Indeed, the need for and significance of the enhanced, gendered approach in deepening our understanding of the Ormond dynasty has already been highlighted by historian Elizabeth McKenna who contends that during the succession crisis that preceded recognition of Piers Butler and of his wife Margaret Fitzgerald as earl and countess of Ormond in 1538, Piers’s conduct was out of character and bore the ‘hallmark of a much more subtle mind, one which fits Margaret admirably’.⁶

³ Ibid.

⁴ Sara Mendelson and Patricia Crawford, *Women in early modern England* (Oxford, 1978), p. 9.

⁵ Mary O’Dowd, ‘The women in the gallery. Women and politics in eighteenth-century Ireland’ in Sabine Wichert (ed.), *From the United Irishmen to the Act of Union* (Dublin, 2004), pp 35–47.

⁶ Elizabeth McKenna, ‘Was there a political role for women in Medieval Ireland?’ in Meek & Simms (eds), *The fragility of her sex?* p. 163. See Chapter 4 below.

Power characterised women's position in medieval society as 'rough and ready equality' while the French medieval historian Robert Fossier has described the central middle ages as 'a matriarchal phase' in the history of Western Europe.⁷ Amy Livingstone has stressed the need to recognise that female members of noble families that established powerful ruling dynasties across Western Europe for centuries shared in this power and prestige.⁸ Drawing upon the work of historians Alice Clarke, Eileen Power and Emily James Putnam, the effects of the transition from medieval to early modern eras on the lives of aristocratic women in Western Europe in general are highlighted, specifically in relation to their changing economic, social, political and domestic roles.⁹ The intention of this chapter is, therefore, to set a broad interpretative context for this case study of aristocratic women in late medieval and early modern Ireland. The public and private lives of the Ormond women's contemporaries in England and Western Europe are discussed in order to determine the degree to which this cohort of twenty-one women resembled their contemporaries with regard to their rights and responsibilities, their roles and relationships, and their contributions in advancing family, societal and, in some instances, political interests.

Of course surviving evidence relating to women during this period is limited in volume, largely created by the clergy and aristocracy (male 'narrow castes' or 'clerkly orders' to coin Power's term, who collectively viewed women in 'subjection to man'¹⁰), and is heavily

⁷ Eileen Power, 'The position of women' in C.G. Crump and E.F. Jacob (eds), *The legacy of the middle ages* (Oxford, 1926), pp 403-33; also Robert Fossier, *Le moyen age* (3 vols, Paris 1982), ii, 321-24.

⁸ Amy Livingstone, 'Powerful allies and dangerous adversaries: aristocratic women in medieval society' in Linda Mitchell (ed.), *Women in medieval Western European culture* (New York, 1998), pp 12-35.

⁹ Alice Clark, *Working life of women in the seventeenth century* (London, 1982); Emily James Putnam, *The lady: studies of certain significant phases of her history* (New York, 1910); Power, 'The position of women'. Although Clark focuses mostly on the lives of 'working class' and peasant women, she does devote some attention to aristocratic women.

¹⁰ Power, *Medieval women*, pp 9-10.

biased in favour of a very small proportion of aristocratic women, making the task of studying their lives especially challenging. Given the dearth of extant sources in Ireland, the challenges are even greater. Added to these is the unavoidable reversion to inference when endeavouring to understand women's motives, actions and reactions in the absence of evidence generated either by themselves or by men referring explicitly to them. Nonetheless, these obstacles are not entirely insurmountable and in recent years, several scholarly studies have shown what is possible in terms of uncovering dimensions to aristocratic women's lives.¹¹ Recognising that 'the position of Irish women in the Middle Ages was discussed too much in isolation from the situation in other countries'¹² historians Christine Meek and Katherine Simms, together with nine contributors to their 1996 volume, have explored the experiences of medieval Irish women in their wider contemporary context and concluded that they were 'not fragile pawns, but players in the plots and politics of the ruling elite'.¹³ One of the most extensively researched aspects of aristocratic women's lives in this period is widowhood. Scholars have highlighted how widowhood conferred a uniquely advantageous status for noble women of property in the late medieval and early modern periods. As widows, their exercise of discretion in arranging (on occasion) their own re-marriage was an important demonstration of female power within their patriarchal societies. Yet, in many instances widowhood coincided with fending off challenges whether to the woman's own property rights and holdings or that of her heir.

¹¹ Jennifer Ward, *Women in medieval Europe, 1200–1500* (London, 2002); Joan Kelly, 'Did women have a Renaissance?' in Benjamin Kohl and Alison Smith (eds), *Major problems in the history of the Italian Renaissance* (Lexington MA, 1995); Jacqueline Murray (ed.), *Love, marriage and family in the middle ages* (Toronto, 2001); Olivia Marilyn, 'Patterns of patronage to female monasteries in the late middle ages' in James Clark (ed.), *The religious orders in Pre-Reformation England* (Woodbridge, 2002); Harris, *English aristocratic women*; Meek & Simms (eds), 'Was there a political role for women in medieval Ireland?: Lady Margaret Butler and Lady Eleanor MacCarthy', in *'The fragility of her sex'?* pp.163-175.

¹² *Ibid*, p. 7.

¹³ *Ibid*, p. 15.

The growing popularity of gender and sexuality studies over the last three decades (referenced above) has inspired scholars to shift the focus away from viewing women mainly in terms of biological or religious functions and instead explore the multiplicity of roles that they fulfilled. Among the many fresh insights into aristocratic women's lives that have resulted from this is the fact that many medieval and early modern aristocratic women enjoyed significant independence in terms of control over property and land ownership, and could even dispose of property at will.¹⁴ Studies of the family, domesticity and private lives have shown that aristocratic women played key roles in arranging their children's marriages, supervised households, managed estates, held their own honour courts, and could wield significant power both within their families and in the wider political sphere. The growing involvement of aristocratic women in the latter is also borne out in recent scholarship on Anglo-Saxon and Anglo-Norman noble women which has highlighted how 'the protection given to women as wives, mothers and widows, shows that they were not always on the fringes of society, but were active and successful participants in their worlds'.¹⁵

In addition to this burgeoning research, it is important to consider sources written by a handful of medieval and early modern women writers whose writings, either directly or indirectly and to varying degrees, influenced the lives of their contemporaries, including the private lives of the women featured in this thesis. Among these is the 'middle class' English writer Margery Kempe (1373–1438) who succinctly outlines aspects of her daily life, her

¹⁴ For aspects of the flourishing interest in challenging the ideas of a universality of experience among women see Cordelia Beattie (ed.), *Women in the medieval world* (London, 2017); Merry E. Wiesner Hanks, *Women and gender in the early modern world: critical concepts in women's history*, (4 vols. London, 2015); Judith M. Bennet and Ruth Mazo Karras (eds), *The Oxford handbook of women and gender in medieval Europe* (Oxford, 2013); James A. Brundage, *Law, sex and Christian society in medieval Europe* (Chicago, 2009).

¹⁵ Ibid; see also Paula J. Bailey, 'Daughters, wives and widows: a study of Anglo-Saxon and Anglo-Norman noble women' (unpublished M.S.E. thesis, Henderson State University, USA, 2001), available at www.hsu.edu/academiaforum/2001-2002 [24 May 2017].

experience as wife mother, and, her spirituality.¹⁶ Also in England, collections of letters by Margaret Paston (1423–84) of Norfolk nobility, and Viscountess Honor Lisle (c.1493–1566) of Cornwall, have yielded remarkable insight into the lives of medieval women, recounting in detail their private lives whilst vividly depicting the milieu in which they lived.¹⁷ We know that the writings of at least some female authors were available to a number of the Ormond women. For instance, listed among the English language books contained in the vast library of Gareth Oge Fitzgerald, ninth earl of Kildare (brother of Margaret Fitzgerald countess of Ormond) is one untitled book by Christine de Pisan.¹⁸ Italian born Pisan (c.1364–1430) was one of the most notable and studied female authors of the middle Ages. Having spent most of her life in France, she authored a biography of Charles V of France (d. 1380), numerous poems and ballads, and several books for ladies on the management of their households and estates.¹⁹ Not only was Christine de Pisan one of very few women of her time to receive a university education, her writing enabled her family to survive following her early widowhood as a young woman with a young family.²⁰ Furthermore, her literary achievements served as a fitting contradiction of the contemporary perceptions of women throughout medieval and early modern Western Europe. Pisan, through her work, set a standard and example for elite women to successfully navigate a patriarchal world. Although the book is

¹⁶ *The Book of Margery Kempe*, trans. Anthony Bale (Oxford, 2015).

¹⁷ *The Lisle letters*, i–vi, ed. Muriel St Clare Byrne (Chicago, 1981); *The Paston letters and papers of the fifteenth century*, ed. Norman Davis, Richard Beadle and Colin Richmond (Oxford, 2004).

¹⁸ *Crown surveys of lands 1540–41, with the Kildare rental begun in 1518*, ed. Gearóid Mac Niocaill (Dublin, IMC, 1992), pp 314, 356. The earl's inventory of books also included the life of St Catherine, another influential and pious woman whose life influenced women in the late middle ages.

¹⁹ Christine de Pisan, *The Book of the City of Ladies*, trans. Earl Jeffrey Richard (London, 1983); see also Pisan, *A medieval woman's mirror of honour: The treasury of the City of ladies*, trans. Charity Canon Willard and Madeleine Perner Cosman (New York, 1989); Christine de Pisan, *The Book of the three virtues*, trans. Sarah Lawson (Harmondsworth, 1985).

²⁰ Charity Cannon Willard, *Christine de Pisan: her life and works* (Harmondsworth, 1984).

listed in the library of the countess' brother, it is very likely that not only Margaret, but her sisters, her sister-in-law and her nieces, had access to the text.

In Spain Leonor Lopez de Cordoba (1362–c.1412) not only wrote one of the first autobiographies in Spanish, she also wrote about her experiences of court intrigues, her financial difficulties, and her many personal tribulations as a young woman. She served as court advisor to Queen Catalina of Lancaster (1373–1418), wife of Henry III (1379–1406), King of Castille and Leon. Indeed it was said that ‘Catalina trusted her so much, and loved her in such a way, that nothing was done without her advice’.²¹ In Brescia in Italy, Laura Cerata (1469–99) corresponded widely with Italian intellectuals of her day, and wrote on issues concerning women’s lives including marriage, the impact of wars, and the importance of education. Coming from a wealthy noble family, Cerata had a lifelong appreciation for education and in 1488, personally assembled a collection of her letters which she dedicated to her patron, Cardinal Ascanius Sforza (d.1505).²² Queen Margaret of Valois (1553–1615), wife of King Henry IV of France, among her array of writings wrote her memoirs which focused almost exclusively on succession and inheritance disputes in her natal family and the protracted conflict between the king and her brothers.²³ Likewise, Queen Marguerite of Anguoleme (1492–1549), wife of King Henry II of Navarre, was an author, patron of the arts, intellectual and a devoutly religious woman who quietly challenged the ‘norms of male dominated society by revealing the cultural politics of women’s history’.²⁴ She was also a firm supporter of reform and of the humanists of her day.

²¹ Ciara Estow, ‘Leonor Lopez de Cordoba: portrait of a medieval courtier’ in *Fifteenth Century Studies*, v (Michigan, 1982), pp 23-46.

²² Laura Cerata, *Collected letters of a Renaissance feminist*, ed. Diana Maury Robin (Chicago, 1997), p. 3.

²³ Patricia Cholakian and Rouben Cholakian, *Marguerite de Navarre: mother of the Renaissance* (New York, 2006), p. 448.

²⁴ Denis Hollier (ed.), *A new history of French literature* (Harvard, 1989), p. 148.

Historians Jo Ann McNamara and Suzanne Wemple agree that until the twelfth century there was no ‘effective barriers to the capacity of women to exercise power; they appear as military leaders, judges, castellans, controllers of property’.²⁵ However, McNamara and Wemple argue that over the following two centuries a fundamental transformation occurred which saw the loss or removal of such positions hitherto held by women, owing to the response of noble families throughout Western Europe to the increasing power of monarchical states and individual dynasties which shifted focus to the rights and prioritisation of single male heirs. This did more than contribute to the detriment of women’s property rights. As historians Kimberly Lo Prete and Theodore Evergates together contend, it ‘excluded women from the exercise of ‘public’ powers associated with lordship and governance within those nascent states’.²⁶ In keeping with McNamara and Wemple’s periodization of the changes that impacted women’s lives from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, Jennifer Ward argues that the ‘growing emphasis on primogeniture and agnatic lineage restricted women’s rights of inheritance and, in certain parts of Europe, of dower’.²⁷ For example, Ward refers to Castilian brides in the fifteenth century being frequently ‘asked’ to sign away their rights to their family inheritance²⁸ and shows that many women did so.

In Northern and Southern Europe, by the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries the nobility continued to strengthen male inheritance, and to that end, ‘entail proved to be an effective means of reinforcing patrilineage’.²⁹ This placed the succession of the dynasty or estate on

²⁵ Jo Ann McNamara and Suzanne Wemple, ‘The power of women through the family in medieval Europe, 500–1100’ in Mary Erler and Maryanne Kowaleski (eds), *Women and power in the middle ages* (Georgia, 1988), pp 83-101.

²⁶ Theodore Evergates and Kimberley A. LoPrete, ‘Introduction’ in, Theodore Evergates (ed.), *Aristocratic women in medieval France* (Philadelphia, 1999), p. 1.

²⁷ Jennifer Ward, *Women in medieval Europe, 1200–1500* (London, 2016), p. 5.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Jennifer Ward, ‘Noble women, family and identity in later medieval Europe’ in A. Duggan (ed.), *Nobles and nobility in medieval Europe* (Woodbridge, 2000), pp 249-54.

the eldest son in the father's life time, preventing it from being overturned following his death. In the Andalusian region of Southern Spain, royal consent preserved the unity of patrimony, and although occasionally an aristocratic daughter could pass her own rights to her son, she was not legally permitted to inherit herself.³⁰ In Ireland, by the late thirteenth century grants in tail male had also become increasingly popular. The houses of Kildare, Desmond and Ormond – three dynasties which became central to the history of medieval and early modern Ireland – were each created in tail male to ensure male succession, while in England for example, the earls of Oxford and Warwick, secured their estates in tail male in the early fourteenth century.³¹

In any discussion of aristocratic women in medieval Western Europe, ideas of chivalry, romance, law, family, and religion, predominate. Indeed, the romanticism of 'the lady in her complicated love affairs, half formal and half passionate, flying her hawk in long blue days by the river training up young squires in the art of love and polite society'³² have to a large extent, focused on the courtly lives of noble women throughout Europe. However, in reality, individual women's voices, when found, are both revelatory and informative in their candour and intent. One such example of an aristocratic woman's voice and a revelation into her real-life experiences is contained in the *Book of the Reformation of Monasteries* (1470–75) by the Saxon reformist and priest, Johan Busch. In the hours prior to her death sometime before 1480, the dying Catherine, duchess of Brunswick-Luneburg, compared life in a castle to living in a cell. When asked by her priest if she believed she would go to heaven, the duchess replied

³⁰ Ward, *Women in medieval Europe*, p. 7.

³¹ Ward, 'Noble women, family & identity', pp 249-54.

³² Postan (ed.), Power, *Medieval women*, p. 35.

‘This I believe firmly’. Said I ‘That would be a marvel. You were born in a fortress and bred in castles and for many years now you have lived with your husband, the Lord Duke, ever in midst of manifold delights, with wine and ale, meat and venison; and yet you expect to fly away to heaven directly you die’. She answered ‘Beloved father, why should I not now go to heaven? I have lived here in this castle like an anchoress in a cell. What delights or pleasures have I enjoyed here, save that I have made a shift to show a happy face to my servants and gentlewomen? I have a hard husband who has scarce any care or inclination towards women. Have I not been in this castle even as it were a cell?’³³

Such poignant insights into the private world of the duchess intimate that aristocratic women experienced isolation and confinement. As attested by the duchess, the reality of these women’s lives as mothers, wives, widows, chatelaines, and landowners was a far cry from the romantic constructs of ‘the lady flying her hawk’. The duchess’s death-bed revelation also bears out Natalie Zemon Davis’s contention that the ‘idea of hierarchy was the very heart of the traditional Christian marriage system, the husband had authority over the sexuality and property of his wife’.³⁴

Early lives and socialisation of medieval noble women for marriage

Ongoing research in this field is deepening our understanding of the life cycle and lifestyle of aristocratic women in Europe during the late medieval and early modern periods. We know that whereas aristocratic daughters usually lived with their families until their late teens

³³ Johannes Busch, *Liber de Reformatione Monasteriorum*, ed. Karl Grube *Geschichtsquellen der Provinz Sachsen* (Halle, 1886), p. 779.

³⁴ Natalie Zemon Davis, ‘Introduction’ in George Duby, *The knight, the lady and the priest: the making of modern marriage in medieval France* (Chicago, 1993), p. ix.

before they married, daughters who married as children were normally sent to live with the families of their husband while still under ten years old. Historian David Herlihy has concluded that the average age for marriage in late medieval Italy was seventeen, in France sixteen and in England and Germany, eighteen.³⁵ For example, in Italy, Beatrice d'Este (1475-97), duchess of Bari and Milan, was betrothed aged five years old and eventually married when she was fifteen in Milan.³⁶ Also in Italy, Caterina Sforza (d.1509) future Countess of Forli, was married when she was ten years old, and gave birth to her first child aged fifteen. In England and in continental Europe, 'child marriage was the rule rather than the exception'.³⁷ Furthermore, in the former, common law permitted a wife to claim dower if she were nine or older at the time of her husband's death 'albeit he were but four years old'.³⁸ Among those English aristocratic females who married and gave birth while still a child was Lady Margaret Beaufort (1443-1529), countess of Richmond and Derby. While less than ten years of age she was betrothed to John de la Pole, second duke of Suffolk (d.1492), sometime before 1450. By the time she was twelve, Margaret had married a second time and by January 1457 she had given birth to the future Henry VII by her second husband, Edmund Tudor.³⁹ The daughters and sons of aristocratic families entered into marriages arranged by their parents to create or consolidate connections with a view to enhancing the standing of their family. Although brides moved to reside in the homes of their husbands, they still maintained 'important and close contact with their kin families'.⁴⁰ Historian Amy Livingstone has

³⁵ David Herlihy, *Medieval households* (Harvard, 1985).

³⁶ Maria Nadia Covini, 'Beatrice d'Este, i figli del Moro e la pala sforzesca. Arte e politica dinastica' in Luisa (ed.), *Beatrice d'Este, duchess of Milan 1475-1497* (Pisa, 2008), pp 91-109.

³⁷ Power, *Medieval women*, p. 40.

³⁸ F. Pollock and F.W. Maitland, *The history of English Law*, 2nd edn. (Cambridge, 1968), ii, 390-1.

³⁹ Michael Jones, 'Margaret Beaufort 1443-1509' in Philippa Gregory, David Baldwin and Michael Jones (eds), *The women of the cousins' war* (London, 2011), pp.254-5

⁴⁰ Pollock & Maitland, *The history of English Law*, ii, 15.

emphasised that this transition from daughter in one household to mistress of another ⁴¹ was a significant first step in the life cycle of female aristocrats in Western European society.

In Ireland, too, both child marriages and arranged marriages were common among the nobility and the Ormond dynasty was no exception. For instance, Margaret Fitzgerald (d.1542) wife of Piers Ruadh Butler, eighth earl of Ormond (d.1539), and daughter of Gareth Mor Fitzgerald, Great earl of Kildare (d.1513), having been raised in the household of one of the most powerful men in late medieval Ireland, married whilst still a child. Once married, she effectively terminated support for her birth family and deviated from the common pattern of married women remaining allied with and working for their own family. Instead, Margaret demonstrated complete loyalty to her husband and his family. Margaret's daughter-in-law, Joan Fitzgerald, ninth countess of Ormond (d.1565), was mother of one earl (of Ormond) and wife of another (earl of Desmond) as a result of her third and final marriage, to a man of her own choosing. (see Chapter six).

Aristocratic wives in late medieval Western Europe

Upon marrying, female aristocrats were usually provided with dowers, one by their husband's family and another by their own natal family.⁴² Wives' access to either dower or dowry varied between regions in Western European countries. For example, in England, married aristocratic women had no control over their dowers unless they became widows. By contrast, in France, wives had access to both dower and dowry from the time of their

⁴¹ Amy Livingstone, 'Powerful allies and dangerous adversaries: noblewomen in medieval Society' in Mitchell (ed.), *Women in medieval Western European culture*, pp 7-31.

⁴² Susan Papino, 'Shifting experiences: the changing roles of women in Italian, lowland and German regions of Western Europe from the Middle Ages to the early modern period' (2006) in *Senior Honours Projects University of Rhode Island*, available at www.digitalcommons.uri.edu/srhonorsprog/10 [10 Apr. 2017], p. 16.

marriage and aristocratic married women maintained independent control of their own land which could be part of either their dowry, dower, or inheritance from their natal family. Throughout much of Europe, noble women's use of seals represented an 'appropriate expression of their power'⁴³ particularly in their handling of land and property transactions. In Italy although women had no control over their dowries as long as their husbands lived, they could protect any property given as part of their dowry if their husband died insolvent.⁴⁴ Moreover, when a wife outlived her husband and even if she had children, she was entitled to restitution of her dowry in full. As historian Christine Meek notes, 'one of the fundamental facts about the dowry was that it belonged to the mother [or wife] and moved with her, if she left one household for another'.⁴⁵ However, as in other Western European countries, an Italian widow's natal family were usually keen for her to re-marry, particularly as she could enter a new marriage without having to produce another dowry.⁴⁶

Norms and entitlements around female access to and control of dowers and dowries varied significantly across Western Europe. In Venice, for instance, it was not unusual for aristocratic daughters to receive dowries of equal value and at times even greater than the share of the paternal inheritance received by their brothers. Venetian women were also unique as they asserted their right to determine what would happen to their entire dowries 'after their deaths by testamentary depositions'.⁴⁷ In the archdiocese of Salzburg in Austria,

⁴³ Livingstone, 'Powerful allies & dangerous adversaries', p. 24.

⁴⁴ Christine Meek, 'Women, dowries and the family in late medieval Italian cities' in Meek & Simms (eds), *The fragility of her sex?* p. 136.

⁴⁵ Ibid, p. 143.

⁴⁶ Ibid, p. 146. For an in depth analysis of medieval Italian dowries, see S. Chojnacki, 'The power of love: wives and husbands in late medieval Venice' in M. Erler and M. Kowaleski (eds), *Women and power in the middle ages* (London, 1988), pp 126-48. Venetian women were unique as they asserted their right to determine what would happen to their entire dowries 'after their deaths by testamentary depositions': see Meek, 'Women, dowries & the family', p. 148.

⁴⁷ For greater analysis of medieval Italian dowries, see S. Chojnacki, 'The power of love', pp 126-48; Meek, 'Women, dowries & the family', p. 148.

certain noble women, ‘retained considerable control of their property after their marriages’.⁴⁸ Historian John Freed has shown that wives of particular families did not tolerate the alienation of their property by their husbands’ ‘barring consent of both their wives and children’,⁴⁹ demonstrating how effectively women in German medieval society could wield influence. Elsewhere, for example in Flanders, women ‘could inherit from their parents like their brothers, and therefore did not actually require a dowry’.⁵⁰

In her *Le Livre des Trois Vertus* (c.1406) Christine de Pisan (d.1430), who wrote several practical advice books for medieval women, encouraged noble wives to be astute in financial matters, management of estates and supervision of bailiffs, and adept at budgeting and fulfilling their duties as housewives.⁵¹ Although wives usually became involved in their husbands’ business, dynastic and estate affairs, they also generally maintained close personal and business contacts with their natal family; hence, noble women frequently appear as executors, co-signers, witnesses and consenters in their kin family documents.⁵²

By comparison with continental Europe, in England and Ireland the rights of married aristocratic women were much more restricted as husbands exercised control over their wives’ rights to property. Once married, the property of an aristocratic heiress in Ireland was transferred to her husband, who secured full control of his wife’s estate.

⁴⁸ John Freed, ‘German source collections: the archdiocese of Salzburg as a case study’ in Joel Rosenthal (ed.), *Medieval women and the sources of medieval history* (Georgia, 1990), p. 86.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Walter Simons, *Cities of ladies: Beguine communities in the medieval Low Countries, 1200–1565* (Philadelphia, 2001), p. 10.

⁵¹ De Pisan, *Le Livre des trois Vertus*, available at www.gallica.bnf.fr [1 Apr. 2017].

⁵² McNamara & Wemple, ‘The power of women’, p. 96.

Whereas practices around dowers and dowries varied greatly across Europe, noble women in Ireland, England, France and throughout Western Europe all ran households and contributed to the running of estates; as such, they occupied positions from which they could exert significant influence within their private sphere and the public arena. Attending to matters concerning marriage, succession and inheritance which were primarily familial concerns frequently ‘overlapped with public duties’.⁵³ As this study highlights, Irish women often exerted their influence in the public arena, making representations on behalf of their husbands at council and court levels. Chapter four discusses Margaret Fitzgerald’s visits to court to represent her husband on at least two occasions, while chapter five examines the visit to court that her daughter and namesake, Margaret Butler, made to represent her two sons following the death of her husband and their father when she faced threats to her son’s inheritance. Chapter six explores how Joan Fitzgerald as countess of Ormond, Ossory and Desmond exerted her influence to maintain the earldom of Ormond during her son’s minority. She is also shown to have played a significant role in maintaining peace between the rival houses of Ormond and Desmond, and like many of her contemporaries, she maintained sufficient strong connections with her kin family that she succeeded in making her cousin her third and last husband. In short, as this study will demonstrate, aristocratic Irish women were no different from their counterparts in England or continental Europe in their fulfilment of familial duties as advocates, agents or protectors of their heirs’ inheritance.

Politics and power

It has been argued by historians including Elizabeth McKenna that the role of noble women during the later Middle Ages was somewhat restricted and ineffective with their ‘energies and

⁵³ Ibid.

abilities officially relegated to the domestic arena'.⁵⁴ However, this was by no means universally the case. In the Low Countries, for instance, women frequently held public political roles, and participated in law-making, particularly in fourteenth-century Flemish society.⁵⁵ According to historian Ellen Kittell, those Flemish women who made 'routine appearances in public as chief and effective agents in the variety of oral-aural transactions, were countesses and castellans [and part of] the legal and commercial lives of most cities'.⁵⁶ In the Low Countries and in some German and Italian regions, the dynastic system of government structure facilitated women to achieve political power and fulfil economic roles which 'further enhanced their status in the cultures of these regions'.⁵⁷ However, the political opportunities and influence that had been available to women throughout Western Europe diminished as the medieval period progressed.⁵⁸ In the German States a weakening of the feudal system negatively impacted the economic role of women since 'the extensive powers exercised by women were largely derived from the rather irregular powers held by the great families of the age'.⁵⁹ By the end of the thirteenth century as dynastic rule in Western Europe in general was declining, noble women were losing the authority and control that they had hitherto enjoyed.⁶⁰ Thus, whereas in the earlier medieval period, when an aristocratic woman in Holland became a widow, she could expect to automatically become regent, from the later medieval period, 'with growing frequency, male relatives, especially [her deceased

⁵⁴ McKenna, 'Was there a political role for women in medieval Ireland?', p. 163.

⁵⁵ Ellen Kittell, 'Women audience and public acts in medieval Flanders' in *Journal of Women's History*, x, no. 3 (1998), p. 74.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

⁵⁷ Papino, 'Shifting experiences', p. 20.

⁵⁸ In late medieval Germany, historian Martha C. Howell contends that 'a shift from a family to an individual as the constituent civil unit caused a definite decrease in the public roles that a woman could employ': see Martha C. Howell, 'Citizenship and gender: women's political status in northern German cities' in Erlar & Kowaleski (eds), *Women & power in the middle ages*, p. 51.

⁵⁹ McNamara & Wemple, 'The power of women', p. 96.

⁶⁰ Papino, 'Shifting experiences', p. 26.

husband's] brothers, seized the occasion to take power'.⁶¹ Historian Rudolph Dekker argued that in Holland by the sixteenth century, 'a more rationalised and formalised functioning of political power eventually pushed women off the scene'.⁶² The same was occurring elsewhere in late medieval Western Europe. In Northern Italy, 'the growing republican form of government under which Italian communes were organised was an institutional obstruction to the visibility of women'.⁶³ The power that aristocratic women once exercised within the world of dynastic-centred politics was undermined when 'institutions outside the household were being created to administer public affairs', and the former political, economic or social influence of women in the earlier Middle Ages - closely bound up with family connections - declined as the role of the family weakened in European politics in general.⁶⁴ As will be seen in chapter five, this change was very evident in mid-sixteenth-century Ireland in a context of encroaching centralised government following the fall of the house of Kildare (1534) and passage of the Act of Kingly Title instituted by King Henry VIII (1541).⁶⁵ The impact of these changes on aristocratic women in Ireland, notably the Ormonds, and the importance of political marriages in presenting women with the opportunity for involvement in political affairs, are discussed in some detail in this study (chapters five and six).

⁶¹ Rudolph Michel Dekker, 'Getting to the source: women in medieval and early modern Netherlands' in *Journal of Women's History*, xx, no. 2 (1998), p. 166.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ David Herlihy, 'The towns of Northern Italy' in Susan Mosher Stuard (ed.), *Women in medieval history and historiography* (Philadelphia, 1987), p. 134.

⁶⁴ Papino, 'Shifting experiences', p. 29.

⁶⁵ See Steven Ellis, *Tudor frontiers and noble power: the making of the British state* (Oxford, 1995); idem, *Tudor Ireland: Crown, community and conflict of cultures, 1470-1603* (London, 1985).

Widowhood

One of the most researched dimensions of aristocratic women's lives during this era is widowhood.⁶⁶ Through his massively popular manual for the ideal Christian woman (1523) the Spanish humanist Juan Luis Vives (d.1540) played a key role in defining appropriate roles for women, widows included.⁶⁷ He wrote that

A woman bereft of her husband is, in the true meaning of the word, widowed – that is, destitute and deserted. She is at the mercy of the winds, like a ship without a rudder, and is carried along hither and thither without plan or purpose, like a child without its tutor.⁶⁸

According to Vives, a widow ought to live as though her husband was still living, she should not mourn excessively, and should at all times exercise chastity.⁶⁹ Remarriage, he wrote, may be considered if a widow had a large family and required help to continue their upbringing.⁷⁰ Although such emphatic assertions regarding the position of a woman following the death of her husband cannot be taken as representative of reality and are grossly presumptive, they nonetheless provide revealing insights contemporary views of women and their reliance on

⁶⁶ See Ffiona Swabey, *Medieval gentlewoman: life in a gentry household in the later middle ages* (New York, 1999); Rhoda L. Friedrichs, 'Rich old ladies made poor: the vulnerability of women's property in late medieval England' in *Medieval Prosopography*, xxi (2000), pp 211-29; Sandra Cavallo and Lyndan Warner (eds), *Widowhood in early modern Europe* (Harlow, 1999); F. Colclough, 'Widows and widowhood in early modern Venice' (unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Northumbria, 1999); Gillian Kenny, *Anglo-Irish and Gaelic women in Ireland, c.1170–1540* (Dublin, 2007), pp 132-85.

⁶⁷ Juan Luis Vives, *The education of a Christian woman, a sixteenth century manual*, ed. Charles Fantazzi (Chicago, 2000). His work originally titled *De Institutione Feminae Christianae* was published in 1524 and translated into English in 1529.

⁶⁸ *Ibid*, p. 301.

⁶⁹ *Ibid*, p. 301.

⁷⁰ *Ibid*, p. 322.

husbands.⁷¹ Moving well beyond such notions of widowhood, modern scholars have been exploring how widowhood presented a woman with opportunities to assert her own identity and power whilst negotiating patriarchal constraints, demonstrating her business acumen, her capacity to protect the wardship and inheritance, her aptitude for administering estates, and negotiating marriage settlements among other skills. Moreover, when a woman developed an awareness of her influence or power or authority during her first marriage that could develop further during a period of widowhood and could in turn place her in a stronger position as a spouse in subsequent marriages. In the present study, this is best exemplified by Joan Fitzgerald (Chapter six). Although shared by men and women, the experience of widowhood was deeply gendered, their contrasting experiences reflecting the patriarchal society that obtained: they also varied greatly from country to country. In Italy, for instance, no system of primogeniture existed; instead ‘the normal inheritance system was for all legitimate sons to inherit equally’.⁷² In fifteenth-century Florence, two brothers from the powerful aristocratic Davizzi family reacted harshly when their widowed sister Lena Davizzi took her future into her own hands. The brothers prayed that ‘God [would] send her a hundred years of misery to repay her for her madness’⁷³ after she took advantage of their absence in London to arrange for her dowry to be transferred to the church instead of her kin family following her decision

⁷¹ Vives’s manual was one of several contemporary texts setting out men’s expectations around women’s roles in both domestic and public spheres. From the sixteenth century onwards, religious and scientific ideas about women took on powerful interpretations and restrictions of their own, many holding up ideals for the perfect Christian wife, mother and widow. Historian Joan Klein contends that this overt religious influence ‘is evident in several prominent religious works including *The Book of Common Prayer*, consisting of several religious texts accepted by the Protestant Church in England’. Klein also notes that although the text of *The Book of Common Prayer* was composed under Henry VIII and popularised under Elizabeth I for the Church of England, many Christians across Europe became familiar with its ideas and content. Such beliefs expectations and instructions for women as laid down in religious texts, prayer books and manuals, were nonetheless, embraced by many. See Joan Klein (ed.), *Daughters, wives and widows: writing by men about marriage in England, 1500–1640* (Chicago, 1992), p. 2.

⁷² Meek, ‘Women, dowries & the family’, p. 137.

⁷³ Carte Stroziane, III serie, 32, f. 66, 16 June 1422 (Archivo di Stato di Firenze, Italia).

to become a nun in Foligno. ‘An ungracious female’⁷⁴, Lena needed to be resourceful since in Florence, it was norm for widows to be returned under the roof of their natal families by the evening of their husband’s funeral. Nowhere were regional differences in the status and rights of aristocratic widows as sharply defined as in the German States where widows generally fared badly. In the town of Magdeburg, for instance, regulations stipulated that a widow ‘shall have no share in his [her husband’s] property except what he has given her in court, or has appointed for her dower’.⁷⁵ ‘If the man has no provisions for her, her children must support her as long as she does not remarry’.⁷⁶

After their husbands’ death, French widows continued to enjoy the position they held within their societies and affinal families, so much so that they held more powerful positions as widows than any of their contemporaries in Western Europe in the late medieval and early modern eras. French aristocratic widows were legally entitled to assume control of their children, dynastic lands, official positions, without the opposition of either their kin or affinal families. This was in direct contrast to the legal position of their contemporaries in Ireland and England where, once widowed, a woman was legally entitled to one-third of her husband’s possessions – her dower. In their new, more autonomous position, widows in Ireland and England were free to exercise their authority over tenants, litigate disputes among their dependents, and appoint estate officials.⁷⁷ However, as long as she held her dower, there was potential for conflict within her immediate and wider family. Like their counterparts in England, Italy, and France, aristocratic widows in Ireland such as Dame Margaret Nugent,

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Emile Amt, ‘Customs of Magdeburg’ in Emile Amt (ed.) *Women’s lives in medieval Europe: a sourcebook* (New York, 1993), pp. 71-72

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Sarah Cavallo and Lyndan Warner (eds), ‘Introduction’ in *Widowhood in medieval and early modern Europe* (London, 1999), pp. 3-24.

daughter of Richard Nugent, Baron of Delvin, County Meath (d.1475) lobbied the (Irish) Parliament to hear petitions that her dower rights be protected. Among these was Dame Margaret Nugent, daughter of Richard Nugent, Baron of Delvin County Meath (d.1475) who petitioned Parliament after an accusation of treason was made against her husband William Butler.⁷⁸

Widowhood, as much as marriage itself, constitutes a central theme in this thesis. Throughout Western Europe the responsibilities of a noble widow began almost immediately following the death of her husband, as many (though by no means all) widows had been appointed as chief executors of their husband's wills by their husband.⁷⁹ For example, in England, Barbara Harris has noted that seventy-seven per cent of English noblemen in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries personally appointed their wives as sole executor of their wills.⁸⁰ Entrusting the future of their patrimony and estates in the full control of a widow pointedly reveals many husbands' recognition of their wives' capabilities. One of the most important roles fulfilled by a widow was ensuring the continued collection of rents from the family estates. Furthermore, the task of overseeing the continued operation of the estate or earldom

⁷⁸ *Statute rolls of the Parliament of Ireland: first to the twelfth years of the reign of King Edward the fourth*, ed. Henry F. Berry (Dublin, 1914), pp 687-9. Parliament upheld Margaret's claim: 'whereupon consideration being had that the said Margaret has no other means to any extent by which she can live, and also that the offences and trespasses which the said William [her husband] committed were against the will of the said Dame Margaret'. William was accused of treason against the king, as a result of his support for the Lancastrian cause during the Wars of the Roses: see *ibid*.

⁷⁹ For a detailed discussion of wills see, Jennifer Ann Rowley-Williams, 'Image and reality: the lives of aristocratic women in early Tudor England' (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Wales, Bangor, 1998); Rhoda L. Friedrichs, 'The remarriage of elite widows in the later middle ages' in *Florilegium*, xxiii, no. 1 (2006), pp 69-83; Mary Prior, 'Wives and wills, 1558-1700' in John Chartres and David Hey (eds), *English rural society, 1500-1800: essays in honour of Joan Thirsk* (Cambridge, 1990), pp 201-227; Margaret L. King, *Women of the Renaissance* (Chicago, 1991).

⁸⁰ Harris, *English aristocratic women*, p. 129. Although many women were given full rights as executrices of their husbands' wills, many others found themselves forced to share authority with sons, nephews, brothers-in-law and at times illegitimate sons.

required skilful negotiation and management abilities. In England, one widow who excelled in this role was Elizabeth Talbot, Countess of Shrewsbury or ‘Bess of Hardwick’ (1527-1608). Aside from her successful management of her second husband William Cavendish’s estates after his death in 1557, she developed contacts with powerful aristocrats, pursued several of her own projects, and personally lobbied parliament when she challenged her husband’s debts to the Crown.⁸¹ When she died in 1608, she was one of the richest people in Elizabethan England and she successfully negotiated the marriages of several of her children.⁸²

In Ireland, Joan Fitzgerald, Countess of Ormond Ossory and Desmond (d.1565) was somewhat comparable with Bess of Hardwick. Twice widowed and married three times, Joan (unlike Bess) she did not hold a position at the queen’s privy chamber. She was, however, both respected and acknowledged by Elizabeth I for her peace keeping and negotiation skills between the rival houses of Ormond and Desmond in her role as mother of one earl, and the wife of the other, throughout the 1550s. Joan also successfully held control of the earldom of Ormond during her son Thomas Butler’s minority following the death of her husband, James Butler, ninth earl of Ormond, in 1546.⁸³ Her sister-in-law, Katherine Butler, as Baroness Power in County Waterford, assumed control of her son’s territories following the death of her husband, and without any authority to do so. (see Chapter five). The death of the head of the dynasty, whether husband or brother, at once presented opportunities and a multitude of challenges for the widow ranging from chances for re-

⁸¹ Elizabeth Goulding, ‘Elizabeth Talbot [Bess of Hardwick] Countess of Shrewsbury 1527–1608’ in *ODNB*, available at www.oxforddnb.com.library.unl.edu/view/article/26925 [1 May 2017]; see also Sara Heller, *Women in early modern England, 1530–1720* (Oxford, 1998), p. 53, for a discussion of how English women became responsible for the debts of their deceased husbands.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ Edwards, *The Ormond lordship*, pp 61, 94-5.

marriage and for greater positions of authority and independence, to inter-family feuds over contested wills and inheritances. The medieval ideology of spousal hierarchy complicates the situation of widows, since as wives, they were forced to rely upon the authority of their husbands. Yet, on being widowed, the woman immediately assumed headship of the household. In her writings, the pragmatic Christine de Pisan emphasised the need for women to be educated in order that they might be prepared for the immense business, financial and legal responsibilities that would fall to them in their bereavement. As this study will show, the Ormond women's handling of widowhood during this period mirrored that of their English and continental contemporaries, with several of them showing both a willingness and a capability to exercise influence and on occasions, power, in their own right.

There was little place for sentiment in at least some aristocratic marriages during this era and the Ormond dynasty was no exception. The second husband of Margaret Butler, daughter of Countess Margaret Fitzgerald, had allegedly murdered her younger brother Thomas Butler in 1532 at the behest of her uncle Gareth Oge Fitzgerald, ninth earl of Kildare (chapter five). In marrying him, Margaret complied with the wishes of her family and acted in keeping with her standing as daughter of the earl and countess of Ormond who lost no opportunity in contracting marriages for all six of their daughters with a view to extending the Ormond network of alliances and political connections. In a similar show of dutiful loyalty to her husband, Eleanor Butler wife and countess of Garret Fitzgerald, fourteenth earl of Desmond, despite failing to persuade her husband to consent to the demands of the government, remained with the earl until his death in 1584. As a widow, the dowager countess continued to petition the London government to have her son restored to his rightful position. In her political role as an intermediary, she was typical of many widowed mothers throughout England and Western Europe who sought to ensure the heir's succession. Re-marriage was

common among the aristocracy in Ireland as elsewhere in this period and although few could match Janet Sarsfield, the dowager Lady Dunsany (d.1598) who married six times, several of the Ormond women married more than once and were by no means unusual in doing so.⁸⁴ On the Continent, in England and in Ireland, when an aristocrat died, his widow frequently encountered threats and challenges to the preservation of the dynasty, especially if the heir had not yet reached majority. This was the experience of several women associated with the Ormond family. Eleanor Beaufort, fifth countess of Ormond, like many of her noble contemporaries following the Wars of the Roses in England, experienced significant uncertainty as the widow of an attainted earl. Between 1539 and 1542, Margaret Fitzgerald, eighth countess had to contend with challenges from her son and heir. This thesis also explores how Joan Fitzgerald, who was widowed for the first time following the murder of her husband James Butler, ninth earl of Ormond in 1546, coped with the challenges that she encountered, particularly while her son Thomas was a minor and living at court in London. As will be revealed, not only did Joan re-marry, she also played a significant role in preserving and protecting her son's wardship including negotiations with the king on her son's behalf (see Chapter six). This was not at all unusual. Following the succession crisis that occurred in the Ormond dynasty following decades of absenteeism and after the death of Thomas Butler seventh earl in 1515, his two daughters Anne and Margaret, fought a protracted and bitter feud over their legal inheritance and succession against the challenges of Piers Butler a usurper cousin based in Ireland (see Chapter 3). Living in England, and as an elderly widow Lady Margaret Butler Boleyn outlived many of her grandchildren, including Queen Ann Boleyn, and actively participated in securing her claim to her father's inheritance, whose death seriously destabilised the dynasty for decades.

⁸⁴ Historian Clodagh Tait suggests that 'her long career as a wife entitled her to this privilege, and her solitary internment does seem to indicate an unusual degree of autonomy': see Tait, *Death, burial & commemoration*, p. 115.

While it is true that aristocratic women acquired a greater sense of freedom, autonomy and power in widowhood than they held during their married life, at times they could also be confronted with several challenges from a variety of quarters. The most common dilemma for widows who were entitled to either legitimate succession or a substantial inheritance arose from opposition mounted by their deceased husband's male kin, including their own sons, and, their husband's illegitimate sons. For example, in England, when Lady Elizabeth Muston became a widow following the death of her husband Sir Richard Whethill in 1536, she received almost his entire estate.⁸⁵ When the couple's oldest son Robert contested his inheritance and attempted to force his mother from her property and lands, Elizabeth solicited the support of the chief secretary Thomas Cromwell in 1537 who supported her suit, ruling that she be allowed to continue to reside at her home.⁸⁶ When Elizabeth died ten years later, she scarcely bequeathed anything to her troublesome son, who subsequently sued his mother's executor.⁸⁷ Similar disputes were commonplace in Ireland and indeed several occur in the Ormond family during the period under review. Following the death of his father Piers Butler in 1539, James Butler, ninth earl of Ormond and his mother were engaged in legal disputes over their respective entitlements from Piers's settlement.⁸⁸ While Margaret's specific issue with her son is unknown, she clearly felt sufficiently threatened by him that she resorted to such measures. In a somewhat similar case in Northern France in 1525 involving Madam Jeanne de Sauveuse, a young aristocratic widow, having inherited substantial wealth and property, her sons proposed at least two suitors for her to consider when re-marrying but none of her children came to her aid after Thibauld de Riou, the suitor whom she chose to marry, 'gambled her children's inheritance and even broke open her locked coffers to seize

⁸⁵ Susan E. James, *Women's voices in Tudor wills, 1485–1603: authority, influence and material culture* (London, 2015), p. 220.

⁸⁶ Elizabeth Whethill to Thomas Cromwell, Oct. 1537 in *L. & P. Hen. VIII*, ii, pt. 12, 1537.

⁸⁷ Will of Dame Elizabeth Whethill, 1542, (TNA PROB 11/29/25).

⁸⁸ *Calendar of Ormond deeds*, ed. Curtis, iv (1509–47), 216.

her family heirlooms to pay his debts'.⁸⁹ Admittedly, the experiences of Lady Elizabeth Whetehill, Countess Margaret Fitzgerald and Jeanne de Sauveuse in their widowhood do not represent those of most aristocratic widows and their sons, since if the eldest son outlived his mother, as son and heir he usually stood to gain after her death. These are, nonetheless, revealing cases that demonstrate how some noble women who had influential connections harnessed these to secure what was rightfully theirs in accordance with their husband's will. Irrespective of whether they came from Ireland, England or continental Europe, we know that some noble widows certainly countered the expectations established by their societies as they frequently diverged from the norms prescribed for women of their status and encountered 'social resistance as a result of defying beliefs and expectations for women'.⁹⁰ But whereas historian Suzanne Hall contends that 'current scholarship concludes – perhaps wishfully – that women did *not* in fact act in accordance with the prescriptions given them'⁹¹, in reality, the matter is not that straightforward since individuality and personal circumstances influenced women's behaviour, 'and that a woman might follow the prescriptions on one occasion and defy them on another'.⁹²

Patronage and religion

Recent research, including Marilyn Olivia's study of lay female patronage of female monasteries in the late middle ages, Therese Martin's study of European women's roles in the creation of medieval art and architecture, and Bronagh McShane's study of the roles and representations of women in religious change and conflict in an Irish context in late medieval

⁸⁹ *The Lisle letters*, ed. St. Claire Byrne, pp 121-24.

⁹⁰ Alison Alvarez, *A widow's will: examining the challenges of widowhood in early modern England and America* (Lincoln, 2013), p. 76.

⁹¹ Suzanne Hull, *Women according to men: the world of Tudor-Stuart women* (Walnut Creek, CA, 1996), p. 165.

⁹² Rowley-Williams, 'Image & reality: the lives of aristocratic women in early Tudor-England', p. 282.

Ireland, have shown that both secular and religious women in late medieval Ireland England and continental Europe served as important patrons in both financial and political senses.⁹³ Such women were not solely focused on feminist patronage activities as some played significant roles in the foundations of universities and centres of learning, despite being exclusively for the education of men. Female patrons, including many from the Italian nobility and the courts of Northern Europe, figure disproportionately as the dedicatees of important works of early feminism.⁹⁴ For example, in France, Jeanne of Navarre (d.1572) was founder and benefactress of the College of Navarre. In England, Queens Marguerite of Anjou (d. 1482), and Elizabeth Woodville (d. 1492), were both benefactors and founders of Queens' College Cambridge, while Lady Margaret Beaufort (d. 1509), founded Christ's College and St. John's College Cambridge.⁹⁵ For women within wider aristocratic circles, royal patronage was also a by-product of the status and importance of families to which they belonged. Where family clout may have been actively cultivated and sustained mostly by males with women participating by proxy, the weight of family clout can in fact be obscure, for analytical purposes, given the 'agency' of individual noblewomen in their roles as

⁹³ Marilyn Olivia, 'Patterns of patronage to female monasteries in the late middle ages' in James G. Clark (ed.), *The Religious orders in Pre-Reformation England* (Woodbridge, 2002), pp 155-162; Bronagh McShane, 'The roles and representations of women in religious change and conflict in Leinster and South-East Munster, c.1560–1641' (unpublished PhD thesis, Maynooth University, 2015); Constance H. Berman, 'Introduction: secular women in the documents for late medieval religious women' in *Church history and religious culture*, lxxxviii, no. 3 (2008), pp 485-92; Theodore Evergates, 'Aristocratic women in the County of Champagne', in Theodore Evergates (ed.), *Aristocratic women in medieval France*, pp 74-110; Therese Martin, 'Exceptions and assumptions: Women in medieval art history', in Therese Martin (ed.), *Reassessing the roles of women as 'makers' of medieval art and architecture* (2 vols, Leiden, 2012), pp. 1-37.

⁹⁴ Margaret L. King and Albert Rabil Jr., *The other voice in early modern Europe* (Chicago, 2000), p. xxiii.

⁹⁵ June McCash (ed.), *The cultural patronage of medieval women*, p. 32; Patrick Collinson, *Lady Margaret Beaufort and her professors of Divinity at Cambridge: 1502–1649* (Cambridge, 2003); David Baldwin, *Elizabeth Woodville* (Stroud, 2002); Helen Maurer, *Margaret of Anjou: queenship and power in late medieval England* (Suffolk, 2004).

patrons.⁹⁶ Female benefactions varied in accordance with variations in wealth and beliefs. In the early medieval era, patrons were queens or women among the highest nobility, so patronage was limited to the very few with the appropriate station and resources.⁹⁷ However, in the late medieval period, there was a discernible change in female patronage: despite their ongoing involvement in patronage of religious or monastic institutions, women's dedication to 'new houses and nunneries had dropped in favour of devotional foundations such as chantries'.⁹⁸ The nature of benefactions made by individual women depended on factors such as access to finance and norms among their contemporaries, and, were 'significantly linked to theological concerns of the period'.⁹⁹ In this light, Christine de Pisan made specific reference to such theological aspects of patronage, where patronage itself was among the many forms of 'good works' necessary for the salvation of one's soul.¹⁰⁰ Patronage of religious houses or orders was regarded as a personal plea for salvation to God, and as varying degrees of social display. On the other hand, when a woman was instrumental in or personally founded a religious house, she had the benefit of knowing that 'she could rely on the benefits of its constant prayers'.¹⁰¹ Aristocratic women's patronage of religious houses regularly continued after their death as attested by their wills. For instance, in England, Lady Mary Roos left £24 in her will to the monastery of Riveaulx in Yorkshire for prayers for her own soul and the

⁹⁶ Helen Nader, 'Introduction' in *Power and gender in Renaissance Spain: eight women of the Mendoza family, 1450–1650* (Chicago, 2004), pp 1-25.

⁹⁷ Loveday Lewes Gee, *Women, art and patronage from Henry II to Edward III* (Woodbridge, 2002), p. 8.

⁹⁸ Margaret Wade Labarge, *A small sound of the trumpet: women in medieval life* (Chichester, 1986), p. 114.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ According to Christine, 'in God's eyes, life in a religious community is the highest level of life there is. Anyone who founds a religious order so that those who wish to live in contemplation can be separated from the world in the service of God without any other cares please not only those people, but also God, who would be pleased indeed that each one said his offices there': see de Pisan, *The Treasure of the cities of ladies or, The book of the three virtues*, trans. Lawson, pp 44-5.

¹⁰¹ Ward, *English noblewomen in the later middle ages*, p. 154.

souls of several of her family members.¹⁰² In medieval Italy, Constanza Varano (d. 1487), is famed for her role as poetess and advocate for the rights of her family and for establishing educational programmes in Pesaro. Similarly, her daughter Batista Sforza (1446 – 72) has one of the most famous female profiles in late medieval Italian history.¹⁰³ In Spain wealthy aristocratic widows were encouraged to be generous with their patronage. At Avila, for instance, they adorned religious institutions to which they (as widows) gave support with clearly identifiable coats of arms, and secured prominent positions in convents and hospitals either for family members or for themselves.¹⁰⁴

In Ireland, as in England and Western Europe, aristocratic women were actively involved with religious institutions, making donations to individual religious houses. Indeed, they even extended their munificence to overseas religious houses, Margaret Fitzgerald Countess of Ormond, together with her husband Piers Butler, having been generous patrons of Osney abbey in Oxfordshire England (see chapter four). But aristocrats' engagement with religious communities were not always cordial and crucially, like their male counterparts, female aristocrats in Ireland, England and Continental Europe could also 'contest donations, oppress monasteries and use ecclesiastical patronage for strategic political ends'.¹⁰⁵

For some women - frequently widows - a religious vocation motivated their entry to religious establishments, usually but not exclusively the houses they had personally endowed. To that

¹⁰² 'Will of Lady Mary Roos' in Jennifer Ward (ed.), *Women of the English nobility and gentry, 1066–1500* (Manchester, 1995), p. 223.

¹⁰³ Marinella Bonvini Mazzanti, *Battista Sforza Montefeltro: una 'Principessa' nel Rinascimento Italiano* (Urbino, 1993), pp 79-80, 143, 161.

¹⁰⁴ Jodi Bilinkoff, 'Elite widows and religious expression in early modern Spain: the view from Avila' in Cavallo & Warner (eds), *Medieval and early modern Europe*, pp 181-93.

¹⁰⁵ Theodore Evergates and Kimberley A. LoPrete, 'Introduction' in Theodore Evergates (ed.), *Aristocratic women in medieval France*, p. 5.

end, they quickly succeeded to the abbatial dignity, in keeping with leading roles they held in lay society and ‘frequently took the lead in monastic administration upon conversion to a fully religious life’.¹⁰⁶ Indeed, religious devotion was so important to the role of some medieval and early modern women ‘that patronage was often an activity expected of those of high social standing’.¹⁰⁷ However, this social status dimension also meant that patronage and ‘the public piety associated with it, evolved into a form of aristocratic display.’¹⁰⁸ This thesis examines this aspect of several of the Ormond women’s patronage of religious communities and, focussing in particular on Margaret Fitzgerald, eighth countess’s patronage and the decision taken by Renalda Ní Bhriain, mistress of John Butler, sixth earl of Ormond, to become an abbess in her later years.

Succession and inheritance

Historian Jennifer Ward noted how in late medieval Europe, ‘the developing legal frameworks governing tenure and inheritance had a major impact on the position of women’.¹⁰⁹ Broadly speaking, the practices of entail and primogeniture became increasingly similar in the twelfth century¹¹⁰ although the laws regarding inheritance varied considerably between regions across Western Europe. In contrast with areas including Burgundy and Limousin, where if the dowry comprised a daughter’s share of the inheritance, she was required to return her dowry in order to receive any part of the family lands,¹¹¹ in Ireland, as

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Jennifer Ward, ‘Religion’ in Jennifer Ward (ed.), *Women of the English nobility & gentry*, pp. 190-198.

¹⁰⁸ Peter Coss, *The lady in medieval England, 1000–1500* (Sutton, 1999), p. 61.

¹⁰⁹ Jennifer Ward, ‘Noblewomen, family and identity in later medieval Europe’ in Anne Duggan (ed.), *Nobles and nobility in medieval Europe: concepts, origins and transformations* (Woodbridge, 2000), p. 246.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Jennifer Smith, ‘Unfamiliar territory: women land and law in Occitania, 1130 – 1250’, in N.J. Menuge (ed.), *Medieval women and the law* (Woodbridge, 2000), pp.19-40; M.T. Canon,

in England, Scotland, France and Holland, women were better off, being entitled to hold land whether as widows or heiresses. This thesis explores how various Ormond women fared in the carve up of their husband's property.

In a context in which succession arrangements favoured sons and wider related males, when no such heirs were available, succession disputes frequently arose between legitimate female heiresses and wider male kin. It was not unusual for such disputes to drag on for several decades or to give rise to violent and protracted conflicts among siblings, cousins, and the wider dynasty. The Ormond dynasty experienced such succession crises on two occasions, the first in the early 1500s, the second, in the 1610s.

Throughout most of Western Europe, the use of entail, unlike primogeniture, placed collateral males (usually the deceased's brothers, nephews and cousins) ahead of daughters. In England, by the beginning of the fifteenth century some land owners wished to break entails on their inheritances, as some men who had no sons, endeavoured to leave their estate to their daughters rather than their wider male family network.¹¹² The development of a system known as 'the common recovery' in England, permitted landowners to void entails and freely bequeath their estates,¹¹³ so that by 1500, the established system of entail was subsequently transformed into a 'freely convertible' estate, thereby permitting fathers to bequeath in full, their lands to their daughters, if they had no sons.¹¹⁴ According to Harris in her study of English aristocratic women, between 1450 and 1550, 'barely 7 percent of knights who sat in

La noblesse dans la duché de Bourgogne, 1315–1477 (Lille, 1987), pp 194-201; J. Hudson, *Law and lordship in Anglo-Norman England* (Oxford, 1994), pp 108-18.

¹¹² Harris, *English aristocratic women*, p. 21.

¹¹³ A.W.B. Simpson, *An introduction to the history of land law* (Oxford, 1961), pp 121-29.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid*; John Baker and S. Milsom, *Sources of English legal history: private law to 1750* (London, 1986), pp 235-6.

parliament between 1509 and 1558 had female heirs', a situation which resulted in such women being highly sought after brides on the marriage market in sixteenth-century England. In Ireland, in the 1450s the Ormond dynasty faced a dilemma specifically concerning entail and inheritance, following the attainder of the fifth sixth and seventh earls, as a result of their involvement in the Wars of The Roses. The subsequent reinstatement of titles to the seventh earl Thomas Butler in the 1470s, together with the interpretation of his will, is dealt with in details in this thesis.

Conclusion

Whereas the literature on English aristocratic women is very substantial, followed closely by work on their French counterparts, the body of scholarship on women of other regions including Ireland, Spain, Portugal, Holland, Belgium and Germany is comparatively small.¹¹⁵ The sparse survival and highly fragmented nature of contemporary sources are major determinants of this. However, with the development of a written bureaucratic culture in the later Middle Ages and the generation of legal proceedings, land deeds, grants, dispensations and accounts of private family manors and estates, women's voices very gradually began to emerge from the corpus of material that had hitherto been replete with details concerning their husbands' or fathers' affairs.¹¹⁶

While evidence of female activity in public documents is usually tangential, and often hidden altogether, there is the added impediment that many women's names are frequently excised

¹¹⁵ For a broader discussion of the roles of women in European medieval culture see, Katherine J. Lewis, Noel Mengue and Kim Phillips (eds), *Young medieval women* (New York, 1999); Erler & Kowaleski (eds), *Women & power in the middle ages*; Amt (ed.), *Women's lives in medieval Europe*; Dekker, 'Getting to the source'; Freed, 'German source collections'.

¹¹⁶ Ward, 'Introduction', in *Women in medieval Europe*.

from the record, thereby rendering them invisible and voiceless.¹¹⁷ But in spite of the unsatisfactory nature of their appearance in the historical record, even evidence relating to women in their capacities as wives, daughters, or widows is valuable, revealing insights into their interactions with their families, central or local government, neighbours and subjects.¹¹⁸ Furthermore, as historian Linda Mitchell has observed, although the appearance of many women in records may appear anonymous, this does not render them invisible. No region of Western Europe did not preserve some documentary evidence from the past, and in it, women appear.¹¹⁹ The challenge facing historians is to bring them in from the wings and onto the stage in the historical narrative.

¹¹⁷ Linda Mitchell 'Introduction' in Linda Mitchell (ed.), *Women in medieval Western European culture*, pp. ix-xiv.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

Chapter 2

The Ormond women through the Wars of the Roses and immediate aftermath: marriage, absenteeism and illegitimacy

The history of the Wars of the Roses has usually been told in terms of the men who alone could take part in its physical conflicts, but the lives of the women behind them could be affected no less profoundly.¹

The Wars of the Roses (1430s-85), the protracted contest over which of King Edward III's descendants had the strongest claim to the Crown, was fought between brothers, sons and cousins, the main protagonists being the Lancastrians and the Yorkists, both descended from the Plantagenet line of Edward III. The conflict erupted following King Henry V's death in 1422, at which time, his son and heir, the future King Henry VI, was only nine months old.² During the ensuing political vacuum in the 1420s and 30s, several members of Henry's extended family emerged as potential rival claimants to the throne. At the beginning of the 1450s, by which time Henry VI was in his early thirties and married, the Lancastrians had been on the throne for over fifty years and three generations, from Henry IV's accession in 1399 to that of his grandson, Henry VI. However, the latter's manifest reluctance and unsuitability for the role caused feuding among rival claimants which flared into military combat in 1455. On the Yorkist side, Richard of York (the future King Richard III) was the strongest potential claimant. His wife, Cecily Neville, emerged as the matriarch of the house

¹ Sarah Gristwood, *Blood sisters* (London, 2012), p. 50.

² Phillipa Gregory 'Introduction' in Gregory *et al.*, *The women of the cousins' war*, pp 1- 45.

of York. On the Lancastrian side, Margaret Beaufort would become mother to another rival claimant. The in-fighting which continued throughout the middle decades of the fifteenth century divided the landed aristocracy and impacted profoundly entire families in both England and Ireland as alliances shifted on an ongoing basis. For the Butlers of Ormond, the period from the Wars of the Roses until the death in London of Thomas Butler, seventh earl of Ormond in August 1515, was an especially transformative phase in the history of the dynasty, largely owing to decades of absenteeism from Ireland by successive earls.

This chapter examines the lives of the Ormond women during this protracted conflict in England and the impact it had in the short and medium term on the dynasty from the 1450s until 1515. It begins with a brief overview of the context of the Wars, and the impact that the attendant intrigue and instability had on the fortunes of the nobility of the realm in general, and the house of Ormond in particular. It focuses primarily upon the importance of carefully chosen marriage alliances as the means by which the Ormond dynasty sought to preserve, consolidate and expand their interests in England, albeit at a cost to their Irish earldom. Of necessity, the marriage patterns of earlier generations of earls and countesses of Ormond based in County Kilkenny are briefly outlined in order to highlight continuity with and deviations from these patterns throughout the period under review. While historian David Beresford provides a detailed account of the Ormond dynasty in his thesis on the Butlers in England and Ireland between 1405 and 1515, his study devotes little or no attention to the earls' strategic marriages or to the individual Ormond women whose wealth and pedigree was vital for the consolidation and advancement of Ormond interests in England. Indeed, the absence from Beresford's work of any reference to the women who married into the dynasty during a phase when the Ormonds expanded the earldom outside of Ireland leaves much

scope for this thesis to build upon and complement his findings.³ To that end, areas largely untouched and underexplored by Beresford, such as marriage and re-marriage, form the core of this chapter which focuses on the second half of the fifteenth century and the early years of the sixteenth century. It also explores the implications of illegitimacy, absenteeism, and finally, the disputed inheritance arrangements which created the background to the first subsequent succession crisis in the history of the dynasty. Furthermore, the chapter examines the origin and intricacies of that crisis which is discussed in detail in chapter three. Through its analysis of these women, this thesis endeavours to deepen our understanding of how an aristocratic family like the Butlers of Ormond, with interests in Ireland and England, pursued personal and dynastic advancement in both arenas.

Context of the Wars

Throughout the Wars of the Roses the Ormonds remained steadfast Lancastrian supporters while Ireland's other leading dynasty, the Fitzgerald, Earls of Kildare, supported the house of York. Down to the death of James Butler, fourth earl of Ormond in 1452, the Ormonds had been the most powerful dynasty in Ireland. However, after the earl sent his sons to England as children in the 1430s, the fortunes of the dynasty changed significantly and it was not until the beginning of the sixteenth century that an earl of Ormond was again resident in Ireland. In England, the principal dynasties embroiled in the conflict were the Beauforts, Staffords, Hankfords, Nevilles, and Boleyns. The political climate in England and Ireland grew increasingly uncertain during the decades after the 1450s when intrigue, conspiracy and political manoeuvring around legitimate succession to the Crown drew scores of noble families in England and Ireland into the conflict, and in turn generated instability, power

³ David Beresford, 'The Butlers in England and Ireland, 1405–1515' (unpublished PhD thesis, Trinity College Dublin, 1998).

vacuums and succession contests among other problems for these dynasties. The resultant neglect of their Irish holdings and their lapsed involvement in government in Dublin and at local level, allowed the Ormonds' rivals, the earls of Kildare, grow in strength.

From the 1460s, with the Butlers absent and the Desmond Fitzgeralds in Munster estranged from the Dublin government, the earls of Kildare emerged as the only credible aristocrats to assume responsibility for governing the lordship and protecting the contracting English colony in Ireland. Gareth Mor Fitzgerald, eighth earl of Kildare's appointment as lord deputy of Ireland in 1478 marked the beginning of his dynasty's political dominance in the lordship for six decades. Weakened, the house of Ormond was susceptible to external threats and usurpation, to the point that at the start of the sixteenth century Fitzgerald exercised virtually unrivalled influence over governance in the lordship.

Earlier Ormond marriage trends

From the era of James Butler, first earl (1305-38) down to the commencement of the Wars of the Roses in the mid-1450s, successive earls of Ormond married well connected, influential aristocratic English women. Through those alliances, they extended and strengthened the Butler's English connections and increased their properties; the result was a marked advancement in the Ormond's status and influence in England. James' wife, Lady Eleanor de Bohun (d.1363), was the daughter of the fourth earl of Hereford and his wife, Lady Elizabeth Plantagenet, a daughter of Edward I (d.1307). Eleanor's mother Elizabeth was exceptionally well connected, being a sister of Edward II (d.1317) and an aunt of Edward III (d.1377). This marriage alliance, contracted in 1328, significantly 'augmented the Butlers English

properties'⁴ since the earl acquired additional property in ten English counties, all of which he held jointly with his wife, who outlived her husband and re-married in 1344.⁵ This, and the marriages of their son and grandson, signalled that the Ormonds were highly regarded in Ireland and England as premier aristocratic stock down to the 1450s. James and Eleanor's son and heir James, second earl of Ormond (1331-82) married Elizabeth Darcy, daughter of John Darcy (former lord chief justice under Edward III) and his wife, Joan De Burgh.⁶ The third earl of Ormond, also James (1360–1405), in keeping with family tradition, married another influential and well connected English aristocrat, Anne Welles (fl.1386–97) sometime before 1386.⁷ Born in England in 1360, the second daughter of John, fourth Lord Welles and his wife, Maud de Ros,⁸ Anne become the first countess of Ormond to live at Kilkenny castle – a significant departure which evidenced the perception in English aristocratic circles of the Ormonds as a dynasty with significant influence and wealth. Having lived at Gowran castle about ten miles east of Kilkenny city, in September 1391 James Butler and his wife Anne Welles purchased Kilkenny castle and made it their primary residence.⁹ (Significantly smaller in size, Gowran castle had been built by James, third earl in 1385).¹⁰ Within four years the

⁴ Robin Frame, 'Butler, James, first earl of Ormond (c.1305–1338)' in *ODNB*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, Jan. 2008 <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/50021> [3 July 2015].

⁵ *Ibid*, <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/50021> [3 July 2015].

⁶ Robin Frame, 'Butler, James, second earl of Ormond (1331–1382)' in *ODNB*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, Jan. 2008 <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/4186> [3 July 2015].

⁷ Elizabeth Matthew, 'Butler, James, fourth earl of Ormond (1390–1452)' in *ODNB*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, Sept. 2013 <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/4187> [3 July 2015].

⁸ *Ibid*.

⁹ Previously, Sir Gilbert de Bohun, seneschal of Kilkenny, had lived in Kilkenny castle. The Crown seized it after his death in 1381 and sold it to the Butlers ten years later.

¹⁰ Sir William Carrigan, *The history and antiquities of the diocese of Ossory* (4 vols, Dublin, 1905), iii, 399-426.

earl and countess had firmly established themselves in Kilkenny castle and in 1395, in a clear signal that the Ormond dynasty had reached unprecedented standing, the earl and countess hosted King Richard II who, in gratitude for their hospitality, became godfather to their second son, Richard.¹¹ Not only did the earls' marriages to each of these women augment the power, wealth, and profile of the Ormonds; their status in the eyes of the Crown was also enhanced and remained so as evidenced by the fact that in the 1560s Thomas Butler, future tenth earl of Ormond, extended the castle at Carrick-On-Suir, County Tipperary, in the hope that his cousin, Queen Elizabeth I, would visit him in residence there.¹²

Moreover, the Ormonds had direct blood ties with the Crown, including James Butler, first earl of Ormond's wife Lady Eleanor de Bohun, being granddaughter of Edward I. Of all countesses of Ormond during the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, Eleanor features most prominently in the fragmentary sources that survive, generally when she received bequests and grants from Edward III, who consistently referred to her as his 'kinswoman'.¹³ In fifteenth-century England the Nevilles, Woodvilles and Plantagenets were among the coterie of families who were 'closely linked to the crown and had hopes of marrying their offspring to the king's children or dominating the government'.¹⁴ The Howards, Greys, Dudleys and Seymours were among those who did so in the sixteenth century.¹⁵ Furthermore, just as many

¹¹ John Lodge, *The peerage of Ireland or, A genealogical history of the present nobility of that kingdom* (7 vols, Dublin, 1789) iv, 17.

¹² See Ralph Alan Griffiths, *The reign of King Henry VI: the exercise of royal authority, 1422–1461* (Los Angeles, 1981), pp 154–78; Colin Richmond, *The Paston family in the fifteenth century* (New York, 2000); Douglas L. Biggs, Sharon D. Michalove and Albert Compton Reeves (eds), *Reputation and representation in fifteenth-century Europe* (Boston, 2004).

¹³ Douglas Richardson, *Plantagenet ancestry: a study in medieval and colonial families* (3 vols, Salt Lake City, 2005), i, 45.

¹⁴ Harris, *English aristocratic women*, p. 54.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

earls of Ormond descended from kings of England, so too many queens were related to the Ormonds. Thus, King Edward I was great-grandfather to James, second earl, while Thomas Butler, seventh earl, was great-grandfather to Queen Anne Boleyn (d.1536), second wife of Henry VIII.

In line with the established trend, sometime before August 1413 the fourth earl of Ormond – also James – married an English aristocrat, Joan Beauchamp (d.1430), only daughter of William Beauchamp, first Baron Bergavanny, and his wife Joanne Arundel.¹⁶ Her paternal grandfather was Thomas de Beauchamp, eleventh earl of Warwick (d.1369), one of the most powerful families in medieval England. Her mother Joanne, who after her father's death in 1411 received an 'unusually large widow's portion, became perhaps the most formidable woman in England over the next twenty years'¹⁷ through her extensive landholdings, wealth and political status as 'she held local office, as commissioner for loans in Warwickshire, Worcestershire, Gloucestershire, and Leicestershire, between 1426 and 1431'.¹⁸ With ancestry descended from the earls of Arundel and Northampton respectively, Joan brought esteemed reputation, wealth and connections to the Ormond dynasty, enhancing its standing in aristocratic circles.

Unlike the previous countess of Ormond, Joan never visited Ireland; neither did she engage with her husband's Irish earldom. However, this had less to do with Joan and more to with the earl spending a lot of time in France on campaign: it was a foretaste of what was to come.

James and Joan's three sons, all earls of Ormond, remained absent from Ireland. Although

¹⁶ Matthew, 'James Butler, fourth earl of Ormond'.

¹⁷ Christine Carpenter, 'Beauchamp, William (V), first Baron Bergavenny (c.1343–1411)' in ODNB, 2004; online edn, Jan. 2008 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/50236> [26 May 2016]].

¹⁸ Ibid.

their absenteeism was not unusual, its extended duration was, and as this study will emphasise, it had a detrimental impact on the dynasty's standing and influence in Ireland in particular. After her death on 3 August 1430 at the earl's manor in Surrey, Joan countess of Ormond was buried in St Thomas Beckett church, London.¹⁹ Her husband James was in France at the time of his wife's death, as part of a royal entourage for the French coronation of King Henry VI, and did not return to England until December of that year.²⁰ It is unclear where the earl of Ormond spent the following year. However, his license for absence from Ireland was renewed on 3 February 1431 for another two years.²¹ Despite the terms of the license, James returned to Ireland the following year and set about reasserting his authority in the southern counties of his patrimony 'which had seen considerable Gaelic incursion during his absence'.²² By the end of 1432, he had re-married.²³ His second wife was Elizabeth Fitzgerald, daughter of Gerald Fitzgerald, fifth earl of Kildare, the only legitimate child of the earl and his wife Agnes Darcy. The marriage proved advantageous for Elizabeth. She had a strong husband and forged an alliance capable of withstanding the inevitable pressures from rival illegitimate siblings. In contrast to the earl's first wife Joan Beauchamp, Elizabeth was born in Ireland. However, given Elizabeth's noble pedigree, this union was no less important than his first in his development of dynastic strategic alliances since it allowed James to acquire the majority of the Kildare lands for life.²⁴ In February 1442 the Irish chancellor Richard Wogan, recognised James as 'so mighty and so hable to kepe [Ireland] to the kinges availle'²⁵ in particular through his dominance in Ireland following his acquisition of Kildare

¹⁹ A.J. Forey, 'The military order of St. Thomas of Acre' in *EHR*, xcii (1977), pp 481-503.

²⁰ E.A.E. Matthew, 'The governing of the Lancastrian lordship of Ireland in the time of James Butler, fourth earl of Ormond' (unpublished PhD thesis, Durham University, 1994), p. 252.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Annals of the kingdom of Ireland by the Four Masters*, ed. John O'Donovan (7 vols, Dublin, 1848-51), iv, 893.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Matthew, 'Butler, James, fourth earl of Ormond'.

²⁵ Memo by Chancellor Richard Wogan, Feb. 1442 (TNA, E101/248/16).

lands. Indeed, historian Elizabeth Matthews contends that James Butler was ‘unquestionably the most dominant Irish magnate of his day’.²⁶

In an effort to counter challenges to the legitimacy of the marriage, Ormond appealed to Pope Eugenius IV for a dispensation as both parties were related in the third and fourth degree.²⁷

The pope authorised Bishop William FitzEdward of Kildare to conduct the marriage and the lieutenant of Ireland, Thomas Stanley also granted a license for the union.²⁸ When Elizabeth’s father died in October 1432, her husband, James earl of Ormond, did not obtain the earldom of Kildare as it was entailed to male heirs since 1319. Yet Ormond did secure seisin by right of his wife, Elizabeth, to two-thirds of the deceased earl of Kildare’s lands; the remainder went to the Crown.²⁹ The marriage also proved advantageous for the protection of Crown interests in Leinster since Ormond served as a loyal figure responsible for the protection of Kildare’s strategically positioned lands. Furthermore, it was beneficial to the Ormond dynasty for the remainder of the lives of the earl and countess, as the Kildare lands only reverted to the Crown after both James and Elizabeth died in 1452.³⁰ Less than forty years later, in 1485, another Butler-Fitzgerald marriage between Piers Butler, eventual eighth earl of Ormond and Margaret Fitzgerald, daughter of Gareth Mor, eighth earl of Kildare, would also prove beneficial to Ormond interests and mark one of the most successful phases in the history of the dynasty stretching into the mid-sixteenth century. In short, both marriages were propitious, the two Fitzgerald countesses playing significant roles in expanding the earldom of Ormond and advancing the standing and political influence of their respective husbands. By the mid-1450s, with the exception of the fourth earl’s second marriage, a distinct pattern in Ormond marriages was therefore established. Apart from Elizabeth Fitzgerald, successive

²⁶ Matthew, ‘Butler, James, fourth earl of Ormond’.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ *Cal. Ormond deeds*, ed. Curtis, iii (1413–1509), no. 99, p. 82.

²⁹ Ibid, no.101.

³⁰ Matthew, ‘Governing of the Lancastrian lordship of Ireland’, p. 256.

countesses were English-born and from the middle and highest ranking aristocratic families, including a granddaughter of King Edward I. The key differences between these women and those who became associated with the family from the 1450s down to the end of the century was that the latter resided in England. The changing ways and circumstances in which these alliances with English aristocratic women were negotiated, only to ultimately impact negatively the Ormond dynasty during the Wars of the Roses and its aftermath, are now discussed in detail.

Marriage and expansion of the Ormond earldom outside Ireland

By focusing on Avice Stafford and Eleanor Beaufort, successive countesses of James Butler, fifth earl; on Renalda Ní Bhriain, mistress of John, sixth earl and mother of his illegitimate son, James Butler; and on Anne Hankeford and Lora Berkeley, countesses of Thomas Butler, seventh earl, and highlighting how these individuals negotiated challenges arising from the prevailing instability and uncertainty in the era of The Wars of The Roses, the relative importance of each woman's contribution to the preservation and advancement of the Ormond dynasty's interests can be assessed.³¹

It is categorically the case that the wives of the fifth and seventh earls did nothing to preserve or enhance the earldom in Ireland. By contrast, in England, Avice Stafford, Eleanor Beaufort,

³¹ Insights into the family's interests in both Ireland and England can be gleaned from statutes of Henry VI (1422-61) and Edward IV (1461-70). Patent rolls and calendars of inquisitions held at Kew in London, together with the Carew manuscripts held at Lambeth Palace library, offer fleeting glimpses into the lives of Eleanor Beaufort, Anne Hankeford, Avice Stafford and Lora Berkeley. Unsurprisingly, information concerning Renalda Ní Bhriain, mistress of John, sixth earl, is even more scarce, although her last will and testament, written in 1509 (the only extant will of a Gaelic Irish woman from the early sixteenth century), offers an invaluable insight into her life, her brief liaison with the earl, and the relationship she maintained with the Ormond dynasty after she married a cousin of the earl and subsequently had another two sons.

Anne Hankeford and Lora Berkeley each made significant contributions in augmenting the Ormond's landed estates and political influence through their respective marriages to the fifth and seventh earls. Both were wealthy heiresses. In addition, Eleanor Beaufort had connections at the highest level of English aristocratic society, being a cousin to each of the chief protagonists in the wars. These unions therefore strengthened the Ormond earls' close connections with the Crown; the fifth earl's marriage to Eleanor Beaufort might have made James Butler brother-in-law to a king had political events taken a different turn and Eleanor's brother, the duke of Somerset, ascended to the throne.

In Ireland, during the early fifteenth century the Ormond dynasty's land holdings had been expanding to the point that by the 1430s the Butlers had acquired most of Kilkenny and Tipperary through the agency of the fourth earl. The core of the lordship achieved its 'final form'³² with new acquisitions 'merely filing in pieces of the lordship'.³³ By then the earldom extended to the Nore-Suir-Barrow basin.³⁴ Having reached what historian David Beresford terms its natural limits, the earldom seemed set to extend beyond the confines of its heartland in Kilkenny. Such was their strength and wealth that the Ormonds had at least one manor 'in most of the counties of the lordship of Ireland'³⁵ (that is, the southern and Midlands regions).

Strategic marriages

James Butler, fifth earl of Ormond and first earl of Wiltshire (1420-61), was influenced by a coterie of aristocratic women throughout his life, notably his maternal grandmother Joan Beauchamp, Lady Bergavanny (1375-35) and Marguerite of Anjou, Queen of England (1445-

³² Beresford, 'The Butlers in England & Ireland', p. 31.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

61). Through inheritance, familial connections and strategic marriage alliances they augmented his wealth and that of the earldom in England. James was the eldest of three sons and one daughter of the fourth earl of Ormond, James Butler (1390-52) and Joan Beauchamp (d.1430): all three sons were brought up at the court of Henry VI (1422-61). As a youth, James had a sojourn in France under the guardianship of John of Lancaster, first duke of Bedford (1389-1435) and brother of King Henry VI.³⁶ The fourth earl sent the infant James to live with his maternal grandmother Lady Bergavanny in England in the 1430s, with the intention of strengthening the Butler's English connections. Since the majority of the Butler lands and estates were in Ireland, the fourth earl spent his last years in Kilkenny, the seat of his Irish lordship, channelling his energies into bolstering the family's estates and status in England through the agency of his sons. Aged six years, James was knighted by Henry VI at the Leicester Parliament of May 1426 and 'by Christmas 1427 he had been summoned to court as a suitable companion for Henry VI, and so began his lifelong friendship with the king.'³⁷ There is no evidence that he ever returned to Ireland. After James's maternal grandmother, Lady Bergavanny, lost her only son, Richard earl of Worcester in 1422, she transferred her focus to her grandson James, eldest son of her only daughter. An extremely wealthy widow, in 1427 Lady Bergavanny's estates, including her dower lands, were valued at STG£2,000. When she died eight years later, James inherited 'a substantial collection of manors in Cambridgeshire, Leicestershire, southern Staffordshire, and elsewhere'.³⁸ That inheritance proved vital in enabling the young earl to position himself within aristocratic circles in those counties. Before he acquired the share of Lady Bergavanny's inheritance, the

³⁶ Ibid. David Beresford, 'James Butler earl of Ormond', available at <http://www.dib.cambridge.org> [12 June 2016].

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ John Watts, 'Butler, James, first earl of Wiltshire and fifth earl of Ormond, 1420–1461' in *ODNB*, Oxford University Press, 2004 online edn, Jan. 2008 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/4188> [26 Oct. 2014]].

Butler's holdings in England amounted to no more than 'eighteen manor houses scattered across ten English counties'.³⁹ While these were of little value and too far flung to provide the future earl with a substantial seat and powerbase, their real value lay in their additional income that they generated for the earldom in Ireland.

In addition to her bequest of estates, Lady Bergavanny left STG £500 to James 'for the defence of the lands I give and assign him, in case they be challenged or impugned wrongfully'.⁴⁰ She also left 700 marks to his brothers Thomas and John respectively, together with 100 marks to their sister, Elizabeth Butler.⁴¹ Lady Bergavanny's bequest, therefore, marked a new departure for the Ormond dynasty whose focus shifted almost exclusively for the first time in generations beyond Ireland. These lands left to James, fifth earl, immediately quadrupled the Butler holdings in England. The fourth earl, who was still alive at that time, was pleased at this upturn in his family's fortune and status in England: by 1436, although not yet eighteen years old, James Butler already had from his English properties almost twice the income his father received. The epicentre of Ormond interests thus transferred from Ireland to England. James and his brothers now looked to arrange marriages to wealthy aristocratic heiresses – as generations of earls had done before them – in their drive to enhance their holdings, wealth, connections and influence in England.

In 1438, three years after he received the Bergavanny inheritance, James Butler took a further step towards achieving that end, by marrying Avice Stafford, only daughter and sole heiress of Sir Robert Stafford of Somerset and his wife Maud Lovell (who, through her father, was a

³⁹ Beresford, 'Butlers in England & Ireland', p. 65.

⁴⁰ Will of Lady Joanne Bergavanney, cited in *The register of Henry Chichele, archbishop of Canterbury, 1414–35*, ed. E.F. Jacobs and H.C. Johnson (4 vols, Oxford, 1937), ii, 535-39.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

descendant of King Henry II).⁴² That year Avice's half-brother Humphrey, earl of Arundel, died and she and James secured full possession of Arundel's lands on 15 July 1438. (At the time Avice was about fourteen years old).⁴³ Arundel's inheritance consisted of two manors in Essex, six in Suffolk, four in Kent, six in Devon, six in Somerset, two in Gloucestershire and nine in Dorset, along with an island in Devon, other holdings in Suffolk and Somerset and Walwyns Castle in Pembrokeshire.⁴⁴ Having already acquired from his grandmother and from his heiress wife sufficient lands to support an earldom, by the end of 1439 James enjoyed an annual income of STG£1,000.⁴⁵ Ten years later, on 8 July 1449, he was created earl of Wiltshire and his wife Avice was styled Countess of Ormond and Wiltshire.⁴⁶ Butler's standing and wealth in English aristocratic circles was, therefore, significantly enhanced by this union, which brought him forty manors and estates in the western counties, adding to his property in the eastern and southern counties which he inherited from his maternal grandmother. By 1450 Ormond was very well positioned in English aristocratic circles. Watching his son's assimilation into English aristocratic society, and realising that he was unlikely to return and take up his Irish earldom, James, the fourth earl, transferred his own English manors and estates to his son and heir, and resolved to concentrate on attending to his Irish interests. The young James's acquisitions of properties and his marriage to the Stafford heiress enabled him to assert his independence from his father. While the marriage in 1438

⁴² Richardson, *Plantagenet ancestry*, p. 454.

⁴³ *The Full abstracts of the feet of fines relating to the County of Dorset, remaining in the Public Record Office, London, from the commencement of the reign of Edward III to the end of the reign of Richard III. 1327–1485*, ed. Edward Alex. Fry and George S. Fry (Dorset Records 10, British Records Society, London, 1910), p. 322; 'The Carey estate', BCM/H and 'The Butler inheritance', BCM/H/1 (Berkeley Castle Muniments, Berkeley, England).

⁴⁴ *The Full abstracts of the feet of fines relating to the County of Dorset*, ed. Fry & Fry, p. 322.

⁴⁵ 'The Butler inheritance', BCM/H/1 (Berkeley Castle Muniments, Berkeley, England).

⁴⁶ G.E. Cokayne *et al.* (eds), *The complete peerage of England, Scotland, Ireland, Great Britain and the United Kingdom, extant, extinct or dormant* (new edn, 1910-59; repr. in 6 vol, Gloucester, 2000), ii, 362.

had provided the young couple with substantial lands, there were other estates and ‘twenty-one manors in Devon, Dorset, and Somerset’⁴⁷ which they had not inherited. Having opted initially to settle for his grandmother’s estates in Cambridgeshire, and specifically her ‘manor of Fulbourn’, the earl became politically active within those counties during the 1440s.⁴⁸ Once established there he began to involve himself in parliamentary elections and was soon embroiled in disputes over control of local estates, gaining support for his stance from members of the local gentry. Crucially, his marriage to Avice Stafford had afforded him the opportunity for political advancement both for himself and for his dynasty. Owing in part to having spent his youth at court with the young Henry VI, he was presented with greater chances for ‘patronage and reward’⁴⁹ than many of his peers. In July 1449 Henry made James Butler the first earl of Wiltshire, a knight of the garter⁵⁰ for his fidelity to the house of Lancaster. This gesture came as a particularly significant and timely recognition just three years before the death of his father, the fourth earl. Two years later James was appointed lord deputy of Ireland. The following year he succeeded his father, and had his appointment as lord deputy extended by a further ten years.⁵¹ His political career continued to be successful and in 1454 he was appointed as lord high treasurer of England. This was a significant promotion and further recognition of his steadfast attachment to the house of Lancaster. However, while the king may have expected James Butler to return to Ireland and use the earldom as the base from which he could serve the Crown’s interests most effectively, this did not happen. James never returned. Instead he appointed John Mey, archbishop of Armagh, as his deputy there. The fact that Ormond was appointed in place of Richard, duke of York as

⁴⁷ Ibid, 70.

⁴⁸ Watts, ‘Butler, James, first earl of Wiltshire & fifth earl of Ormond’.

⁴⁹ Beresford, ‘Butlers in England & Ireland’, p. 77.

⁵⁰ Rot. Parl. v, 477-8-480.

⁵¹ Watts, ‘Butler, James, first earl of Wiltshire & fifth earl of Ormond’.

lord deputy of Ireland, even though York still had four years of his term to run there, testifies to the high regard in which Ormond was held by King Henry VI, and his proximity to the centre of court politics in England.⁵²

After the fourth earl's death in 1452 James inherited both the family's estates in Ireland and the earldom. This boosted significantly his position and influence within court circles at a time when the political arena in England was about to enter a turbulent phase, during which York, former lord deputy of Ireland, withdrew support from Henry VI, the house of Lancaster, and the powerful duke of Somerset.

Owing to the fifth earl's standing at court, together with his status as a magnate who had vast wealth and property, York and his supporters wasted no time in soliciting his support. James's father had served and died in office as York's deputy, and by the late 1450s the fifth earl had a well-established and largely successful working relationship with the upstart duke. In early 1452, while Ormond remained loyal to the house of Lancaster, he maintained good relations with York, until, that is, 1453, when he joined the king's royal army in resistance against the duke. The wisdom of Ormond's decision to support the king was borne out by his continued political advancement, or so it seemed. His lieutenancy of Ireland and investiture to the Order of the Garter all took place after this period of political intrigue and instability at court. By the mid-1450s the fifth earl's reputation and standing were publicly acknowledged by the duke of Somerset and Queen Marguerite. For his own benefit, James put to good use his knowledge of the court, made the most of royal patronage to amass great wealth, 'and increasingly came to be identified with the court faction in Lancastrian politics'.⁵³

⁵² *Rot. Parl.* v, 477-8. 480; Statute rolls, Ire. Edw. IV, ii, 25.

⁵³ Beresford, 'James Butler, earl of Ormond'.

By 1453 York was in no doubt as to where Ormond's allegiance lay. However, when the duke's influence increased rapidly during the king's nervous breakdown and virtual disappearance from public life (1453-54), Ormond swiftly lost his position as deputy of Ireland in 1454.⁵⁴ Three years later, in 1457, when his popularity within Lancastrian circles and with the queen was growing, Ormond's wife, Avice Stafford died childless, aged thirty-four.⁵⁵

In April the following year Ormond re-married. This union with Eleanor (Plantagenet) Beaufort, the twenty-seven-year old eldest daughter of Edmund, duke of Somerset, one of the king's most influential advisors, once again testified to and enhanced Ormond's standing, wealth and political influence. Crucially, this second marriage drew him even closer to the Crown, as the Beauforts were cousins of the main protagonists in the Wars of the Roses. Ormond's political power and prospects were enhanced yet again. This union with a sister of Henry Beaufort, the new duke of Somerset, not only assisted the earl in insinuating himself more deeply into court circles, it clearly signalled the earl's long-term plans for his future and that of the Butler dynasty, particularly in England. Eleanor was the eldest of five daughters and three sons born to the duke of Somerset and his wife, Eleanor Beauchamp (d.1467).⁵⁶ Through her marriage to James, Eleanor became countess of Ormond and Wiltshire. For James, this second union, like his first, strengthened an evolving alliance between the Ormond dynasty and the highest echelons within the house of Lancaster and its supporters. The Beauforts were direct descendants of John of Gaunt, son of Edward III, and therefore were

⁵⁴ *Rot. parl.*, v, 477-8.480.

⁵⁵ Death of Avice Stafford, 6 July 1457 in *Cal. fine rolls, Henry VI*, xix (1452-61), 168. Avice's full inheritance stayed in the Butler family until it was forfeited in 1461.

⁵⁶ Her father had also been first earl and first marquis of Dorset and count of Mortain. During the 1430s, together with William de la Pole, duke of Suffolk, Edmund gained control over the government of the weak Henry VI in his capacity as the king's chief lieutenant.

close cousins of Henry V and VI. Eleanor was also a first cousin of Margaret Beaufort, mother of the future Henry VII. Their great-uncle, Cardinal Henry Beaufort (d.1447) was the most important statesman in early fifteenth-century England. The marriage between James and Eleanor also increased the earl's already sizeable wealth, adding significantly to his vast property and estates, most of which had come from his previous marriage. Although it lasted only three years and the couple had no children, this union with the daughter of the king's chief minister aligned James even more closely with the Lancastrians and placed him 'in direct opposition to York.

James Butler used his presence at court throughout the 1450s to forge connections within court circles, not only for his own advancement but to encourage and bring together the supporters of Queen Marguerite of Anjou. Soon after the death of his first wife Avice, Ormond used his court connections to secure ownership of her lands entirely for his own ends and without royal permission, although he was granted a royal pardon on 10 June 1457 for his transgression.⁵⁷ Butler's entitlement to full use of his first wife's lands was crucial, as these holdings, together with those he inherited from his grandmother years earlier, constituted the bulk of his landed wealth in England. Before she died, Avice facilitated the earl's securing possession of her property, although whether she did so voluntarily is unclear. An enfeoffment of October 1445 records Ormond's first wife transferring her lands to her husband's 'long term servant, Henry Fillongley, who in turn did enfeoff the couple themselves'.⁵⁸ The new arrangement stipulated that the heirs of both James and his wife would hold the land, and that in the event of their having no issue, the lands would revert to her rightful heirs. However, a clause clearly stated that should the countess die without issue

⁵⁷ Pardon of James le Botiller, Knight of Wiltshire and Ormond, 10 June 1457 in *Cal. patent rolls* (1452-61), p. 352.

⁵⁸ See *Full abstracts of feet of fines*, ed. Fry & Fry.

from her body, then ‘the premises wholly should remain to the right heirs of the said earl’.⁵⁹ At no stage was it specified that in the entail, the rightful heirs of the earl of Ormond, were to be of his ‘body’.⁶⁰ In 1458 Ormond gave to his second wife Eleanor Beaufort, ‘twelve of his former wife’s manors’⁶¹ as a marriage endowment. He directed that ‘she should have sufficient estate for life in the lordships or manors of kyngesdon by Ilchester, and Somerton Erle, county Somerset and Poundeknoll and Toller Porcorum, county Dorset’.⁶² As already stated, there was a real possibility that if circumstances unfolded in his favour, ‘this marriage could have made the earl, brother-in-law of a king’.⁶³ Building on his grandmother’s legacy, his first wife’s vast inheritance and more recently his marriage into the Beaufort family (cousins of the king), Ormond became one of the most financially and politically powerful magnates in England by the closing years of Henry VI’s turbulent reign. But while this succession of countesses of Ormond collectively boosted the standing, influence and landholdings of the Ormond earldom in England, there was no direct positive impact on the Irish earldom as a result of either marriage.

During a truce in the Wars of the Roses (1444-49) Eleanor Beaufort’s father served as lieutenant of France and was created duke of Somerset in March 1448. He replaced York as commander in France in 1448 although both eagerly sought the position as the king’s chief

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ This was the precise issue upon which the entire succession crisis in the earldom of Ormond, as will be explored in Chapter 3, arose. Thus in 1515 when Thomas Butler, seventh earl died, the possibility of the succession of two Butler heiresses to the earldom emerged for the first time in its history.

⁶¹ The office of first fruits and tenths: Henry Fylington, esq. and John Tawrer, chaplain, and James, earl of Wiltshire and Ormond, and Eleanor his consort, and sister of Henry now duke of Somerset, Aug. 1458 (TNA, MS. E 326/5414-6).

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ R.A. Griffiths, ‘The sense of dynasty in the reign of Henry VI’ in C.D. Ross (ed.), *Patronage, pedigree and power in the later medieval England* (Gloucester, 1979), p. 76.

councillor. By 1455 York was intent on getting rid of Somerset. The opportunity presented itself in May of that year after York raised an army. At the first battle of St Albans, York and his army confronted Somerset and the king, and Eleanor's father was killed. Her brother Henry, who never forgave York for their father's death, spent the following decade trying to restore the Beaufort family's honour. James, earl of Ormond, bore the king's standard at that battle. He had, therefore, already established a close connection with the king three years before his marriage into the Beaufort family. The union was a further significant step in strengthening that bond when Eleanor, as countess of Ormond and Wiltshire, extended the connection within England.⁶⁴

A series of well-chosen strategic marriage alliances in court circles, therefore, allowed the Butlers of Ormond to manoeuvre themselves into increasingly powerful political positions in England during the 1440s and 50s. By strengthening the Ormond presence in the inner circles at court, these unions ensured the expansion of the dynasty's powerbase and orbit of influence beyond Ireland. Since according to R.A. Griffiths, James Butler, fifth earl, never visited his Irish estates, it can be assumed that neither did Eleanor, as countess. That absenteeism had a profoundly damaging impact on the English colonial presence in Ireland, leaving 'the Englishry destitute of good captains, precipitating a crisis of lordship'.⁶⁵

A Council of Lords meeting held at Coventry two years later in spring of 1457 reappointed York as lieutenant of Ireland, most likely as a result of Ormond's marriage to the daughter of Somerset, his deceased opponent.⁶⁶ As indicated, the marriage between James and Eleanor

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ R.A. Griffiths, 'The English realm and dominions and the king's subjects in the later middle ages' in John Rowe (ed.), *Aspects of government and society in later medieval England: essays in honour of J.R. Lander* (Toronto, 1986), pp 83-105.

⁶⁶ Ellis, *Ireland in the age of the Tudors*, p. 59.

lasted only three years (1458-61) since early in 1461, Ormond, on fleeing from the battle of Towton, was captured and executed on 1 May. He was beheaded at Newcastle, from whence his head was taken back to London and spiked on London Bridge by Yorkist supporters.⁶⁷ An examination of the Beaufort family sheds light on some reasons for the marriage. The unification of these two powerful aristocratic families not only increased each individual party's wealth, it increased their combined wealth, status and political influence. While the Beauforts were continuously lauded at the Lancastrian court, it was not always justified or deserved. Eleanor's uncle, John, father of Margaret Beaufort, had returned from France, disgraced, and allegedly committed suicide following his capture and defeat at Bauge in France in 1421.⁶⁸ The suicide of a disgraced war commander of the king was one of the most shameful stigmas any aristocratic house could bear. Eleanor's cousin Margaret Beaufort was one of the chief figures involved in restoring the Beaufort dynasty's reputation during the 1460s. Eleanor's own father Edmund, duke of Somerset, for all his popularity with Henry VI, has been described by T.B. Pugh as 'unscrupulous and resourceful'.⁶⁹ He replaced Eleanor's uncle John, as King Henry VI's principal councillor, and he was also embroiled in levying unfair taxation and in corruption at court.⁷⁰

On 15 March 1462 Sir John Wenlock was appointed governor of the dowager countess Eleanor Beaufort, 'late wife of James, earl of Wiltshire, attained of high treason by authority of parliament at Westminster, on 4 November last and of her jointure, with the sole power of

⁶⁷ T. F. Henderson, 'James Butler, fifth earl of Ormonde' in Stephen Leslie and Sidney Lee (eds.), *The Dictionary of National Biography* (63 vols, London, 1885-1900), iii, 51.

⁶⁸ 'Gregory's chronicle' in *Historical collections of a citizen of London*, ed. J. Gardiner (Camden society, new ser., 17, London, 1876).

⁶⁹ T.B. Pugh, 'Richard Plantagenet duke of York, as the king's lieutenant in France and Ireland' in Rowe (ed.), *Aspects of late medieval society*, pp 107-41.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

appointing and removing servants and officers'.⁷¹ While this was not an unusual end for the wives of attained men, living or dead, it appears to have been an initial precautionary measure taken by Edward IV (1461-70 and 1471-83). Not only was this a period of political reorganisation in England: as widow of James Butler, and daughter of the executed first duke of Somerset and devout Lancastrian, Eleanor Beaufort was wealthy and powerful in her own right.

From the beginning of his reign, however, King Edward IV was keen to heal breaches within the wider 'Lancastrian' family where possible. In response to a request in 1478 from his kinswoman Eleanor Beaufort that she should have sufficient estate for life in certain lordships or manors throughout England, he was more than generous in compensating the countess for her losses arising from the forfeiture against the earl (and his widow's) estates.⁷² Edward continued to support Eleanor throughout his reign and for the rest of her life, undoubtedly in recompense for placing her under the care of a governor and for the forfeiture of her attained husband's lands.

The 1471 forfeiture Act features some revealing insights into the relationship between the king and Countess Eleanor. It made no mention of her jointure, but already (in 1470) Edward had granted to his kinswoman her 'parcel of the jointure, to hold for her life for her use and sustenance in recompense of her jointure'.⁷³ Notwithstanding the fact that she was married to

⁷¹ Appointment of Sir John Wenlock, 15 Mar. 1462 in *Cal. patent rolls, Edw. IV, 1461–1467* (London, 1897), p. 178.

⁷² Douglas Richardson and Kimball G. Everingham, (eds), *Magna Carta ancestry: a study in colonial and medieval families*, 2nd edn (Salt Lake City, 2011), pp 480-1.

⁷³ *Cal. patent rolls, Edw. IV, Hen. VI, 1467–1477* (London, 1901), p. 211.

one of Henry VI's chief supporters, she was also a cousin of Edward, and all three were great-grandchildren of King Edward III.

Eleanor's special treatment by the king continued into her second marriage. In 1470, she married Sir Robert Spenser and once again Edward granted her further estates, in recompense for the loss of so much after the forfeiture of her dead husband's estates. This new grant was accompanied by permission for the newly-married Eleanor and Spenser to 'hold advowsons, courts, leets, views of frank – pledge, and all other profits and all issues from 4 April'⁷⁴ in the previous year.⁷⁵ King Henry VII (1485-1509) was also supportive of Eleanor. In 1501, the year of her death, he pardoned Eleanor and her husband for having acquired possession 'without license from William Hody and John Byconnel, knights, of the manor of Somerton Erle in Somerset, held of the king-in-chief by knight's service, for term of her life, with the remainder to Thomas earl of Ormond', brother-in-law of Eleanor Beaufort.⁷⁶

Historian Barbara Harris has emphasised how 'aristocratic women's first marriages played a crucial part in determining the character and quality of their entire adult lives'.⁷⁷ Having married the earl of Ormond and Wiltshire when she was twenty-seven, as a thirty-six-year old widow Eleanor was an important, if aging and childless woman at the time of her husband's execution (1461). Little is known about her life after Butler's death or during her second marriage. However, the imperative to re-marry was strong as Eleanor's family fell foul of the

⁷⁴ *Cal. patent rolls, Edw. IV, 1476–1485* (London, 1901), p. 306

⁷⁵ Frank pledge was a system of joint surety-ship in the medieval period common throughout England. Leets referred to the yearly court of record held by the lords of manors. It could also be half yearly.

⁷⁶ *Cal. patent rolls, Hen. VII, 1494–1509* (London, 1916), p. 257.

⁷⁷ Harris, *English aristocratic women*, p. 141.

reigning monarch soon after Ormond's demise.⁷⁸ After her father and brother led a short-lived and failed Lancastrian revival in Scotland and north-east of England in 1464, Eleanor's ageing widowed mother was taken prisoner by the king. Her father was executed in 1464 and the following year an Act of attainder was posthumously passed against the duke, depriving him and all his heirs of the Beaufort family titles and estates.⁷⁹

Against this backdrop of her family's second fall from favour with a new king and court, Eleanor needed to secure her future and consider re-marriage. Like many of her female peers, she found herself dependent on a king who had lately condemned her dead husband as a traitor. Whereas R.A. Griffiths has observed how during Edward IV's reign (1461-70 and 1471-83) widows were portrayed as 'passive recipients of royal acts of mercy'⁸⁰, in fact Yorkist kings treated some widows of men whom they attainted quite severely. Edward IV made an example of his own sister-in-law, Anne Countess of Warwick, whose circumstances somewhat resembled Eleanor's, although Anne had children. He declared Anne legally dead and allowed for the transfer of her vast inheritance to his own brother and her sons-in-law, the dukes of Gloucester and Clarence respectively. Margaret, Countess of Oxford, another contemporary of Eleanor, received similarly harsh treatment. After her husband's death and attainder in absentia in 1475, Margaret was left with nothing to live on and was obliged to survive on an income from needlework and from charitable donations.⁸¹ In contrast with the countess of Oxford, other aristocrats such as Eleanor, Countess of Northumberland, Anne, widow of Aubrey de Vere, and Katherine, Duchess of Buckingham received grants of

⁷⁸ Griffiths, 'The sense of dynasty in the reign of Henry VI', p. 79.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Anne Crawford, 'Victims of attainder: the Howard and de Vere women in the late fifteenth century' in Malcolm C. Barber and Keith Bate, (eds.) *Medieval women in southern England*. Reading medieval studies, 15 (London, 1989), pp 59-74.

substantial incomes shortly after their husbands were attainted.⁸² Harris contends that while all widows did not, therefore, face financial crisis or ruin upon the deaths or attainder of their husbands, the threat of such outcomes ‘always existed’ during the Yorkist period.⁸³ For those less fortunate widows, attainders deprived them of property rights or legal protection on which they could normally have relied.

Eleanor Beaufort was therefore fortunate in terms of her benign treatment by successive kings and in negotiating a second marriage to Sir Robert Spencer, was a knight of Spencer-Combe, in Devonshire with whom, despite her advanced years, she had had two children, Lady Margaret (1472-1536) and Lady Catherine (1477-1542).⁸⁴ She was typical of many aristocratic women in Yorkist and early Tudor England who, through their natal families, and successive marriages, ‘accumulated’ families, properties, wealth and networks, as well as becoming peripheral members of the families into which their children married. Eleanor and her second husband’s standing is evidenced by their daughters’ matches. Their eldest, Margaret, married Sir Thomas Carey (their son William, became first husband of Mary Boleyn, great-granddaughter of Thomas Butler, seventh earl of Ormond) while their second daughter, Lady Catherine Spenser, married Henry Percy, fifth earl of Northumberland.⁸⁵

From the Crown’s perspective, the Ormond lordship was strategically important, serving as a Lancastrian bulwark in the midlands, southern and eastern parts of Ireland. Consequently, successive monarchs, not only Lancastrians, ensured that strong ties were maintained with that dynasty. The marriage between the king’s cousin, Eleanor Beaufort and the fifth earl secured that connection which resulted in successive earls’ absence from Ireland for almost

⁸² Harris, *English aristocratic women*, p. 140.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ Griffiths, ‘The sense of dynasty in the reign of Henry VI’, p. 79.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

‘sixty-three years’,⁸⁶ beginning with Eleanor’s husband James, down to Piers Butler, the eventual eighth earl, who was based in Kilkenny at the turn of the century.

A threat to legitimate succession

John Butler, second son of James Butler, fourth Earl of Ormond and Joan Beauchamp, deviated from family convention by remaining unmarried and ultimately contributed to the instability of the dynasty, at a time when absenteeism was already seriously undermining the earldom in Ireland. In her capacity as mistress and mother of John Butler’s son, a Gaelic Irish woman, Renalda Ní Bhriain, exercised significant influence over the Ormond dynasty, and specifically the succession in the 1490s. Like his older brother, James, John was raised in the south of England, in the care of the duke of Bedford.⁸⁷ He pursued a military career in France during the 1440s before being imprisoned there from 1449-51.⁸⁸ Upon his father’s death in 1452, John inherited several manors in Somerset. In his thirties and still unmarried, the political tensions of the 1450s personally impacted John and his elder brother, the fifth earl. Both fought for Henry VI at the battle of Towton in March 1461. John succeeded his childless elder brother as sixth Earl of Ormond, but was soon after attainted at a Parliament of 1461 in London which ruled that all Butler lands in England were forfeited to the Crown. Following the execution of James, John returned to Ireland where, in the name of Henry VI, he ‘captured Waterford city in 1462’.⁸⁹ While still under attainder for his support of Henry VI, John was attempting to recover and restore his Irish estates as they had been forfeited by

⁸⁶ Edwards, *The Ormond lordship*, p. 82.

⁸⁷ R.S. Thomas, ‘Tudor, Jasper, duke of Bedford (c.1431–1495)’ in *ODNB*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, Oct. 2008 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/27796>] [8 July 2015]].

⁸⁸ Steven G. Ellis, ‘Butler, John, sixth earl of Ormond (d.1476/7)’ in *ODNB*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, Oct. 2008 <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/4195> [11 Dec. 2014].

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

Edward IV after the execution of the fifth earl. This attempt at reviving Lancastrian support in Ireland resulted in defeat for Ormond at the hands of the earl of Desmond at the battle of Piltown, County Kilkenny in 1462.⁹⁰

In England, John made peace with the Yorkist Edward IV after the death of Henry VI in 1471.⁹¹ Edward rewarded John's loyalty by recognizing him as Earl of Ormond in 1474⁹² and all the Ormond lands in England and Ireland were restored when John's attainder was annulled in 1475.⁹³ Crucially, however, despite the restoration of lands and title, the entailment was not restored.⁹⁴ David Edwards suggests that this may have been an oversight as in England entailments had been 'abandoned at that time'.⁹⁵

As father of three successive earls James, fourth earl, had at one point hoped that his second son, John, might have been interested in returning to Ireland, perhaps serving as his brother's deputy. John's financial and political prospects were poorer than those of his sibling. His grandmother Lady Bergavanny, who had been so generous to his older brother, left him just one manor and a small amount of money to be divided between him and his younger brother Thomas, future seventh earl. He therefore had no valuable estate of his own in England. More significantly, he had no aristocratic English heiress wife. His father evidently harboured hopes that John might come to Ireland and protect the earldom from advances by cadet branches vying for power following the deaths of the fourth and fifth earls. However, John had a different outlook.

⁹⁰ Ibid, pp 53-54.

⁹¹ Ellis, *Tudor Ireland*, p. 56.

⁹² Ellis, 'Butler, John, sixth earl of Ormond'.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ This is covered at length in chapter 3.

⁹⁵ Edwards, *The Ormond lordship*, p. 80.

The problems facing the Ormond earldom in Ireland arising from prolonged absenteeism of successive earls were compounded by John's fathering an illegitimate child with the daughter of a Gaelic Irish lord. John Butler was by no means the only earl of Ormond to have fathered illegitimate children; many of the earls had several children with mistresses over the generations. However, not only was John a single man with an illegitimate child, he had fathered a son, the only one of the three successive earls to have done so. The sixth earl did not conform to expectations associated with an aristocrat of his standing, and did not follow in the path of his older brother James, who had dutifully married (indeed twice), on each occasion to the benefit of his dynasty. Moreover, John's rejection of the aristocratic norm surrounding marriage placed his family's hold on the earldom in jeopardy. Since the time of James Butler, first earl of Ormond (1305-38), successive earls not only married legitimately, they married aristocratic women of appropriate standing and means. This was integral to the preservation and perpetuation of the legitimate Butler blood line and to the stability and prosperity of succession to the earldom. Largely owing to his involvement in the Wars of the Roses, John Butler seriously breached conventions governing sexual and marital relations for a man of his standing. The Irish earldom was in a deteriorating state as years of the earls' absenteeism impacted and that was compounded by the complication of illegitimacy and contested succession in the later fifteenth century.

John Butler's only recorded visit to Ireland was during the first six months of 1462.⁹⁶ A short-lived dispute between the houses of Ormond and Fitzgerald ended in a severe defeat for John and his supporters in summer 1462 at Carrick-On-Suir; immediately afterwards, the earl left Ireland, never to return.⁹⁷ However, it was during this sojourn that Butler and Renalda,

⁹⁶ Ellis, 'Butler, John, sixth earl of Ormond'.

⁹⁷ *Cal. Ormond deeds*, ed. Curtis, iii (1413-1509), no. 190.

the daughter of O'Brien of Thomond, met and had a brief relationship.⁹⁸ At the time Renalda was in her late teens, Butler was much older. A learned man, he had travelled extensively throughout Europe, showing his support for the Lancastrians; he had fought wars, been imprisoned and attained. Renalda's father, Turlogh 'The Brown' O'Brien king of Thomond, had died in 1460, two years before John Butler's campaign in Ireland.⁹⁹ O'Brien had ruled the independent Gaelic territory of Thomond in Clare, which was capable of maintaining its own 'military power in the endemic warfare of the later medieval period'.¹⁰⁰ He concerned himself with reclaiming the former O'Brien lands in Limerick, then under the control of the Fitzgeralds, earls of Desmond'.¹⁰¹ The Desmond Fitzgeralds, together with their Kildare cousins, were Yorkist supporters, and across the Shannon from where Renalda and her family were based, lay the earldom of the Butlers of Ormond, staunch Lancastrian supporters. The main opposition encountered by Ormond during his brief visit to Ireland was from Thomas Fitzgerald, earl of Desmond (1426-67), then lord deputy of Ireland. For his part, O'Brien of Thomond – though by no means a Lancastrian supporter – backed Butler as this presented him with opportunities to challenge the Fitzgeralds who were an obstacle to O'Brien's expansion and reclamation of his lands in Limerick.¹⁰² Since the death of Renalda's father, Tadhg O'Brien led the family who's 'territory was a coherent administrative structure and still a potent military power in the endemic warfare of the later medieval period'.¹⁰³ It is unlikely that this brief liaison was recognised under fifteenth-century canon law.

Furthermore, the Statutes of Kilkenny (1366) prevented any union between aristocratic Old

⁹⁸ Briain Ó Dálaigh, 'Mistress, mother and abbess: Renalda Ní Bhriain, c.1447–1510' in *North Munster Antiquarian Journal*, xxxii-xxxiii (1990-91), p. 52.

⁹⁹ *Ibid*, p. 50.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid*.

¹⁰¹ Edmund Curtis, *A history of medieval Ireland from 1086 to 1513* (London, 1978), pp 330-31.

¹⁰² Ó Dálaigh, 'Mistress, mother & abbess', p. 50.

¹⁰³ *Ibid*.

English families and the native Irish population. While these regulations were not uniformly adhered to, given that he styled himself ‘sixth Earl’ before being officially titled by King Edward IV before November 1475¹⁰⁴ and given his favoured standing with the house of Lancaster and at court, he was ‘unlikely to enter a marriage contract that further weakened his claim to the earldom of Ormond’.¹⁰⁵ Before the end of summer 1462 and the birth of his son, John had fled to Portugal with the earl of Shrewsbury¹⁰⁶ where he remained until 1471, before returning to England during one of Henry VI’s periods of restoration. John and Renalda’s son, James Dubh, emerged in later decades as a problematic figure during the succession crisis that troubled a rival claimant to the earldom, Piers Ruadh.

Among the Ormond deeds originally held at Kilkenny castle and now in the National Library of Ireland in Dublin is the will of Renalda Ní Bhriain which sheds valuable light on Ormond’s mistress, and on her complex relationship with the Butler dynasty. Her individuality among her female predecessors and successors is striking. She spanned several divides – ethnic, political, and social; hence analysis of her adept handling of a diverse range of complex relationships reveals much about her capacity as mother of the sixth earl’s son to negotiate favourable terms for herself and her child, regardless of the illegitimate status of both her union and her offspring. As Renalda’s life showed, deviation from adherence to the prevailing norms of marriage and legitimate succession did not necessarily mean ostracisation, at least for her and her son, until such time as he reached adulthood and asserted his own claim to the earldom.¹⁰⁷ As mother of Ormond’s son and daughter to O’Brien of Thomond, Renalda was a woman ‘much in demand’.¹⁰⁸ Shortly after the birth of

¹⁰⁴ Ellis, ‘Butler, John, sixth earl of Ormond’.

¹⁰⁵ Ó Dálaigh, ‘Mistress, mother & abbess’, p. 52.

¹⁰⁶ Ellis, ‘Butler, John, sixth earl of Ormond’.

¹⁰⁷ Ten years before he was murdered, James had been appointed by his uncle Thomas, seventh earl, as deputy in Ireland.

¹⁰⁸ Ó Dálaigh, ‘Mistress, mother & abbess’, p. 52.

her son by John, she married his cousin, Richard Butler of Knockgraffon in Tipperary.¹⁰⁹

From this marriage, another son (Thomas) was born, drawing Renalda even closer into the Ormond fold.

In the eyes of the law in both English and Gaelic medieval Ireland, as elsewhere in Western Europe, mistresses such as Renalda, ‘were of inferior status and were not eligible for the same rights and protections accorded to wives’.¹¹⁰ Furthermore, the offspring of such unions had ‘less chance of succeeding to lands and honours within both Gaelic and Anglo-Ireland’.¹¹¹ A brief examination of the liaisons of previous earls of Ormond, specifically John Butler’s grandfather, James, third earl (1359-1405), provides a useful interpretative context for the case of John and Renalda. Katherine of Desmond (d.1420) was mistress of James Butler, third earl of Ormond. Historian Gillian Kenny has stressed that because Katherine was also from a noble family, her relationship with Ormond was ‘likely to have been substantially different from that of the concubine of a lower-ranking man’.¹¹² Their relationship produced four sons and three daughters, ‘each of whom was provided for by their father the earl’.¹¹³ Like, Renalda who went on to marry Ormond’s cousin, Katherine subsequently married another man, John Fitzthomas of Waterford. Again, like Renalda, Katherine apparently accepted her role as mistress having been ‘influenced by Gaelic Irish practices’.¹¹⁴ This is captured in her response to the earl’s subsequent marriage to the English aristocrat, Anne Welles. Upon finding clothes belonging to the English-born countess of

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Gillian Kenny, *Anglo-Irish and Gaelic women in Ireland, c.1170–1540* (Dublin, 2001), p. 127.

¹¹¹ Bert Jaski, *Early Irish kingship and succession* (Dublin, 2000), pp 146-8.

¹¹² Kenny, *Anglo-Irish & Gaelic women*, p. 127.

¹¹³ T. Blake Butler, ‘Senechals in the liberty of Tipperary’ in *Irish Genealogist*, ii, no. 12 (1955), pp 368-73.

¹¹⁴ Kenny, *Anglo-Irish & Gaelic women*, p. 127.

Ormond while visiting the earl at Carrick in County Kilkenny, Katherine donned the apparel and ridiculed the earl. Pretending to be countess Anne, she mimicked her saying; ‘For ye the earls of Ireland (as I opine) deem that in Ireland ye find not women to suit yourselves; whereas I hold that, in the way of a countess, I myself am better than yon Geraldine hag which thou hast’.¹¹⁵

In time, Katherine was replaced by a legitimate wife, the third earl ‘continuing with the Ormond tradition of marrying into the English nobility’.¹¹⁶ But like Renalda, she had a lasting impact on the Butler family. Historian C.A. Empey suggests that Katherine’s relationship with the third earl could have contributed to a long-running dispute between the Cahir Butlers and the MacRichard Butlers, in part due to ‘a claim by Katherine to the manor of Carrick’.¹¹⁷ Moreover, Empey suggests that Katherine was demonised by Piers Butler who commissioned ‘derogatory poems about her’.¹¹⁸ Through such vilification of her, Piers sought to silence rumours of illegitimate succession, past indiscretions, or shameful/morally suspect behaviour by past earls of Ormond. Renalda’s remaining within the Butler family, unlike Katherine of Desmond who married outside, suggests a possible plan, perhaps devised by John, the sixth earl, in concert with some of the wider cadet branches of the Butler family, to protect and prepare their son James Dubh for asserting his claim to the earldom. However, while James’s illegitimacy made this highly improbable, his claim to the earldom was, nonetheless, stronger than that of Piers Butler.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁵ *Caithreim Thoirdhealbhaigh*, ed. S.H. O’Grady (2 vols, London, 1929), i, 173.

¹¹⁶ Beresford, ‘Butlers in England & Ireland’.

¹¹⁷ C.A. Empey, ‘The manor of Carrick-on-Suir in the middle ages’ in *Journal of the Butler Society*, ii, no. 2 (1982), p. 211.

¹¹⁸ C.A. Empey, ‘From rags to riches: Piers Butler, earl of Ormond, 1515–1539’ in *Journal of the Butler Society*, ii, no. 3 (1984) pp 299-314.

¹¹⁹ Ó Dálaigh, ‘Mistress, mother & abbess’, pp 50-63; Edwards, *The Ormond lordship*, pp 83-4; see also *Cal. close rolls, 1485–1500*, no. 580.

Upon his return to England and recognition as earl of Ormond, John had his son James Dubh join him. He arranged for the boy's education at the Inns of Court. By 1486 James had been elected a bencher of Lincolns Inn, as a practising lawyer¹²⁰ and according to historian John T. Gilbert, he was knighted by Henry VII for his 'service against the Yorkists',¹²¹ despite Edward IV having recognised his father as earl in 1475. The following year, Sir John left on a pilgrimage and was in Rome that spring. However, he died while on pilgrimage in the Holy Land on 14 October 1476.¹²²

Despite his successful career and his having gained recognition in London society, James failed in his attempt to assert his right to succeed his father. In keeping with the tradition of his father and uncles, including his uncle Thomas Butler, the young James remained on in England, only returning to Ireland at Thomas's request to diffuse growing tensions between the Kildares and Desmonds who were encroaching on the Ormond earldom in the early 1490s.¹²³ King Henry VII was also keen that James Dubh should return to Ireland. Following the arrival there of the pretender Perkin Warbeck in 1491, the lord deputy of Ireland, Gerald Fitzgerald, eighth earl of Kildare, and his Yorkist supporters, had crowned him king¹²⁴ and Desmond also supported Warbeck's claim. Fearful of a Yorkist uprising against himself, Henry dispatched James Dubh to 'secure the Butler territories, as well as suppress any rise on the part of Kildare'.¹²⁵ A key factor in James's success during this Irish visit was the strong support he received 'from his mother's family and extended Ó Bhriain's throughout

¹²⁰ Donough Bryan, *Gerald Fitzgerald, the great earl of Kildare, 1456–1513* (Dublin, 1933), p. 158.

¹²¹ J.T Gilbert, *History of the viceroys of Ireland* (Dublin, 1865), p. 443.

¹²² Steven G. Ellis, 'Butler, John, sixth earl of Ormond (d. 1476/7)' in *ODNB*, Oxford University Press, 2004, online edn, Jan. 2008 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/4195> [11 Dec. 2014]].

¹²³ *Cal. close rolls, 1485–1500*, no. 580.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

¹²⁵ Bryan, *Gerald Fitzgerald*, pp 158-9.

Thomond'.¹²⁶ As the conspiratorial activity unfolded, Kildare relayed to the king that James Dubh was claiming to be earl of Ormond in his uncle's stead in a self-appointed manner. This gave Kildare considerable cause for concern as he had recently arranged the marriage of his daughter, Margaret, to Piers Ruadh, the son of another lateral branch of Butlers, whose claim to the earldom was dubious owing to questions about the validity of his parents' marriage and therefore his birth right.

Kildare appears to have had grounds for concern. So impressed was Henry VII with James's ability to galvanise his mother's allies and those of his father that he appointed James, 'king's governor of Ireland with authority for the area beyond the pale'.¹²⁷ Renalda's remaining on within the Butler earldom and family circle after the death of her son's father paid off not only for her son, and for herself, but also for the Ormond dynasty. Or so it seemed, at least until the marriage in 1485 of Piers Ruadh to Margaret Fitzgerald whose ambitions would reset the trajectory of future earls well into the sixteenth century. A significant force for stabilising the dynasty, Margaret had the preservation and advancement of the Butler dynasty, present and future, at the heart of her designs.

However, Henry VII was anxious to achieve peaceful governance of the lordship of Ireland at a minimal cost to the Crown. Hence, in 1496 he reappointed the earl of Kildare as lord deputy. That move caused James Dubh to retaliate against the king, who had, in the previous decade, supported him, and as Steven Ellis contends, capitalised on James's Gaelic connections.¹²⁸ Having been summoned by the king to return to London on two occasions, James refused. There are many likely reasons for this, including his dismay at the

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

¹²⁷ Ellis, *Reform & revival*, p. 28.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*

reappointment of Kildare and the amount of support he had elicited from his kinsmen, all of which made his return to London virtually impossible. Significantly, whereas he was fully aware that his illegitimacy was against him in terms of his ever-achieving recognition as Earl of Ormond, this was not an impediment in the eyes of his mother's kinsmen. James chose to remain in Ireland during the late 1490s, and in July 1497 was murdered by Piers Butler, who was determined to clear his own path to the earldom.¹²⁹ Renalda outlived her son and was still resident at the manor of her husband, Richard Butler, in the heart of the Ormond earldom in 1497. She remained on good terms with her kin in Thomond, in particular her brother Toirdhealbhach Donn (1498-1528), who supported her son in his military endeavours in the Ormond earldom.¹³⁰

Like James Dubh, Piers Ruadh did not fit into the direct line of succession. He was not a direct descendant of the seventh earl Thomas Butler; rather his claim was a distant one. He was a descendant of Sir Richard Butler (1395-c.1443), who was a brother of James, fourth earl of Ormond (1392-1452). Both Piers and James Dubh had Gaelic Irish mothers. Piers did all he could to consolidate his position, including producing evidence that his father, James Butler of Polestown and his mother Sadbh Kavanagh, had been lawfully married before his birth, and that the Butler lands had been entailed by the fourth earl to heirs male.¹³¹ He conveniently neglected to take into account that when titles, estates and the earldom itself was fully restored in 1475 to John and Thomas Butler by the Yorkist Edward IV, the entailment was not restored to heirs male specifically.

¹²⁹ *Holinshed's Irish Chronicle*, ed. L. Miller and E. Power (Dublin, 1979), p. 326.

¹³⁰ Ó Dálaigh, 'Mistress, mother & abbess', p. 50.

¹³¹ *Cal. Ormond deeds*, ed. Curtis, iii (1413–1509), nos 19, 33, 90, 115, 177, 258.

But what of Renalda Ní Bhriain after generations of involvement with various branches of the Ormond dynasty? After the death of James Dubh she returned to the safety of her Thomond kin and it was most likely with her brother's support that she entered the convent of Killone Abbey near Ennis in County Clare, and was swiftly appointed abbess.¹³² Renalda in many ways led a far more impactful life than the aristocratic English-born Ormond countesses of the fifteenth century. She demonstrated that although she was not married to the earl, did not come from an English background, and brought neither dowries nor vast estates, she nevertheless managed to influence the dynasty in no small way by giving birth to John's son, who despite not succeeding to the earldom, did manage at least for a short time in the 1490s to represent and protect the interests of the earldom in Ireland. Renalda's success in forging a lasting connection with the Butler family highlights the influence commanded by a woman who advanced her own standing and that of her first son, and then secured her second son's legitimate succession by marrying Richard Butler. Her natal, affinal and extended families had at least briefly succeeded in frustrating the designs of the Kildares, the Desmonds and indeed the king at one point in the 1490s. Although victory in the end was Piers Ruadh and Margaret Fitzgerald's, Renalda's sons played important roles in representing the Ormond dynasty during the prolonged absence of successive disinterested earls in the later decades of the fifteenth century. Particularly significant for her was seeing her son James knighted by King Henry VII, and his appointment in 1487 as his uncle Thomas Butler's deputy in Ireland.¹³³

Sometime in 1509, as abbess at Killone Renalda composed her will. Despite the fact that Piers Ruadh had murdered her son, Renalda did not allow sentiment to prevent her from

¹³² Ó Dálaigh, 'Mistress, mother & abbess', p. 50.

¹³³ Steven G. Ellis, 'Ormond, Sir James (d.1497)' in *ODNB*, Oxford University Press, 2004, online edn. Jan. 2008 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/20841> [9 July 2015]].

appointing Piers as her executor. Recognising that he was the most powerful figure in the earldom at that time, she sought to ensure that the Ormond property that remained in her name would be disposed of appropriately following her death. Hence, ‘she pledged her lands in Killenaule to Piers Ruadh [Butler] for the sum of 100 marks and directed him to pay her debts and settle her bequests in a fair and equitable manner’.¹³⁴ Piers needed her lands and those of her second son Thomas to enable him to present a credible challenge for the earldom. According to historian Brian Ó Dálaigh, the survival of the will in the Ormond archives testifies to the importance of Renalda’s bequeathing her rights and lands to Piers. It is clear from the will that before entering religious life, she dispensed with the majority of the substantial property that she had held following the deaths of Richard and her son, leaving a depleted inheritance for distribution after her death. The remainder of her estate was to be used to pay for prayers for the salvation of her own soul and the souls of Sir John, earl of Ormond, and her husband, Richard. It is striking that at no point is her son, James Dubh, mentioned in her will: perhaps because Piers was executor, she thought better of mentioning her son’s name, or perhaps she was prevented from doing so. Despite her Butler connections and ending her days in the abbey, Renalda requested that she be buried in the family plot at the Franciscan friary in Limerick where generations of O’Briains of Thomond are interred. At the monastery in Clare on 18 May 1510, the vigil of Pentecost, her nephew, the bishop of Killaloe, issued ‘probate and conferred on Piers Ruadh authority to administer the estate’.¹³⁵ Renalda’s will read:

be it known to all men that I Rendalam InyBrien Abbess of Kilyhon and in the diocese of Loamey [Killaloe] being of sound mind though sick of body hereby make my last will. I request the said Peter Bottiller [Butler] to arrange for prayers to be said for the

¹³⁴ Ó Dálaigh, ‘Mistress, mother & abbess’, p. 60.

¹³⁵ Ibid, p. 62.

repose of my soul and for the souls of John sometime earl of Ormond and the said Richard Bottiler. I witness whereof I have laid my seal to these presents.¹³⁶

Piers and his wife Margaret, honored Renalda's financial commitments. Three decades later the guardian and convent of Adare acknowledged receipt of one such payment:

Whereas Renalda Iny Brien, has in her will disposed and bequeathed to us twenty marks which she owed to us and our monastery, and whereas Peter Butyller, earl of Ormond, and his wife at our request satisfied us in the payment of the said sum, we have been satisfied in the above sum by the said earl and countess.¹³⁷

That John Butler, sixth earl of Ormond, was unmarried and had an illegitimate heir (whom he recognised) with a Gaelic Irish woman is not only a stark contrast with his brothers, James and Thomas's preoccupation with advancing their political and dynastic fortunes through marriage, it was a break in generations of Butlers marrying aristocratic women, and in particular, English women. Although John made some attempt to secure his lordship before going into exile, his departure from Ireland was the beginning of yet another long period of absenteeism that would again 'force the Ormond lordship to adapt to the reality of a non-resident earl'.¹³⁸ Writing from Ireland in the 1490s, Edmund FitzButler, a member of one of many Butler family cadet branches, urged John's successor and brother Thomas, seventh earl, to visit his lordship of Kilkenny and Tipperary, and 'reform the government of the liberty'.¹³⁹

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ While the seal is no longer intact and no date remains, the record is contained in *Cal. Ormond deeds*, ed. Curtis, iv (1509–1547), no. 27. (Testimonial of the monks of the Holy Trinity, Adare. This post-dates recognition of Piers as earl in 1538).

¹³⁸ Beresford, 'Butlers in England & Ireland', pp 200-201.

¹³⁹ Ibid, p. 238.

He implored ‘your lordship to please take the labour to come into this land and to take you some goodly young lady that you may have issue by her which will be to you right great work of mercy, comfort and renewal of all your blood’.¹⁴⁰ FitzButler was unsuccessful in his appeal, and by the end of the 1480s succession was the central issue gripping the attention of the collateral branches of the Butler dynasty, ‘in particular the MacRichard Butlers’,¹⁴¹ as for almost a quarter of a century, successive earls of Ormond failed to maintain more than minimal contact with their lordship in Ireland. By far the most important marriage alliance for the MacRichard Butlers took place in 1485 when Piers Butler married Margaret Fitzgerald.¹⁴² The rise of the Kildare earldom to pre-eminence under the leadership of Thomas Fitzgerald since 1456 had allowed his son Gareth an unprecedented level of authority within the lordship. The period between 1464 and the death of Thomas, seventh earl of Ormond in 1515, saw a radical change in the relationship between an absentee earl of Ormond and his Irish lordship owing to absenteeism from Ireland over decades while successive earls (James, John and Thomas Butler) focussed almost entirely on political advancement in England and a sustained drive to ‘rebuild their place in England after exile in the 1460s’.¹⁴³ Moreover, to compound this problem, there was a generational shift in leadership among other branches of the family within Ireland which resulted in a leadership that lost its personal connection to the earl himself, and was largely only aware of him as an absentee family figurehead in England. During the earls’ prolonged absence, various heads of branches of the Butler extended family came to regard the ‘divisions of committal authority created during the life of the white [fourth] earl as permanent hereditary offices’.¹⁴⁴ The career of Piers Butler – future eighth earl – highlighted this shift in perceptions, as he came to view his position as Ormond’s

¹⁴⁰ *Cal. Ormond deeds*, ed. Curtis, iv (1509–1547), appendix 11, pp 317-18.

¹⁴¹ Beresford, ‘Butlers in England & Ireland’, p. 238.

¹⁴² *Cal. Carew MSS – Book of Howth and miscellaneous*, vi, 176-7.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 263.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

deputy in Ireland. Following the murder of James Dubh, his uncle Thomas Butler maintained regular correspondence with his Irish lordship and slowly clawed back some of the authority lost by both himself and his brothers during their absence.

Restoration of marital norms and the aftermath of the Wars of The Roses

Like his older brother James, fifth earl, Thomas Butler was married twice, and to English aristocratic women. Unlike his brother John, Thomas clearly had the stability of the earldom and advancement of the dynasty's standing and wealth in mind. Through his choice of brides, Thomas lived up to the dynasty's tradition of marrying into the wealthiest and most politically powerful families in England. For their part, his wives enhanced and augmented the earldom in England. However, yet again, by embedding the earls in English politics and aristocratic society, these marriages worked to the detriment of the dynasty's smaller Irish lordship. On 18 July 1445 Thomas Butler married for the first time.¹⁴⁵ His bride, Anne Hankeford, was the only daughter and co-heiress from the second marriage of Sir Richard Hankeford of Devon, feudal baron of Bampton.¹⁴⁶ Anne was born in England in 1431, and would become great-grandmother of King Henry VIII's future queen consort, Anne Boleyn. Her

wealth lent a significant and timely boost to the Ormond dynasty.¹⁴⁷ The marriage had been encouraged by James, fifth earl, during his years of amassing wealth and property since it added property in the south west of England to the ever-increasing number of estates and manors coming into Ormond possession. The couple had two daughters, Margaret who married Sir William Boleyn by whom she had issue, including Thomas Boleyn, father of

¹⁴⁵ 'The Hankford inheritance' in 'The Carey estate' BCM/H and 'The Butler inheritance' BCM/H/1 (Berkeley Castle Muniments, Berkeley, England).

¹⁴⁶ Tristram Risdon, *Survey of Devon* (London, 1811), p. 64.

¹⁴⁷ 'The Hankford inheritance' in 'The Carey estate' BCM/H and 'The Butler Inheritance' BCM/H/1 (Berkeley Castle Muniments, Berkeley, England).

Anne, Mary, and George by his wife Elizabeth Howard. Their second daughter, Anne, married Sir James St Leger by whom she had two sons, George and James St Leger.¹⁴⁸ Through his marriage to the Hankeford heiress, Thomas's financial position swiftly improved. After a marriage of forty years Anne died on 13 November 1485, the first year of the reign of King Henry VII.¹⁴⁹ Her daughters, Anne, then aged twenty-three, and Margaret, aged twenty (both married), were listed as her co-heirs in 1485.¹⁵⁰ 'Having survived her,' Thomas was 'seized [by the Crown] of the premises [the couple had occupied] for life, as tenant by the curtesy'¹⁵¹ and within weeks Henry VII's first Parliament restored the Ormond estates and title in England to Anne's widower.¹⁵²

After the death of his first wife, and anxious for a male heir of his own (having fathered two daughters), in 1496 Thomas Butler married Lora Berkeley, only daughter of Sir Edward Berkeley and widow successively of John Blount, third Baron Mountjoy, and Sir Thomas Montgomery of Faulkbourne, Essex.¹⁵³ However, this second marriage was short lived, as just five years later, in 1501, Lora died.¹⁵⁴ The couple had one daughter, Elizabeth Butler who died in 1510, five years before her father.¹⁵⁵ Thanks to these two marriages, Thomas Butler ranked among the wealthiest aristocrats in England. He was granted a fine manor house at Beaulieu in Essex by King Henry VII where he entertained the recently crowned Henry VIII in 1510 and again in 1515. On his death, the Beaulieu manor passed to his

¹⁴⁸ John Prince, *The worthies of Devon: biography of Sir William Hankeford* (London, 1810), p. 462.

¹⁴⁹ The Hankeford inheritance, in 'The Carey estate', BCM/H and 'The Butler Inheritance' BCM/H/1 (Berkeley Castle Muniments, Berkeley, England).

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵² Beresford, 'Butlers in England & Ireland', pp 298–304.

¹⁵³ Rosemary Horrox, 'Blount, Walter, first Baron Mountjoy' in *ODNB*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn. Jan. 2008 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/> [2 Jan. 2015]].

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁵ Richardson & Everingham (eds), *Magna Carta ancestry*.

youngest daughter, Margaret, who had married William Boleyn.¹⁵⁶ When Thomas, seventh earl, died in England in August 1515 he was buried within the Easter Sepulchre in the chapel of St Thomas Acon, London. The Butler family had a long affinity with this church as the mother of three successive earls, Joan Beauchamp, fourth countess of Ormond and daughter of Lady Joan Bergavanney, was also buried there.¹⁵⁷

In his will, Thomas refers to his two daughters by Anne Hankeford as ‘my daughter Dame Anne St. Leger’ and ‘my daughter Dame Margaret Boleyn, late the wife of Sir William Boleyn’.¹⁵⁸ Both received from their father personal bequests which, he reminded them, originally belonged to their mother. He left Margaret a bed of tapestry work and an old great carpet, Anne, the older of the two, received a little prayer book covered in russet velvet.¹⁵⁹ Margaret and Anne’s uncle James, fifth earl, had died childless in 1461 and their uncle, John (while still alive at the time of Margaret Butler’s marriage) had, as we have seen, fathered one illegitimate son. This augured well for both women as future heiresses to the Ormond dynasty following the death of their uncle John in 1476. When their father Thomas became seventh earl after John’s death, they also became wealthy co-heiresses to the vast Ormond dynasty. This had been amassed mostly by their uncle, the executed fifth earl, and had been added to significantly after the sixth earl made his peace with Edward IV in 1475 and the family estates and titles were restored. On reaching adulthood Thomas’s daughters were therefore women of substantial wealth and impeccable dynastic pedigree. Their mother, Anne Hankeford, was granddaughter of the earl of Shrewsbury and their father, an earl, was also

¹⁵⁶ Will of Thomas Butler, earl of Ormond, July 1515 (TNA, PROB 11/18/184).

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

grandson of Lady Bergavanny.¹⁶⁰ Elizabeth Butler, sister to the fifth, sixth and seventh earls of Ormond, had married the earl of Shrewsbury, further enabling the Butlers to forge links at the highest level of English nobility.

Margaret Butler was the earl's younger daughter and co-heiress. When their father died, Margaret and her sister Anne each inherited thirty-six manors.¹⁶¹ As a widow, Margaret could have taken charge of these herself but instead permitted her son Thomas to control her inheritance. Her husband, William Boleyn, as a young man had enjoyed a promising career at court, having been knighted by King Richard III in 1483.¹⁶² Margaret and William's hosting of Henry VII at their manor at Blickling in 1498 proved significant not only in advancing the political career of Margaret's husband but also that of her father, the seventh earl of Ormond, who had been appointed ambassador to Burgundy in 1497. (Thomas had previously held the post of ambassador to France whilst serving as a member of Henry VII's Privy Council.) Originally Margaret's father had served Queen Elizabeth of York before continuing as chamberlain to Queen Katherine from 1509 until 1512. The deaths of Margaret and Anne's stepmother, Lora Berkeley countess of Ormond in 1501, and of their half-sister Elizabeth in 1510, strengthened significantly the two women's positions as their father's heiresses and as beneficiaries in part of their half-sister's estate.¹⁶³

¹⁶⁰ It was Joanne Lady Bergavanny's will of 10 January 1435, (TNA, PROB C139/73/2) which enabled the fifth earl of Ormond to establish a base in England initially. She also left substantial bequests to his two brothers John and Thomas and to their sister who was married to the earl of Shrewsbury.

¹⁶¹ Will of Thomas Butler, earl of Ormond, July 1515 (TNA, PROB 11/18/184).

¹⁶² S. E. Volkes, 'The early career of Thomas Lord Howard, earl of Surrey, and third earl of Norfolk, 1474–1525' (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Hull, 1988), p. 7.

¹⁶³ Computus roll for Ormond manors in England, 1506-7 (Cambridge Record Office, MS. R 52/15/1).

Margaret and William had a large family of sons and daughters, many of whom died young. It appears that Margaret devoted her energies to their surviving children, particularly their son and heir Thomas. By the time her own father died, aged about ninety in 1515, Margaret, then in her sixties, had been widowed some ten years. One of ‘the wealthiest of the king’s subjects’ when he died, Thomas left ‘£40,000 in money besides jewels and as much land to his two daughters in England as at this day (1960s) would yield £30,000 per annum’.¹⁶⁴ Both Margaret and Anne had legitimate birth rights to the earldom. They were both legitimate offspring of a legally recognised union, unlike their only rival cousin, James Dubh, and certainly more legitimate than their distant cousin Piers Butler. Both women enjoyed very considerable means and social standing in their own right, within English society. Their legal position as co-heiresses was clear cut: they had full claim to both the English and the smaller ancient earldom in Ireland. The experiences of Margaret and Anne Butler, outlined in the next chapter, highlight the challenges, opportunities, and difficulties experienced by female heiresses as a result of the previous generation’s failure to provide a legitimate male heir. However, one significant consequence of successive earls being caught up in the Wars of the Roses was the break from generations of legitimate succession from father to son, occasioned by John Butler’s fathering a child with Renalda Ní Bhriain. Their illegitimate son emerged as a ‘potential’ rival to the English sister’s claim in the mid-1480s and persisted with his campaign for over a decade. On the surface, any threat posed by James Dubh in Ireland to the right of his cousins’ legitimate claim in England was of little concern to either woman as his illegitimacy disqualified him. (Moreover, by the end of summer 1497 he was dead.) After nine generations of successful inheritances from father to son, in the space of one generation the

¹⁶⁴ M.J. Tucker, *The life of Thomas Howard, earl of Surrey and second duke of Norfolk, 1443–1524* (London, 1964), p. 26.

lack of a legitimate ‘male’ heir to the earldom thrust both Butler heiresses into prime positions to inherit, or at the very least, to assert their entitlement to that inheritance.

While the Ormond lordship in Ireland languished owing to neglect, a power vacuum emerged in which their rivals, the Kildares, and others sought to press home their advantage. At the end of the fifteenth century and in the aftermath of the Wars of the Roses, the successors to the entire Ormond earldom were two female co-heiresses who had spent their whole lives in England.¹⁶⁵ Neither woman had any intention of moving to the smaller and troublesome earldom in Ireland.

Conclusion

The Ormond women discussed in this chapter (Avice Stafford and Eleanor Beaufort, Anne Hankford and her daughters Anne and Margaret Butler, as well as Lora Berkeley, second wife of the seventh earl, and Renalda Ní Bhriain) each played a unique role in shaping the fortunes of the dynasty during and after the Wars of the Roses, in either England or Ireland. The careers of the fourth earl and his three sons illustrate that it was possible for an Irish-born magnate to secure significant political roles in England. However, the position of Irish-born magnates in England were more dependent upon royal patronage than their English counterparts. In this light, the marriages of James and Thomas Butler were crucial in assimilating the Butler earls into the political milieu in England as well as greatly increasing their wealth there. Each countess had royal connections or was the daughter or sister of a significant peer. Each brought substantial inheritances to the Ormond dynasty and contributed to the expansion of Ormond lands throughout England from coast to coast. While to varying degrees each of these women played an important part in enhancing her husband’s wealth and political standing, their unions ultimately jeopardised the earls’ hold on their Irish earldom, as

¹⁶⁵ There is no record of either sister ever having visited Ireland.

neither the fifth nor the seventh earl, nor their respective countesses, visited Ireland; neither did they demonstrate any concern for the security, modernisation or expansion of the Irish earldom. The reverse was true for the earldom in England, where these women contributed significantly to bolstering the house of Ormond's status, wealth, power and political influence, particularly in the context of the Ormond's relationship with the English nobility and monarchy. In Ireland, the relationship between John, sixth earl and the daughter of an aristocratic Gaelic family, Renalda Ní Bhriain, differed from the propitious legitimate unions contracted by his brothers.

This chapter has explored the ramifications of these various relationships, highlighting how each impacted the earldom in Ireland, England or both. In an Irish context, the main consequence of the absenteeism of three successive earls was to remove any 'challengers to the emerging Kildare hegemony from within the Anglo-Irish community'.¹⁶⁶ Within the extended Butler family, the earls' absenteeism permitted the emergence of 'fossilised divisions'.¹⁶⁷ The recovery of the Ormond lordship only began when Thomas Butler 'bowed to the realities of the situation and broke with precedent'¹⁶⁸ by accepting Piers Butler as deputy in 1505. In addition to impacting the Ormond earldom through the earls' absenteeism, the Wars of the Roses also gave rise to disruption of a different kind that lasted almost two decades. The succession crisis between 1515 and 1538 placed the daughters of Thomas Butler, seventh earl and Countess Anne Hankeford, at the epicentre of that struggle. The following chapter examines the lives of these two sisters who, assisted by their respective Boleyn and St Leger families, navigated the challenges they encountered as the first heiresses in the history of the earldom.

¹⁶⁶ Beresford, 'Butlers in England & Ireland', p. 272.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

Chapter 3

The first Ormond succession crisis (1515-38): two heiresses, a usurper and royal intervention.

‘I understand to my great heaviness that my Lord, my father is departed this world to the great God on whose soul I beseech Jesus to have mercy’.¹ Thus wrote Margaret Butler to her son, Thomas Boleyn, upon hearing of the death of her father, Thomas Butler, seventh earl of Ormond, who died aged about ninety in August 1515.² In his will dated 31 July 1515, the old earl directed that his property, including holdings he had acquired through the Hankeford inheritance upon his marriage in 1445, was to be divided equally between his two surviving offspring, Anne and Margaret.³ This unprecedented circumstance precipitated a crisis in which the heiresses’ claim to their inheritance was challenged by rival claimants based in the Irish earldom, chief among them Piers Butler. This chapter presents an in-depth examination of that crisis which began in 1515 and only ended in 1538 when Piers Butler was elevated to the earldom of Ormond. It explores how the prospect of female succession impacted the house of Ormond, precipitating a reversion to male succession that lasted for ninety-nine years until a further crisis occurred in 1614 regarding Elizabeth (Butler) Preston, first Duchess of Ormond. Challenges faced by Margaret and Anne as co-heiresses in the context of succession in contemporary English and Irish families are examined with a view to illuminating how the Butlers dealt with the crisis that dragged on over three decades. It will be shown that the Butler sisters’ case was neither unique nor unprecedented since the

¹ Margaret Butler to Thomas Boleyn, 1515 in *L. & P., Hen. VIII, i, 5784*.

² *Ibid.*

³ Will of Thomas Butler, seventh earl of Ormond, July 1515 (TNA, PROB 11/18/184).

obstacles they faced, including rival claims from other family members, were commonplace, particularly in cases of potential female inheritance.

Female succession in England and colonial Ireland

In fifteenth- and sixteenth-century England, when land descended to sons, it was impartible and passed to one son at a time, beginning with the eldest, whereas it was divided equally among daughters.⁴ Despite the fact that Old English families in late medieval and sixteenth-century Ireland adhered to common law, female inheritance was not popular since it was regarded as detrimental to the stability and preservation of large landed estates.⁵ Given the exceptional impact of the political turmoil of the Wars of the Roses on the house of Ormond, it may be the case that having secured restoration of the earldom in 1475 and having failed to produce a legitimate male heir to the title and estates, the Butlers were especially exercised about the potentially detrimental effects of limiting inheritance to the male line. The Butlers were in fact keen to keep their options open in the interests of securing the succession; the fact that the seventh earl did not specify the gender of his successors suggests that this was the case. Furthermore, there is no evidence of any attempt made by the Butlers to persuade the king to rectify or amend the legal technicality that permitted recognition of heiresses' claims to the Ormond dynastic titles and estates. It is unlikely that this provision was the result of an oversight on the part of Crown officials who doubtless assumed that entailment on the male line had lapsed in Ireland as it had done in both England and Wales for some time. Indeed, historian M.L. Bush has shown that 'female successions were entirely normal among English and Welsh nobility at this time'.⁶ In colonial Ireland, under common law

⁴ Harris, *Aristocratic English women*, p. 20.

⁵ K.W. Nicholls, 'Irishwomen and property in the sixteenth century' in MacCurtain & O'Dowd (eds), *Women in early modern Ireland*, pp 17-32.

⁶ M.L. Bush, *The English aristocracy: a comparative synthesis* (Manchester, 1984), p. 44.

control of an heiress' inheritance was usually vested in her husband who enjoyed full access to his wife's property while in the case of a widow, it remained under her personal control so long as she remained unmarried. Aristocratic women in colonial Ireland were assigned a 'dower' upon their marriage.⁷ Once married, a husband assumed control of his wife's property but was not entitled to 'alienate her lands without her permission'⁸: if he did so, after his death his widow could 'contest his actions'.⁹

It should be emphasised that heiresses to property and titles in Ireland during the fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were few in number, not least because as Mary O'Dowd contends 'in families without sons, nephews, male cousins and grandsons, even illegitimate sons were named as heirs before daughters'.¹⁰ Among this handful of heiresses was Lady Lettice Fitzgerald (d.1658) of County Kildare who fought a lengthy battle to have her inheritance as daughter of Henry Fitzgerald twelfth earl of Kildare (d.1597) acknowledged. She was successful and acquired a 'sizeable portion of the estate as well as the title of Baroness Offaly'.¹¹ Perhaps the wealthiest and best-known heiresses of this era was Elizabeth (Butler) Preston, grand-daughter and heiress of Thomas Butler, tenth earl of Ormond.¹² A descendant of the Butler sisters in England, Elizabeth became the first Duchess of Ormond, and featured centrally in the second succession Ormond crisis that occurred in 1614.

⁷ A dower was provision for widows under common law. Widows were entitled to the use of one third of their husband's land after his death. This was a legal requirement for the bride in the event of her husband predeceasing her, a measure to support her financially in widowhood.

⁸ Peter Fleming, *Family and household in medieval England* (Basingstoke, 2001), p. 38.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Mary O'Dowd, *A history of women in Ireland*, p. 81.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Mary O'Dowd, 'Property, work, and home: Women and the economy, c1170 - 1850', in Angela Bourke, Siobhan Kilfeather, Maria Luddy, Margaret MacCurtain, Geraldine Meeney, Maire Nic Dhonnchadha, Mary O'Dowd, and Clair Wills, (eds.) *The Field Day anthology of Irish writing, Vol. V, Irish women's writings and traditions* (New York, 2002) pp. 464-472.

While instances of female succession in England, Ireland or continental Europe were not exceptional during this era,¹³ they were rare. Barbara Harris in her analysis of aristocratic women in Yorkist and early Tudor England found that ‘the percentage of land that descended to the daughters of noblemen or knights was considerably less than twenty percent’.¹⁴ The estates of only 12 percent of 249 noblemen who died in the Yorkist and early Tudor period descended to female heirs. Of the contemporaries of Thomas Butler who sat in Parliament between 1509 and 1558, barely 7 percent had female heirs.¹⁵ Yet, as in the case of Thomas Butler, Harris has revealed that certain English noblemen without sons chose to ‘leave their property to their daughters rather than their brothers or nephews’¹⁶ or other male relatives. For example, in England in 1544, Sir John Shelton, father to three daughters and one son, broke the entail of his estates to ensure his daughters would inherit in the event of the death of his son, and to prevent their uncle (his brother) inheriting the estates. The succession arrangement angered Sir John’s brother to the point that Lady Shelton and her brother-in-law had such a violent quarrel that ‘she feared he would kill her husband and son’.¹⁷ By the time he died in England in 1514 Sir Thomas Cheyney’s nine-year-old daughter and heiress was already married. Likewise, Margaret Plumpton of Colthorpe, the five-year-old granddaughter and coheir of Sir William Plumpton, was married to one John Roucliff in 1463 and despite her age was dispatched to live with his family.¹⁸

¹³ The Butlers of Ormond were not unique regarding cases of female successions, see Bush, *The English aristocracy*, p. 44, and B. Coward, ‘Disputed inheritances: Some difficulties of the nobility in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries’ in *Bulletin of the Institute for Historical Research*, xlv (1971), p. 194.

¹⁴ Harris, *Aristocratic English women*, p. 20.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Will of Sir John Shelton, 1558 (TNA, PROB 11/42A/37).

¹⁸ *Plumpton correspondence: a series of letters, chiefly domestic, written in the reigns of Edward IV, Richard III, Henry VII and Henry VIII*, ed. Thomas Stapleton (London, 1839), p. 8.

In the context of Ireland Gillian Kenny suggests that since ‘the late fourteenth century, the large loss of life due to the plague [The black death] and its recurrences may have contributed to families losing their desire to create tails male’.¹⁹ Be that as it may, instances of female heiresses having their claim to succession honoured in colonial Ireland during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries are few and far between.²⁰ In County Meath, two Plunkett lords of Killeen in and two St Lawrences, lords of Howth left only daughters, in each case the inheritance passed intact (including the title) to the lord’s brother. Not one of the daughters succeeded to what was legally their inheritance. In 1515 – the same year as Thomas Butler died – Margaret and Anne Talbot, two daughters and only legitimate children of the landed aristocrat Robert Talbot of County Louth had their inheritance rights ‘undermined by him [their father] to the benefit of his distant male heirs’.²¹ Talbot was intent upon bequeathing his estates to his illegitimate male offspring and his lands eventually passed to his probably illegitimate son William, and in turn, his heirs, through tail male.²² According to M.J. Blake during the late 1520s, there was a blanket exclusion of females from inheriting property throughout Galway ‘according to the custom and ordinance of the nation of Blake’.²³ Kenneth Nicholls contends that despite the fact that common law was invoked to authorise the transfer of property to Gaelic Irish heiresses, there was at the same time significant pressure on Old English female heiresses to relinquish their claims to the agnatic male heirs.²⁴ Thus the circumstances in which Margaret and Anne Butler found themselves in 1515 was by no means unusual by contemporary standards in colonial Ireland.

¹⁹ Kenny, *Anglo-Irish & Gaelic women in Ireland*, p. 32.

²⁰ Nicholls, ‘Irishwomen & property’, pp 17-32.

²¹ Nicholls, ‘Irishwomen & property’, p. 33.

²² *Calendar of inquisitions formerly in the office of the Chief Remembrancer of the Exchequer prepared from the manuscripts of the Irish Record Commissioners*, ed. M.C. Griffith (Dublin, 1991), p. 13.

²³ *Blake family records: 1300 to 1600*, ed. M.J. Blake (London, 1902), pp 63-4.

²⁴ Nicholls, ‘Irishwomen & property’, pp 17-32.

Causes of the first Ormond succession crisis: two heiresses and one usurper

As highlighted in chapter two, this first Ormond succession crisis was a direct result of a combination of exceptional factors. It came about owing to a deviation from the norms of legitimate succession that occurred during the Wars of the Roses and in their immediate aftermath. The fact that Margaret and Anne Butler were ‘absentee’ claimants living in England was the result of their father’s and uncles’ absence from the Irish earldom between the 1450s and 1510s. Moreover, following the death of the seventh earl in 1515, the Ormonds’ position in both Ireland and England was especially vulnerable since, exceptionally, there was no legitimate ‘male’ heir to the earldom. This was also the first time the prospect of female succession emerged after the change to the Ormond succession arrangement was made by King Edward IV in 1475.²⁵ With the succession no longer specifically in tail male, it was at least technically possible for females to inherit. Forty years later, the first test case occurred.

The problem was that the Ormond heiresses were female, absentee, and had no connection with Ireland; nonetheless, they had a legitimate claim through their legitimate birth right and through the entail arrangement sanctioned by the Crown. On the opposing side, a distant relative with a very questionable claim to the earldom but a strong familiarity with the Ormond lordship, posed a formidable challenge. Despite his dubious claim, he succeeded in usurping the legitimate heiresses, not only with the backing of Crown, but also, crucially, the able assistance of his wife Margaret Fitzgerald.

Thomas Butler’s will specified that his two daughters, Margaret and Anne, were the heirs general and co-heiresses to both the Irish and English estates and titles, and any property that

²⁵ *Cal. Ormond deeds*, ed. Curtis, iii (1413–1509), no’s 242, 248.

was not entailed upon his heir male.²⁶ The sisters also inherited STG£40,000 in money as well as jewels and as many as seventy-two manors in England alone (thirty-six for each daughter).²⁷ At the heart of the ensuing dispute was the interpretation of ‘heirs’ since in the wake of the earl’s death there were ‘heirs general’ and ‘heirs male’. Following the death of their father, the two heiresses gained possession of his English estates. The division of the extensive Ormond patrimony initially proceeded unhindered as the seventh earl’s English estates automatically passed to the Boleyns and St Legers. The task of settling the Irish patrimony, however, was far more troublesome. Piers Ruadh Butler was ‘a formidable and rather intimidating character whom some onlookers feared would have little trouble persuading the government to accept his pretensions to the earldom of Ormond, despite the rights of others’.²⁸ Following his murder of Earl John and Renald Ní Bhrian’s illegitimate son James Dubh in 1497, Piers informed Thomas Butler that as well as taking possession of the Irish estates (a move contrary to the terms of the earl’s will), he was also declaring himself the new earl of Ormond since he was a descendant of the younger brother of the deceased fourth earl, James Butler.²⁹ Piers knew that he would not face prosecution for having killed James Dubh as he enjoyed the protection of his foster father, the lord deputy, Gareth Mor Fitzgerald.³⁰

Initially the Boleyns and St Legers managed to persuade King Henry VIII to ignore Piers’s claim and support theirs. That support was short-lived, however, as Piers, in need of someone to promote his claim in England, found a willing proponent in Thomas Wolsey,

²⁶ Will of Thomas Butler, seventh earl of Ormond, July 1515 (TNA, PROB 11/18/184).

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Edwards, *The Ormond lordship*, p. 82.

²⁹ Piers Butler to Thomas Butler, Earl of Ormond, (undated) TNA, SP 46/130, fol. 23; See also *Ormond papers, 1480–1535*, ed. Quinn, no. 35.

³⁰ *Ormond papers*, ed. Quinn, no. 53.

archbishop (and subsequent Cardinal) of York. Both Wolsey and Butler were poised to take advantage of the opportunity this crisis presented. Concerned that the Kildare Fitzgeralds were becoming too powerful, Wolsey was in search of a way to curtail their autonomy while for over a decade, Piers Butler with the assistance of Wolsey, endeavoured to undermine Kildare's authority by making himself 'indispensable to the king'.³¹

In his will, the only specification that Earl Thomas made regarding males (specifically his grandsons) concerned their inheritance of specific family heirlooms. This proves the earl's conviction that his daughters were his legitimate heirs. It also provided them with a sound legal basis on which to press their legitimate claims in 1515. The law was on their side, amplified by their father's explicit provision for them to inherit. However, their gender weakened their claim. Their experience replicated that of heiresses in England where according to Harris, 'the estates of inheriting daughters were particularly vulnerable because collateral males routinely challenged their rights on the grounds that their inheritance should have descended in tale mail'.³²

³¹ Edwards, *The Ormond lordship*, p. 86.

³² Harris *Aristocratic English women*, p. 113. A contemporary of the Butler sisters, Dame Isabel Harrington, widow of Sir James Harrington (d.1497) of Cumberland in England and member of the court of Henry VII, was pitted in a lengthy struggle of over ten years against her brother-in-law Nicholas. His contention was that the Harrington inheritance was held entirely in tail male, and therefore ought to have descended to him, by-passing Isabel and James' eight daughters. Dame Harrington succeeded in that succession dispute, asserting that her deceased husband's estate was 'enfeoffed to her for life for the performance of his will and then for her own use': see Early Chancery cases, 1504-15 (TNA, C1/208/71&72). In the 1530s Lady Mary Willoughby, widow of Lord Willoughby of Eresby in England, struggled to successfully defend her only daughter Katherine's rights, against her uncle Christopher who attempted to usurp Katherine's claim on her father's estate. In her daughter's defence, Lady Willoughby was assisted by Charles duke of Suffolk, brother-in-law of Henry VIII, who subsequently married Katherine sometime about 1535: S.J. Gunn, *Charles Brandon, duke of Suffolk* (Oxford, 1988), p. 132; for Lady Willoughby's role see TNA, State Papers of Henry VIII, SP 60/1/44, f.144d-145 (1527) and SP1/47, f.38 (1528)).

Royal intervention

Crown intervention in particularly significant succession disputes was not unheard of in this era, the Dorset family dispute being a case in point. In 1504 Cecily, widow and sole heir of the first marquess Lord William Bonville, was about to re-marry. However, her son the second marquess, feared his mother would endow all her inheritance on her new husband at his cost. After the second marquess challenged his mother's right to continue as his father's executor, Henry VII and his council intervened to prevent an escalation in the family dispute.³³ The marchioness's ability to administer her inheritance was seriously curtailed as a result of the king's order that she bequeath her inheritance to her son upon her death. Essentially Henry VII severely limited her rights as an heiress in favour of her eldest son and the practice of primogeniture.³⁴

In August 1515 Henry VIII instructed Gerald Fitzgerald, ninth earl of Kildare, to intervene in the Ormond succession dispute by lending his 'lawful assistance' to the two Butler sisters.³⁵ Kildare, by then lord deputy of Ireland, took his time replying, only doing so on 1 December 1515. Meanwhile Piers Butler was coming under increasing pressure from the gentry and merchants of the midlands, Kilkenny and the central Nore valley (traditional Ormond supporters) to remove the Fitzgeralds from their dominant position within those regions. Butler's determination to press his claim for the earldom meant severing ties with his wife's family and indeed his own foster family under whose protection he had lived for over three decades. After the seventh earl died in 1515 Gareth Oge Fitzgerald was slow to recognise his

³³ *Cal. close rolls, Hen. VII*, ii, 414, 471 The settlement the Crown dictated permitted the marchioness to administer her husband's estate until she had paid his debts but prevented her from claiming her dower until she had transferred the remainder of her son's inheritance to him.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ David Baldwin, *Henry VIII's last love: the extraordinary life of Katherine Willoughby, lady-in-waiting to the Tudors* (Gloucestershire, 2015), p. 11.

brother-in-law Piers as the new earl of Ormond; he delayed doing so until the following April, almost one year after Thomas' death. For Piers and his wife Margaret the insult was a set back at a crucial time in their bid for the earldom. After all his years of service to the Kildares, Butler soon realised that Kildare was supportive of a Boleyn- St Leger succession to the earldom which had the appeal of facilitating continued Ormond absenteeism. This snub marked the beginning of an irreconcilable split between Piers Butler and Margaret Fitzgerald and her brother Gareth Oge.

Henry's support for the Ormond sisters' claim placed Kildare in an 'ominous position'³⁶ since Piers Butler had been banking on his support. As Kildare procrastinated, Henry granted full livery of the Ormond inheritance in England, Wales and Ireland to the Butler sisters in December 1515.³⁷ However, Kildare and the Dublin Council recognised Piers's claim, and in April 1516 he received the livery of the Irish inheritance.³⁸ In the event of any unrest between Kildare and Ormond, Henry warned that they both would be summoned to London to explain their actions to the English Council. Both parties awaited further instructions from the king. For almost a decade, Piers retained possession of the Irish lands while the Boleyns and St Legers held control of Butler lands in England. But Henry VIII did not officially recognise Piers Butler as earl in his own right in Ireland.

Some historians of the Irish and English aristocracies of this period, including Rowena Archer, argue that influence exerted by some aristocratic widows in shaping their families'

³⁶ Ellis, *Tudor Ireland*, p. 104.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*

fortunes could be ‘monstrous’.³⁹ Archer emphasises that a widow who survived with a reasonable jointure ‘just long enough to see their (sic) child through his minority, following her husband to the grave within a small space’⁴⁰ may have had some small beneficial impact on her marital family, provided she was ‘a caring guardian of her son’s inheritance’.⁴¹ However, the claims of Margaret Butler Boleyn, widowed since 1505,⁴² and Anne Butler St Leger widowed since 1509, were at odds with that contention since each widowed sister heiress, guarded carefully the Butler family inheritance. Both sisters were widows for several years before their father’s death and, despite challenges to their claim of their Irish inheritance, were intent on preserving that inheritance for their own benefit as well as that of their heirs.

In England, the Boleyns had made their fortune through trade, in particular during the fifteenth century.⁴³ The marriage to the (Ormond) heiress Margaret Butler about the year 1477⁴⁴ significantly strengthened the Boleyn family’s links with the highest-ranking nobility of England. Both father and son married aristocratic women from leading houses in England and through those unions enhanced their family’s wealth and status. By 1498 William and Margaret hosted a visit of the king (Henry VII) to Blickling, ‘a significant honour’,⁴⁵ and William’s ascent was largely due to his aristocratic bride and the favour in which the king

³⁹ Rowena Archer, ‘Rich old ladies: the problem of late medieval dowagers’ in A.J. Pollard (ed.) *Property and Politics: essays in later medieval English history*, (New York, 1984), pp 15-35.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² ‘Accounts and memoranda of Sir John Howard, first Duke of Norfolk, AD 1462 to AD 1471’ in *Manners and household expenses of England in the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries*, ed. B. Botfield (London, 1841), p. 503.

⁴³ Elizabeth Griffiths, ‘The Boleyns at Blickling, 1450-1560’ in *Norfolk Archaeology*, xl (2009), pp 453-68.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ R. Warnicke, ‘Family and kinship relations at the Henrician court: the Boleyns and Howards’ in D. Hoak (ed.), *Tudor political culture* (Cambridge, 1995), p. 36.

held her father, the earl of Ormond. Margaret brought with her substantial wealth, aristocratic respectability, acceptance within the upper echelons of English aristocratic society and access to influential figures at court. As long as her father the seventh earl lived, Margaret's reputation as a wife of impeccable pedigree reflected well on the ascending Boleyns. Her father served as ambassador to France and Burgundy, and was a member of Henry VII's Privy Council⁴⁶ having previously been chamberlain to Queen Elizabeth of York and her daughter-in-law, Queen Katherine of Aragon.⁴⁷ It was thanks to this Butler-Boleyn marriage that within a few generations, the Boleyns rose from the ranks of farmers and traders to fraternizing with the royal family, in the person of Margaret and William's granddaughter, Anne.

In late fifteenth-century England, especially after the Wars of the Roses, when ascendant families such as the Boleyns pursued propitious unions with aristocratic families and dynasties including the Butlers of Ormond and the Hoos from Sussex,⁴⁸ young women like Margaret and Anne Butler, both heiresses possessing wealth, pedigree and property, were vitally important in advancing the interests of not only the Boleyns and St Legers but also the Ormond dynasty itself. While on the one hand, in the aftermath of the Wars, 'the wives and widows of attainted men were often treated punitively by the crown'⁴⁹, the growth of the Yorkist and early Tudor court also opened opportunities for aristocratic women to exercise influence and, as Harris observes, 'their presence and access to royal patronage increased notably'.⁵⁰ The period following the Wars was a time when royal patronage played an

⁴⁶ Thomas Carte, *The life of James, duke of Ormond* (6 vols, Oxford, 1851), i, p. lxxxiv.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ 'Antiquarian researches – Sussex Archaeological Society' in *The Gentleman's Magazine*, new ser., xlv (1855), p.182.

⁴⁹ Harris, *Aristocratic English women*, p. 12.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

increasing role in the ‘shaping and fortunes of the aristocracy’.⁵¹ Both the Butler and Boleyn families benefitted from the enhanced opportunities for social mobility and political advancement in post- War England. Anne and Mary Boleyn (granddaughters of Margaret Butler Boleyn) were successful in exploiting their positions in court, and of course, Ann would become the second wife of Henry VIII.

Preservation and continuity of the earldom

Thomas Butler’s preoccupation with securing the dynasty through legitimate succession is apparent both in the contents of his personal Book of Hours and in the bequest in his will of an ancient family heirloom (a drinking horn, passed down through successive generations of Butler earls). Between 1495 and 1510, in common with many of his peers, Thomas kept a personal and elaborate Book of Hours, which survives in remarkably good condition in the British Library.⁵² In it, he recorded many of his family’s obituaries from the fifteenth century including those of his two wives, his parents, his grandmother Lady Bergavanney, and his father’s second wife, Elizabeth Fitzgerald. He also recorded the deaths of the following – Eleanor Beaufort, wife of his brother James, fifth earl; his sister Elizabeth Butler, countess of Shrewsbury; Kings Henry VI, Edward V, and Queen Margurite of Anjou. Large sections of his Book of Hours is given over to elaborate Marian religious sketches as well as details of religious feasts and festivals, all meticulously noted. The book reveals the importance and esteem he attached not only to female relatives but also to those women who married into the Butler family in preceding generations. Moreover, his assiduousness in recording details

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Book of Hours of Thomas Butler, earl of Ormond, c.1501-1510 (BL, Royal MS. 2 B XV). Bound in green velvet binding with silver and gold gilt corner pieces, the front and back of the book contains a centre plaque with the initials ‘M.R’, referring possibly to Queen Mary suggesting the book was preserved during the reign of Mary Tudor or perhaps a reference to the Blessed Virgin Mary.

relating to both female and male family members testifies to the importance he attached to maintaining continuous legitimate dynastic succession within his family. His Book is, therefore, tangible testimony to the different priorities of Thomas Butler and his unmarried brother John, who fathered an illegitimate son with a Gaelic Irish woman.

Shortly before his death the seventh earl bequeathed a symbolic heirloom (an ancient gold and ivory drinking horn) to his grandson, Thomas Boleyn⁵³ who apparently had a close relationship with his mother, and a fondness for his grandfather (the seventh earl). As a treasured symbol of their original and ongoing claim to aristocratic status and privilege, it was an iconic token passed on from earl to earl symbolising legitimacy of succession.

According to the elderly earl, his father, James fourth earl,

left and delivered unto me a lytle whyte horne of ivory, garnished at both thendes with gold, and corse thereunto of whyte sylke, barred with barres of gold, and a tyret of golde thereupon. Therefore, for the accomplishment of my seid father's will, as farr as it is in me to execute the same, I woll that my executors delyver unto Sir Thomas Boleyn knight, son and heir apparent of my said daughter Margaret, the said lytle white horn and corse, he to keep the same to the use of thissue male of his body lawfully begotten.⁵⁴

It had been in his ancestor's possession since 'first they were called to honour and has since continually remained in the same blood, for which cause my lord and father commanded me upon his blessing that I should do my devoir to cause it to continue still in my blood'.⁵⁵

Setting aside sentimentality or preoccupation with the monetary value of the horn, the earl

⁵³ John Prince, *The worthies of Devon: biography of Sir William Hankeford* (London, 1810), p. 462.

⁵⁴ 'Extract from the will of Thomas, earl of Ormond, dated 31 July, 1515 (TNA PROB 11/18/184).

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

clearly accorded his daughters equal recognition as his co-heiresses in his will. His detailed instructions regarding the passing on of the horn in symbolic recognition of the legitimate line of succession reinforced his explicitly expressed wishes around succession after his death. Firstly, he directed that the heirloom was to be bequeathed to his daughter Margaret's son, Thomas Boleyn. Should Thomas have no male heir, the drinking horn was to be handed on to another grandson, Sir George St Leger, eldest son of the earl's second daughter, Anne St Leger. The old earl also left instructions that should either of his daughters' male heirs have no sons, then the horn should be given to any eventual male heir of his daughters. Crucially (and in the context of this succession crisis) in a further demonstrative and unambiguous instruction, Thomas declared that only if or when each of his previous requests failed, a male heir of his own father (the long deceased fourth earl) should be deemed eligible to receive the horn and thus succeed to the title and estates. Piers Butler of Pottlerath in Kilkenny was one such heir, being a distant descendant of the white earl's younger brother. The seventh earl stipulated that the drinking horn (and by extension the Ormond titles and estates) should only pass to such a distant relative as a last resort 'so that it may continue still in my blood hereafter as long as it shall please God'.⁵⁶ The lengths to which the earl went to ensure the horn was passed into the hands of the rightful heir demonstrate his purposeful provision and clear intentions regarding the succession of the earldom. Furthermore, the fact that Piers Ruadh was placed at the bottom of the pecking order in the list of heirs or successors to the horn, reveals Thomas Butler's full understanding of the ramifications associated with his explicit instructions regarding succession arrangements.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

Taking sides: conflicting scholarly interpretations of the Ormond succession

The historiographical treatment of the ensuing succession dispute involving Anne Butler St Leger and Margaret Butler Boleyn is divided, with scholars judging one or other side to have had the more legitimate claim to the Ormond patrimony. For instance, Sir Nicholas Harris Nicolas, historian, genealogist and antiquarian, writing in the early nineteenth century, accused the Butler sisters of ‘obtaining the English lands through trickery and acting with their father to suppress deeds, which demonstrated that the lands should pass to his heirs male’.⁵⁷ Nicolas clearly refused to acknowledge that the seventh earl of Ormond addressed and acknowledged his daughters as heiresses to the earldom. He argued that the sisters ‘endeavoured to dispossess Piers Butler of all the Irish estates and were only prevented after the king’s intervention when he [Henry VIII] (eventually) passed them to Piers’.⁵⁸ Nicolas’s use of the term ‘dispossess’ is further evidence of his unfounded assertion that the Butler heiresses were not only wrong, but also devious in pursuing their claim to their rightful inheritance. He was not alone in his condemnation and criticism of the Butler sisters. Thomas Carte, a nineteenth-century biographer of the family, concurred arguing that Thomas Butler ‘suppressed the deeds and this earl’s daughters endeavoured to dispossess Piers earl of Ormond of all the Irish estates, if Henry VIII had not prevented them’.⁵⁹ By contrast, J.H. Round, an historian and genealogist specialising in medieval British peerage and aristocratic history with no known connection or affiliation to the Butlers of Ormond, writing later in the nineteenth century defended the Butler sisters. Having analysed this dispute⁶⁰ he emphasised the dynasty’s exceptional unbroken line of succession and contended that the sisters were

⁵⁷ Sir Nicholas Harris Nicolas, *The Privy Purse expenses of Elizabeth of York* (London, 1830), p. 99.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, p. 9.

⁵⁹ Carte, *Life of James, duke of Ormond*, i, p. lxxxiv.

⁶⁰ J.H. Round, ‘The earldom of Ormond in Ireland’ in J. Foster (ed.), *Collectanea Genealogica*, i (1881), p. 48.

indeed the rightful holders of the estates lands and titles of the earldom.⁶¹ But whereas the law may well have been on the side of the earl's daughters, the task of securing access to their Irish inheritance proved fraught and ultimately damaging to the dynasty. As Round concluded, the sisters faced considerable challenges given that both were widows of English men by 1515,⁶² their mother had been an English countess, and support for Piers Butler in Ireland was far greater than for any unknown, absentee English heiresses.

Escalation of the crisis

As three earls had been absent from their Irish earldom for more than half of the fifteenth century, against a backdrop of instability within the Ormond patrimony Piers presented himself as the first 'potential' earl who was committed to the earldom in Ireland, having little or no interest in the family's English estates. Were he to be successful, for the first time in decades, an Irish-born earl and Irish-born countess (Margaret Fitzgerald) would be resident at the seat of the Ormond dynasty in Kilkenny. This augured well for the realisation of Piers and his politically astute wife's ambitions.

For these reasons, almost immediately after the death of their father, any real prospect of the Butler sisters' gaining possession of their Irish inheritances evaporated. Yet, despite the odds (including their advanced years) stacked against them, the two women asserted their claim to their Irish inheritance with vigour. Margaret Butler appears to have handed over some control of her inheritance to her son, Thomas Boleyn, before October 1517.⁶³ By late 1519 her

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid, p. 87.

⁶³ That month, for instance, he was granted a license to export wood and other items 'made within the lordship of Rochford' in his ship *The Rosendell* – see Michael Clarke, *Rochford Hall: the history of a Tudor house* (Stroud, 1990), p. 119.

decline was evident when she devolved increased control over her affairs to Thomas⁶⁴ who had a very good relationship with both his mother and her sister (his aunt) Anne St. Leger as evidenced by a revealing letter, dated 1515, written by Margaret to Thomas shortly after the death of her own father:

wherefore I pray and heartily desire you that you will do for me in everything as you shall think most best and expedient. And in everything as you shall do for me after as you think best, I will on my part, affirm and rate it in as high a manner as though it were mine own deed.⁶⁵

Later that year Margaret assured her son that she was content to visit him in London should he need to discuss matters regarding the Irish inheritance. As she aged, Thomas remained close and reasonably generous to Margaret, ‘paying 9s. and 8d. to fur one of her many gowns, in 1526’.⁶⁶

Anne, the elder of the two sisters, had first married Sir Ambrose Cresacre,⁶⁷ Justice of the Peace in Yorkshire in 1466⁶⁸ and then sometime before 1482 she re-married,⁶⁹ her second husband being Sir James St Leger (d.1509): from this marriage, she had two sons, James and George.⁷⁰ Significantly, during the early phase of the succession crisis, by which time

⁶⁴ Escheators files, inquisitions post mortem and other inquisitions: Margaret Boleyn, April 1540 (TNA, E. 150/87/6).

⁶⁵ Margaret Butler to Thomas Boleyn, 1515 in *L. & P. Hen. VIII*, i, no. 5784.

⁶⁶ Thomas Boleyn’s accounts, Nov.–Dec. 1526 in *L. & P. Hen. VIII*, iv, app. 99.

⁶⁷ In his will, dated 14 Sept. 1469, Cresacre requested that he be buried in St. Thomas of Acon church, London. (This church is now known as Mercers Chapel, in Cheapside, London.) He also included his wife’s mother and sister in his will, bequeathing to Dame Ormond (Countess Anne Hankeford) his wife’s mother, a book, and to his sister-in-law Margaret, a ring with a sapphire: see *Testamenta Eboracensia, a selection of wills from the registry at York*, ed. J. Raine and J.W. Clay, iv (Durham, 1869), 227.

⁶⁸ Richardson, *Plantagenet ancestry*, p. 457.

⁶⁹ Thomas Westcote, *A view of Devonshire in MDCXXX: with a pedigree of most of its gentry*, ed. Rev George Oliver and Pitman Jones (Exeter, 1845), pp 483-4.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

Margaret was both elderly and in declining health⁷¹, Anne very publicly advertised her Ormond lineage and closeness to her sister. As Margaret's health was declining, Anne stepped up her effort to gain recognition of their claims to the Irish earldom, and was assisted by her nephew Thomas Boleyn from about 1519.

However, despite Thomas's representation on behalf of his mother and aunt, it ultimately weakened their claim.⁷² Keen to resolve the ongoing Ormond succession crisis in Ireland for both his mother's and his own sake, Boleyn corresponded with his brother-in-law, Thomas Howard, earl of Surrey before the latter departed for Ireland in late 1520 to serve as lord deputy there. At that time (and helpfully for Boleyn) Henry VIII continued to support the Butler sisters' claim to the Irish earldom. In a letter to Surrey dated October 1520, Henry declared that "Sir' Piers was pretending himself to be earl of Ormond'.⁷³ However, he and Surrey were anxious not to alienate Piers Butler and Surrey in particular regarded Piers as a very useful ally, so much so that he began conveying that message to Cardinal Wolsey from late 1520. Piers needed Wolsey to plead his cause at court in order to override the claim advanced by the Butler sisters and gain him recognition as earl of Ormond. Surrey suggested to Wolsey the idea of a marriage between James Butler, eldest son of Piers Butler and Margaret Fitzgerald, and Anne Boleyn, granddaughter of Margaret Butler, and daughter of Thomas Boleyn and Elizabeth Howard.⁷⁴ This appeared the ideal solution to the succession crisis as far as Surrey was concerned, not to mention Thomas Boleyn, who was undoubtedly

⁷¹ Margaret Boleyn, 1540 (TNA, E. 150/87/6).

⁷² Boleyn's daughter Anne ultimately held more credence in pressing and concluding the protracted succession crisis through her relationship with Henry.

⁷³ Henry VIII to Thomas Howard, Earl of Surrey, Oct. 1520 (BL, Cotton MSS, Titus B. XI). Piers Butler was too valuable an ally for Henry VIII to alienate, and Butler's reception of Surrey in Ireland was positive.

⁷⁴ Thomas Howard Earl of Surrey, to Cardinal Wolsey, 6 Oct. 1520 in *State Papers of Henry VIII*, ii, 49-50.

persuaded by the prospect of his daughter Anne becoming Countess of Ormond. Initially Wolsey favoured the idea and Henry appeared to acquiesce.⁷⁵

Margaret Butler's granddaughter, Anne Boleyn, who was then at the court of the French queen, was sent for and quickly returned to England, initially with the king's encouragement for the proposed marriage. However, she had no interest in her potential Irish suitor, then only five years her senior.⁷⁶ At first, Anne took up a position as lady-in-waiting to Queen Katherine, the king's first wife, but soon after her arrival at court, the planned Boleyn-Butler alliance was dispensed with. By 1526, some six years after her return to England, Henry developed a personal interest in Anne.

Neither Thomas Boleyn nor his mother fully supported the proposed marriage between Anne and James, son and heir of Piers Butler, in the first instance since it would have passed the title Countess of Ormond directly to Anne Boleyn.⁷⁷ In March 1522, after Surrey's return to England, he was replaced by Piers as lord deputy of Ireland. By May the following year, Piers recognised that the proposed marriage between his son and Anne Boleyn would not take place. Meanwhile in Ireland the earl of Kildare had been corresponding with the king, complaining that Piers Butler was 'making new bonds with the Irish, especially O' Keroll, by whose aid he means to defend his title to the earldom of Ormond'.⁷⁸ Not only that, the countess of Kildare, sister-in-law of Margaret Fitzgerald, also wrote to the king alleging that

⁷⁵ Henry VIII to Thomas Howard, Earl of Surrey, Oct. 1520 in *State Papers of Henry VIII*, ii, 57.

⁷⁶ Empey, 'From rags to riches', p. 310.

⁷⁷ Eric Ives, *The life and death of Anne Boleyn* (Oxford, 2004).

⁷⁸ Gareth Og Fitzgerald, Earl of Kildare to Henry VIII, 24 May 1523 in *L. & P. Hen. VIII*, iii, 1519-1523, no. 3048, pp 1273-87.

Piers Butler 'is so cruel towards him [Kildare] because Kildare refused to take part with him against the heirs of the late earl of Ormond who assert title to the earldom'.⁷⁹

In the next move to resolve the protracted succession dispute, in February 1528 Wolsey commissioned articles for the restoration of the co-heiresses to their inheritance.

Undoubtedly that intervention was significantly helped by the presence of two of Margaret Butler's granddaughters at court, Anne and Mary Boleyn. The articles constituted an indenture between seven parties – the king, Margaret Butler Boleyn, and her son Thomas, Viscount Rochford, her sister, Anne Butler St Leger and her son, Sir George St. Leger, and Piers Butler and his son and heir, James Butler. By this indenture the terms of the seventh earl of Ormond's will in which Anne and Margaret Butler were accorded equal recognition were to be implemented, almost entirely as their father had intended. In February 1528, with the archbishop of York acting as mediator, the following was agreed upon by the rival parties Piers Butler in Ireland and the Butler sisters in England, who renounced and surrendered all titles and claims to titles to the king and,

agreeth by these present indentures to our sayd sovereyne lord, that the said honor title style and dignity of the erle of Ormond, ... shall be from henceforth intirely at the disposition, pleasure, and will, of our sayd sovereyne lord.⁸⁰

Next the indenture turned to the estates. The entirety of the Irish estates, with the exception of the manors of Cloncurry in Kildare and Turvey in Dublin which under an entail of Edward III (1330-31) remained the possessions of Piers Butler, were returned to both heiresses (not only

⁷⁹ Elizabeth Grey countess of Kildare, to Henry VIII, 25 May 1523 in *L. & P. Hen. VIII, iii, 1519–1523*, no. 3049.

⁸⁰ Indenture, 23 Feb. 1528 in *L. & P. Hen. VIII, iv, 1519–1523*, no. 3937; *Cal. Ormond deeds*, ed. Curtis, iv (1509-47), pp 116-26.

the Boleyns).⁸¹ The indenture stipulated that Anne and Margaret would lease the Irish estates and manors to Piers and his son, James for a period of thirty years. Although Henry denied Piers the chance of becoming earl of Ormond, within one week of the indenture being drawn up and set for implementation, he created a completely new if significantly less prestigious earldom of Ossory. On 23 February 1528 Henry conferred letters patent on Piers Butler, ‘Earl of Ossory’ at Windsor castle.⁸² Within weeks of his return to Ireland, Piers was re-appointed lord deputy. While the earldom of Ossory was not the title that he and his wife Countess Margaret had pressed for (and the outcome was clearly a disappointing climb-down for both), it was nonetheless significant recognition of Piers by the king and less consequentially, Wolsey, who had long favoured Piers over his brother-in-law, the ninth earl of Kildare.

Peaceful outcomes?

Until December 1529 the king continued to hold the title earl of the Irish and English earldom of Ormond in his gift. Then, however, Henry moved to appoint Anne Boleyn’s father, Thomas Boleyn, the ‘new’ earl of Ormond. He also resurrected the old title, earl of Wiltshire, which had been discontinued after the execution in 1461 of James Butler, fifth earl of Ormond. Thomas Boleyn, Margaret Butler’s son and Anne Boleyn’s father, was now well positioned. Finally, although neither Margaret nor her sister, Anne St. Leger, were ever created Countesses of Ormond, Margaret’s son, Thomas, benefitted from the settlement since he was officially recognised as earl of Ormond fourteen years after the death of his maternal grandfather, Thomas, in 1515. Four years later, in 1533, King Henry VIII married Anne

⁸¹ *Cal. Ormond deeds*, ed. Curtis, iv (1509-47), pp 116-26.

⁸² David Finnegan, ‘Piers Butler, first earl of Ossory and eighth earl of Ormond (b. in or after 1467, d. 1539)’ in *ODNB*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, May 2015 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/4199> [1 Oct. 2017]].

Boleyn. After almost two decades of disputes regarding the Butler succession, Margaret Butler Boleyn's granddaughter was queen of England.

The year before Anne Boleyn's marriage, her grand-aunt, Anne Butler St. Leger, died 5 June 1532.⁸³ At the time of her death she owned properties in Cradley, Old Swinford, Hagley, Stourbridge, and in several other English counties.⁸⁴ Sir George St. Leger, her son and heir, was then aged fifty.⁸⁵ Margaret Butler inherited her father's longevity and outlived many of her children and indeed (some grandchildren) to see her great-grandchildren.⁸⁶ As late as October 1538, together with her son Thomas Boleyn and her granddaughter-in-law, Jane Parker Boleyn, Viscountess Rochford, Margaret was party to the sale of some land in Buckinghamshire which had originally been part of her own inheritance.⁸⁷ The following year, Margaret was resident at Hever Castle when her son Thomas died,⁸⁸ and there she remained until her death in March 1540, aged about ninety.

By then Margaret's mental state was undoubtedly diminished. Given that she was termed a lunatic as early as 1519, her subsequent level of involvement in family and estate affairs is difficult to gauge accurately. The year before he died, her son Thomas granted her in his will the sum of 400 marks [about £130] a year from his Ormond lands, for her comfort in her final years.⁸⁹ To a woman with such substantial estate holdings, that was pittance considering her valuable estates which had enabled and facilitated her son in his career. But once again, her

⁸³ Cokayne *et al.* (eds), *The complete peerage*, x, 133; Douglas Richardson, *Plantagenet ancestry: a study in colonial and medieval families*, 2nd edn (Utah, 2011), p. 457.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ *Worcestershire taxes in the 1520s: the Military Survey and forced loans of 1522-3 and the lay subsidy of 1524-7*, ed. Michael Anthony Faraday (Worcestershire, 2003), pp 36-7.

⁸⁶ Volkes, 'The early career of Thomas Lord Howard, earl of Surrey', p. 40.

⁸⁷ Richardson, *Plantagenet ancestry*, p. 385.

⁸⁸ Sir Thomas Willoughby to Sir Thomas Cromwell, 26 Mar. 1539 in *L. & P. Hen. VIII*, xiv, pt. i, no. 609.

⁸⁹ M.J. Tucker, 'The ladies in Skelton's "Garland of Laurels"' in *Renaissance Quarterly*, no. 22, iv (London, 1969), p. 333.

situation was not unique. In 1537 Dame Elizabeth Whethill of Nottinghamshire, who had been married for almost fifty years and bore fourteen children, encountered significant difficulty with her oldest son and heir, Robert, who took legal action against his mother as he attempted to obtain a farm which his father had bequeathed to his mother and in turn share it with his own wife.⁹⁰ As the case unfolded, Robert prevented his wife Elizabeth from selling any of the livestock or wheat remaining on the farm when her husband had died. In Elizabeth's own words, 'there was never a poor widow so cruelly handled by her own child'.⁹¹ In contrast, John earl of Wiltshire, Sir Thomas Arundell, Sir William Maur, and Sir John Luttrell, all listed their mothers among the co-executors of their wills, with Sir Thomas Arundell instructing that his mother have custody of his children, in the event of the death of his wife.⁹²

Outcomes and old age

In her final years Margaret had achieved for her family what she had spent almost two decades pursuing. The succession crisis, thanks to the king's intervention, appeared to have been resolved, and in Ireland, Piers Butler through his appointment as first Earl of Ossory, was forced to relinquish any further claims to the earldom of Ormond.⁹³ Effectively, the outcome for Piers and his wife Margaret Fitzgerald was that they became appointed tenants of the Boleyn-St Leger estate in Ireland. Piers never paid rent for the lands he controlled during most of his lifetime, namely the estate of Margaret and Anne Butler's deceased father.

⁹⁰ Dame Elizabeth Whethill to Sir Thomas Cromwell, Apr. 1537 (TNA, SP 1/118, f.229; Dame Elizabeth Whethill to Sir Thomas Cromwell, Nov. 1537 (TNA, SP1 /126, f.86).

⁹¹ Dame Elizabeth Whethill to Sir Thomas Cromwell, Nov. 1537 (TNA, SP1/126, f.86).

⁹² *Somerset medieval wills, 1383–1500*, ed. F.W. Weaver (Somerset Record Society, vol. 16, London, 1901), no. 256, no. 48.

⁹³ Edwards, *The Ormond lordship*, pp 86-88.

Almost immediately after the 1528 indenture was agreed, the Boleyn's began collecting rents in the Irish earldom.

However, in England, the king's marriage to Anne Boleyn failed, and she was beheaded for suspected adultery and treason among a host of other charges in May 1536.⁹⁴ Her brother George Boleyn was also executed. Their father, Thomas, as earl of Ormond and Wiltshire, managed to hold his titles for the time being. In a cruel twist for the Boleyn's, the king yet again stepped into the Ormond inheritance débâcle. As a result of the failure of his marriage to Anne and particularly their failure to produce a male heir, Thomas Boleyn suffered the indignity of acknowledging Piers Butler as the 'new' earl of Ormond in February 1538 with 'the crown wanting his agreement all the same, so as to give Piers' [title], the requisite air of legality'.⁹⁵ Not only that, Piers 'once more entailed the earldom and its estate'⁹⁶ to prevent his son and future heirs from involvement in any potential disputes with heiresses or heirs general. In effect, for the rest of Thomas Boleyn's life, there were two earls of Ormond, one resident in England, the other in Kilkenny. Thanks to the collapse of the short-lived ascendancy of the Boleyns in England, and the outcome of Anne Boleyn's marriage to Henry, in Ireland, Piers's luck had turned.

Thus, on 22 February 1538, ten years to the week after he was created earl of Ossory, Henry VIII drew the dispute to a close by recognising Piers's claim to the earldom of Ormond and restored the full title of earl of Ormond and Ossory to Piers.⁹⁷ It was more than two decades since the death of Thomas, seventh earl, which precipitated the succession crisis in 1515.

⁹⁴ Ives, *The life and death of Anne Boleyn*; David Starkey, *Six wives: the queens of Henry VIII* (London, 2001).

⁹⁵ Round, 'The earldom of Ormond in Ireland', p. 90.

⁹⁶ *Cal. Ormond deeds*, ed. Curtis, iv (1509–47), nos 239, 242; Graves & Prim, *The history & antiquities of the cathedral church of St Canice, Kilkenny*, pp 232-46.

⁹⁷ Edwards, *The Ormond lordship*, p. 90.

From the beginning of his tenure as earl of Ossory and lord deputy of Ireland, and particularly throughout the crisis caused by the fall of the house of Kildare in 1534-5, Piers remained on favourable terms with Henry VIII. Almost a decade after his investiture as earl of Ossory at Windsor, Piers' patience and support of the king paid off to his great advantage. At the Dublin Parliament of May 1536 – the same year Queen Anne was executed – an Act of absentees authorised Piers to retake the old earldom of Ormond.⁹⁸ The Act quashed the convoluted settlement with the St Legers and Boleyns that he had been forced to accept in 1528 during his 'climb-down' to accept a new earldom of Ossory. His wife Margaret Fitzgerald became countess of Ormond and Ossory upon Piers's investiture.

The case of Piers Butler, earl of Ormond in Ireland and Thomas Boleyn, earl of Ormond in England, mirrored that of the Dacres in Cumberland in the north of England. There, the solution to a similar, contemporary succession dispute was that 'the two Lord Dacres be named, the one of the south, and the other of the north'.⁹⁹ Margaret Butler and her son Thomas had no choice but to accept their loss of the Irish earldom, now firmly in the hands of Piers Butler. Thomas was in no position to quarrel with the king and by 1538 he had returned to Henry's court.

Margaret's granddaughter, Mary Boleyn, older sister of Anne and only surviving offspring of Thomas Boleyn, is thought to have spent some time with her grandmother before the latter's death in 1540 at Hever castle 'to entertain the old Lady Boleyn in best wise to her comfort'

⁹⁸ Act of Absentees, Irish Parliament, Dublin, 1 May 1536 (NAI, Ferguson MSS, Exchequer memoranda rolls, Henry VIII, 192).

⁹⁹ J.H. Round, 'The heirship of the Percies: the earldom of Ormonde' in *Notes and Queries*, 6th ser., 5 (3 June 1881), p. 431; Henry Summerson, 'Dacre family' in *ODNB*, online edn, 2015[www.oxforddnb.com/biew/article/71861 [26 May 2017]].

before her death.¹⁰⁰ After Margaret died, Mary as the eldest of the Boleyn granddaughters inherited Rochford Hall in Essex, and lived there for a short period. Built in the mid-1400s by Margaret's uncles, the fifth and sixth earls of Ormond, this sizeable property remained in Butler hands until the death of her father, Thomas, from whom she inherited it. Margaret's making provision for Mary, eldest daughter of her son, Thomas, in her will, offers insights into the kind of solidarity and mutual support that operated among female members of aristocratic families in this period. Elizabeth Trussel, countess of Oxford (d.1527) similarly provided generously for her female relatives, including her goddaughter Elizabeth St. Clere, 'leaving her some plate and contributed £100 to her dowry'.¹⁰¹ Margaret, countess of Bath (d.1561) bequeathed the majority of her movable possessions to her unmarried daughters. To her daughters by her first husband, Thomas Kitson, earl of Bath, she left 900 marks each, and 600 marks to her three daughters by her second husband, Sir Richard Long.¹⁰² Not only that, she specifically stated in her will that these bequests were in addition to and greater than the dowries provided by the women's fathers.¹⁰³

On 15 May 1543 Mary Boleyn received the Boleyn family lands previously held by her grandmother, Margaret, and sister-in-law Jane Rochford, as part of their widow's dowers.¹⁰⁴ Even earlier, on 15 April 1540, and less than one month after her grandmother died, Mary inherited (through her father's legacy) control over her Ormond inheritance and other Boleyn properties in Kent such as Hever and Brasted.¹⁰⁵ These lands included the manors of

¹⁰⁰ *The chronicle of Calais in the reigns of Henry VII and Henry VIII, to the year 1540*, ed. J.G. Nichols (Camden Society, 25, London, 1846).

¹⁰¹ Will of Elizabeth, countess of Oxford, 1527 (TNA, PROB 11/27/11).

¹⁰² Will of Margaret Kitson, countess of Bath, 1561 (CUL, Hengrave Hall, MS. 90, 92).

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ Inquisition post mortem, 4 Apr. 1544, of Mary [Boleyn] Carey (Essex Record Office, D/DU 514/29/5).

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

Southboram and Henden Park and all lands in Hever and Brasted in Kentworth valued at approximately STG£488 annually.¹⁰⁶ However, Mary died just weeks later on 19 July 1543¹⁰⁷ and her property was divided between her second husband, William Stafford (d.1556) and her only son, eighteen-year-old Henry from her first marriage to William Carey (d.1528). Henry inherited the majority of his mother's Butler inheritance,¹⁰⁸ while just one manor, Abinger in Surrey, was acquired by Stafford.¹⁰⁹ When Dame Alice Clere, daughter of Margaret Butler and Sir William Boleyn (and aunt of Queen Anne Boleyn) died in 1538, she held over twenty manors as her jointure.¹¹⁰ Before she died one of her main concerns was to endow her youngest son, Thomas, with sufficient land and money befitting his class. Included in her bequests to her son was a pair of gold beads with precious stones given to her by her niece, Queen Anne Boleyn, three luxury beds and £700 for the purchase of land or a ward to marry. Dame Clere also left jewellery to three nieces and a stepdaughter and divided the remainder of her goods and wealth between her two other sons.¹¹¹ A noteworthy feature of her will is the fact that she did not bequeath the majority of her property to the family heir; instead, she chose 'a favourite non-inheriting child, ... in so doing, exemplifying aristocratic women's tendency to use their wealth to mute the primogenital bias of the law'.¹¹²

Conclusion

This first Ormond succession crisis brought to a head several problems, the seeds of which were sown during the preceding six decades of political instability, absenteeism, neglect of

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ J.H Round, *The early life of Anne Boleyn: a critical essay* (London, 1886), p. 38.

¹⁰⁸ Mary had one daughter, Katherine Carey, who later became Lady Knollys, one of Queen Elizabeth's closest ladies in waiting and the queen's first cousin.

¹⁰⁹ S.T. Bindoff, *The Commons, 1509–1558* (3 vols, London, 1982), i, 365.

¹¹⁰ Ibid, i, 651-52; Will of Sir Robert Ormsby, 1529 (TNA, PROB 11/24/5).

¹¹¹ Will of Dame Alice Clere, 1539 (TNA, Exchequer, 40/12173).

¹¹² Harris, *Aristocratic English women*, p. 134.

the Ormond patrimony and multiple factors that complicated legitimate succession to the title and lands in both England and Ireland. Furthermore, as has been highlighted in this chapter, the contest became bound up with changes in Henry VIII's personal life and escalating problems in governing the Irish lordship. It is true that Piers Ruadh utilised to his benefit in the long term the vacuum left by successive earls living outside of Ireland, thus positioning himself to override the claim of the first heiresses in the history of the dynasty. Had the marriage between Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn been successful, it is unlikely that Piers Butler would have been conferred with the title earl of Ormond in Ireland. In effect, the claims of Margaret and Anne Butler could very well have been immediately recognised in 1515 in accordance with their father's wishes and their own right (since 1475) given that their chief rival, Piers, had killed their mutual cousin, James Dubh, in 1497 in his attempt to usurp the position as earl and place himself next in line. Ultimately, it was the fall of the Boleyns in England which impacted the earldom of Ormond more profoundly than the corrosive factors of extended absenteeism, illegitimate succession, or usurped power within the extended family. The Ormond succession crisis was decisively determined by Crown interventions, the first following the restoration of the earldom in 1475 by Edward IV, and later Henry VIII's involvement in 1528 and 1538. Henry went so far as to create a new earldom of Ossory in 1528 at the cost of the Crown in order to 'legitimise the position of [Piers Butler] its preferred nominee'.¹¹³ The king showed a flexible approach to the law when he eventually over-ruled the legitimate entitlements of Thomas Butler's two daughters as heiresses to the Irish Ormond inheritance by promoting and permitting the accession of Piers Butler, the son of a Gaelic Irish woman and distant male cousin of the deceased earl, firstly to the earldom of Ossory and then Ormond ten years later. For political and personal reasons, clearly Henry

¹¹³ Edwards, *The Ormond lordship*, p. 79. When the Crown intervened again in 1614, it was to facilitate resolution of another crisis of succession following the death of the tenth earl of Ormond.

felt compelled to put in place a stable settlement for the Irish earldom. But this was also an example of the Crown tightening its control over the aristocracy throughout the realm, thereby making aristocrats such as Piers Butler in Ireland, like the lords Dacre in England, indebted to and dependent upon it for their positions.

Piers was no more 'entitled' to the earldom than James Dubh, the former being a usurper, the latter, illegitimate. Furthermore, both failed to qualify as potential legitimate claimants to the earldom under the terms of the reinstated dynasty's titles (1475): this was at the heart of the succession crisis in 1515. Following the seventh earl's death, the dynasty reached a turning point.

During decades of internal dispute surrounding the succession to the earldom of Ormond in Ireland, Piers Butler and Margaret Fitzgerald's marriage was unique. Where there had been extended absence, the new earl and countess were now resident in Ireland. Their marriage was legitimate and Margaret was the daughter of the most powerful man in medieval Ireland, Gareth Mor Fitzgerald. After several marriages and affairs that yielded either no sons or illegitimate sons, Margaret and Piers had three legitimate sons as well as six legitimate daughters. At the turn of fifteenth century the ramifications of the Wars of the Roses were felt not only in England but in Ireland too: Piers and Margaret's marriage was a union between a Lancastrian Butler and a Yorkist Fitzgerald, thus heralding a new era in Irish history generally, and the Ormond dynasty specifically.

Chapter 4

Dynastic consolidation and female political entity:

Margaret Fitzgerald, Countess of Ormond and Ossory (1472–1542)

Piers Ruadh Butler, eighth earl of Ormond and his wife, Margaret Fitzgerald, undertook the transformation of the earldom in Ireland and established the first home-based control of the dynasty for almost seventy years, since the days of the white or fourth earl of Ormond in the early fifteenth century. The new countess, resident in the heart of the earldom, assumed a higher profile than her predecessors had done: this was achieved as much through her physical presence in the earldom as through her political acumen and strong personality. This chapter highlights her influence in the transformation of the patrimony that she and her husband inherited, to the family's benefit, and how she enhanced the succession and security of the dynasty, being as firmly focused on proving Piers's legitimate claim to the Ormond inheritance as she was on providing for their offspring. Margaret's very active part in the drive to have her husband's claim to the earldom in Ireland recognised by the Dublin Parliament in 1517 is examined and the importance of her role as interlocutor between the two most powerful and political aristocratic Old English families in the lordship is assessed.¹ The chapter also explores Margaret's emergence into the roles of daughter, wife, countess, mother and widow, highlighting her aristocratic background and character, her prioritization of the interests of her adoptive family over those of her own kin, and her contribution to stabilizing, consolidating, and expanding Ormond interests in Ireland.

¹ *Cal. Ormond deeds*, ed. Curtis, iv (1509–47), no. 27.

Despite the availability of contemporary sources concerning Margaret, notably the writings of Richard Stanihurst, the state papers, her correspondence with King Henry VIII and a handful of documents among the Ormond deeds, it was not until the publication of the writings of James Graves and J.G.A. Prim in the nineteenth century that she became the subject of scholarly study. More recently, entries in both the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography and the Dictionary of Irish Biography attest to recognition among modern scholars of her importance in Tudor Ireland: this study seeks to deepen an understanding of her significance.

‘The fairest daughter of the earl of Kildare’

Although neither the exact date nor location of her birth is recorded, it is probable that Margaret Fitzgerald, daughter of Gareth Mor Fitzgerald, Great Earl of Kildare, was born at Maynooth Castle in County Kildare. The second of six daughters of the eighth earl and his first wife, Alison FitzEustace, she is understood to have been born in 1472 and was described by the Dublin-born Old English chronicler and Geraldine supporter, Richard Stanihurst, as ‘the fairest daughter of the earl of Kildare’.² Her marriage to Piers Butler was, according to the Book of Howth (c.1544) for reasons of ‘policy’. It is said to have taken place ‘about the year of our Lord 1485’³ at which time Margaret would have been twelve or thirteen years old. That she was a child at the time of her marriage was not unique either in Irish, English or continental European aristocratic circles in which political expediency took precedence over

² Stanihurst, *The Historie of Irelande*, p. 253. (Stanihurst is invaluable for his description of both the Great Earl and of Margaret Fitzgerald. He was a chronicler and supporter of the Kildares who was employed as a tutor by Gerald, eleventh earl of Kildare. Gareth Mor later had seven sons with his second wife, Elizabeth St John: C.W. Fitzgerald, Marquis of Kildare, *The earls of Kildare and their ancestors: from 1057 to 1773* (Dublin, 1858), p. 77. Margaret’s mother died in Lucan, County Dublin in November 1494 while the earl was imprisoned in the Tower of London for two years, and is buried at Grey Abbey near Kilcullen in County Kildare which her own father, Lord Portlester had founded: Fitzgerald, *The earls of Kildare*, p. 57.

³ ‘A discourse of the variance between the earls of Kildare and Ormond’ (1485) in *Cal. Carew MSS*, ‘*The Book of Howth*’, p. 176.

the age of marriage partners.⁴ In late fifteenth-century England three of Sir John Howard, duke of Norfolk's (d.1485) daughters were married before they were sixteen.⁵ Two of their husbands had been foster sons of their father, just as Piers Butler had been brought up in the house of his father-in-law, Gareth Mor Fitzgerald. Also in England, in 1458, Humphrey Stafford, first duke of Buckingham, assumed custody of his daughter-in-law, Constance Green, the heiress who married his younger son, and promised to support both. Betrothal most likely took place in late autumn or early winter of that year.⁶ By contrast, according to Gillian Kenny, 'examples of child marriages are relatively rare in Irish sources'.⁷ The great exception of course was the family of Catherine Fenton (c.1588–1630) and Richard Boyle, first Earl of Cork, which consisted of six daughters and five sons. Infamous for his social climbing, Boyle personally orchestrated his children's marriages, typically beginning discussions about the daughters' marriages when they were nine years old. One was sent to live with her future in-laws when she was only six, another when she was nine, and two other daughters were married before they reached thirteen.⁸

The timing of Piers's and Margaret's marriage attests to its political significance. The Lancastrian claim to the throne of England had been sealed with the victory of Henry Tudor over Richard III at Bosworth in August 1485. Henry's accession to the throne caused trepidation for the Fitzgeralds, long-established Yorkists, and led the eighth earl of Kildare to

⁴ See Harris, *English aristocratic women*, pp 61-88; Kimberley A. LoPrete, 'Adela of Blois: Familial Alliances and Female Lordship' in Theodore Evergates (ed.), *Aristocratic women in medieval France*, pp 7-74; Kenny, *Anglo-Irish & Gaelic women in Ireland*, pp 52-67; Nicholas Canny, *The upstart earl* (Cambridge, 1982).

⁵ Anne Crawford, 'The career of John Howard, duke of Norfolk, 1420-1485' (unpublished M.Phil. thesis, University of London, 1975), p. 103.

⁶ Henry Mordaunt, *Succinct Genealogical proofs of the house of Green*, London: privately printed 1685, cited in Harris, *English aristocratic women*, p. 63.

⁷ Kenny, *Anglo-Irish & Gaelic women in Ireland*, p. 61.

⁸ Canny, *The upstart earl*, p. 90.

negotiate a marriage between his daughter Margaret and the house of Ormond, long-standing supporters of the Lancastrians. But as David Beresford has argued, whilst ‘the timing of the marriage may have been triggered by the restoration of Thomas earl of Ormond in England’, the motivation for this marriage ‘had more to do with Kildare securing the allegiance of an important Anglo-Irish family than it had to do with offsetting Ormond’s influence in England’.⁹

A pragmatic strategist, Kildare had Margaret marry Piers Butler in the hope of placating the Lancastrian Butlers of Ormond and uniting the two leading Old English aristocratic houses in Ireland. For Stanihurst, the marriage was ‘of good meaning’, intended to unite the families in friendship.¹⁰ Putting it more bluntly, Beresford contends that it was about ‘Kildare consolidating his ties with the future earl of Ormond’.¹¹ To view it in any other way, Beresford warns, is to ‘read history backwards.’¹² Arguing that the Ormond sphere of growing influence and favour was in England rather than Ireland, Beresford places heavy emphasis on Piers Butler’s having been a strong ally of the Great Earl of Kildare throughout the latter’s life and indeed the evidence strongly supports his interpretation.

Like all aristocratic heads of households Margaret’s father was politic in contracting marriage alliances for all of his children, including his other five daughters. The eldest, Eleanor, was married first to Donal McCarthy Reagh, chief of Carbury County Cork and later to Manus O’Donnell of County Donegal. The third daughter, Elizabeth, married Christopher Fleming, Lord Slane of County Meath; Alice wed her cousin, Conn Mor O’Neill, and Eustachia, the

⁹ Beresford, ‘The Butlers in England & Ireland’, p. 270.

¹⁰ Stanihurst, ‘*The Historie of Ireland*’, p. 253.

¹¹ Beresford, ‘The Butlers in England & Ireland’, p. 245.

¹² *Ibid.*

earl's youngest daughter married Ulick McWilliam Burke, Lord of Clanricarde in County Galway.¹³ Kildare's positioning of his eldest daughter Margaret was a key tactical move in his strategy for consolidating Geraldine political hegemony in the lordship while he negotiated the challenges arising from political instability in England and steadily reclaimed outlying areas of the Pale marches. Gareth Mor was mindful that Butlers of Pottlerath, the most important junior branch of the Butler family resident in the neighbouring Ormond lordship, were becoming increasingly powerful during the absenteeism of successive earls in the fifteenth century. Sir James Butler, Piers's father and head of the family, served as deputy to the absentee earls. Gareth Mor's move to contract this marriage was, therefore, opportunistic, driven by a determination to capitalise on the Butlers' favour with the new king, Henry VII, whom Thomas Butler, seventh Earl of Ormond, served as Privy Councillor. Notwithstanding her youth at the time of her marriage, Margaret had an influential role as interlocutor between two of the most powerful dynasties in Ireland. Whereas she appears to have played this part during the lifetime of her father (d.1513), as discussed in the previous chapter, her brother Gareth Oge's failure to recognise Piers Butler as earl of Ormond created irreconcilable differences between Kildare and Ormond, and led Margaret to prioritize the interests of her adoptive family over those of her kin.

Writing in the 1570s Stanihurst portrayed Margaret in a very flattering light. She was, he claimed, a woman who was 'manlike' and 'tall of stature'¹⁴ who 'had inherited likewise the most formidable qualities of the Great Earl, as she was to prove in a manner unfortunate for her brother Gerald.'¹⁵ From her father 'she inherited her stature, her generosity and the

¹³ Fitzgerald, *The earls of Kildare*, p. 71.

¹⁴ Stanihurst, *The Historie of Ireland*, p. 326.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

carriage and force of character so great that all the estates of the realm couched unto her'.¹⁶ Stanihurst praised Margaret as 'a sure friend, a bitter enemy, hardly disliking where she fancied, not easily fancying where she disliked.'¹⁷ Such description of women in masculine terms was not unusual among contemporary male historians and antiquarians; nor was it complimentary. For instance, writing in 1635, the English antiquarian and historian William Camden depicted Rose O'Toole, wife of Feagh McHugh, Lord of Clann Uí Bhriain in County Wicklow as a fierce opponent, 'a woman of manly courage above that of a woman, who for a terror was adjudged to be burnt, but by the Queen's mercy was spared'.¹⁸

As indicated in Chapter one, the socialisation of aristocratic women was largely geared towards their preparation for marriage. The popular sixteenth-century religious and moral manual by Juan Luis Vives, *The instruction of a Christian woman*, emphasised chastity and honesty as key priorities for parents raising daughters. Aristocratic girls were taught needlework, music and literacy. They received some instruction in arithmetic and a grounding in estate management, property development and the law. Instruction in English was usually provided by a resident chaplain or family tutor who typically taught Latin, French and in the context of Ireland, possibly some Gaelic. An acquaintance with Latin was especially important for women (such as Margaret) seeking to protect or assert their rights in relation to property and business. At the same time, young noble women were expected to master the middle ground of being mistresses within their own households whilst also dealing with the management of large numbers of domestic staff and estate workers. As young

¹⁶ Graves & Prim, *The history, architecture & antiquities of the cathedral church of St Canice, Kilkenny*, p. 248.

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 85. Stanihurst's portrayal of Margaret in masculine terms is not unique: for example, see William Camden, *Annals or the Histoire of the Most Renowned and Victorious Princess Elizabeth, the Late Queen of England* (London, 1635), p. 439.

¹⁸ Camden, *Annals*, p. 439.

women they learned the skill of ‘subordinate agency’¹⁹ to coin historian Linda Pollock’s phrase whilst being obedient to their father and male relatives. Observing and imitating the conduct of their mothers and extended female adult family members was key to the early adult development and preparation for the future of aristocratic girls such as Margaret Fitzgerald and her sisters in Ireland as indeed it was to the aristocratic children who grew up in the Paston, Plumpton, Stonor, Lisle and Dacre households in England, or the children of the earl of Champagne, or the earl of Anjou in France. While we know that as a girl, Margaret was frequently separated from her father during his sojourns to England and while he campaigned around Ireland in his capacity as the king’s deputy, regrettably, we have no evidence relating to her education or that of aristocratic girls in general in late medieval Ireland. However, as mentioned in chapter one, the library at Maynooth Castle during Gareth Oge’s time contained works by the medieval female author Christine de Pisan along with a life of St Catherine. The collection is believed to have contained some works acquired by the Great Earl and so it is not unreasonable to believe that Margaret and her siblings had access to religious and other works while they were growing up.²⁰

The Great Earl and his wife, like their counterparts in England such as the Percies, Dacres, Dudleys and Seymours, invested heavily to raise their children in a manner appropriate to their rank.²¹ When Margaret reached marriageable age, heavy responsibilities, expectations and restrictions rested on her shoulders. But as the eldest daughter in the leading Old English household in late fifteenth-century Ireland, she also had influence and opportunities, more

¹⁹ Linda Pollock, ‘“Teach her to live under obedience’: The making of women in the upper ranks of early modern England’ in *Continuity and Change*, iv (1989), pp 231-58.

²⁰ *Crown surveys of lands, 1540–41*, ed. Mac Niocaill, pp 314, 356; Katharine Simms, ‘The Norman invasion and the Gaelic recovery’ in R.F. Foster (ed.), *The Oxford history of Ireland* (Oxford, 1992), p. 83.

²¹ Harris, *English aristocratic women*, p. 42.

than many of her male peers. Given that marriage in church only became ‘a legal necessity for everyone in the sixteenth century’²² it is possible that Margaret and Piers were married at Maynooth but no record of this survives. Two years later, Piers’s father James completely disregarded the legal rights of the seventh earl of Ormond when he ‘bequeathed his office as the earl’s deputy to Piers giving him control of both the MacRichard Butler estates along with the earl’s demesne manors in Kilkenny and Tipperary, including Kilkenny Castle itself’.²³ Following their marriage, Piers and his wife renovated and extended some of the Butler properties including the substantial manor of Grannagh, located on the Kilkenny side of the Waterford estuary, which was one of their most strategically important manorial settlements.²⁴ Following the renovations, Grannagh became the central administration base for the Butler patrimony in southern Kilkenny.²⁵ As historian Carol O’Connor has explained, ‘this position greatly enhanced Piers’ status among the elite political nexus’ in Ireland. During these early years of their marriage, Margaret emerged as one of Piers’s most important political assets.²⁶

According to Terry Clavin, ‘Piers was by background a heavily Gaelicised warlord, but at Margaret’s prompting he began making concessions to English culture. Indeed, Old English annalists praised her for rescuing the Butler lordship from Gaelic barbarism’.²⁷ Parallel with a re-anglicisation campaign in the Kildare lordship during the second half of the fifteenth century Margaret instigated the re-anglicisation of the Ormond territories from an early stage

²² C.N.L. Brooke, *The medieval idea of marriage* (Oxford, 1989), p. 133.

²³ McKenna, ‘Was there a political role for women in medieval Ireland?’, p. 166.

²⁴ *Cal. Ormond deeds*, ed. Curtis, vi, appendix 1, pp 143 - 4.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ O’Connor, ‘The Kildare women’, p. 13.

²⁷ Terry Clavin, ‘Lady Margaret Fitzgerald, countess of Ormond’ in *Dictionary of Irish Biography*. Cambridge University Press, 2009, online edn, 2009 [<http://dib.cambridge.org/viewReadpage.do?articleId=a1269> [17 Apr. 2014]].

in her marriage. According to Edwards, during the absence of successive earls of Ormond it was the Butlers of Pottlerath (Piers's branch) who accelerated the 'Gaelicisation of the county',²⁸ particularly under the 'Statutes of Kilcash' introduced by Piers's father James MacEdmond Butler in 1478.²⁹ According to Stanihurst, Margaret proved 'a bitter enemy, the only meane at those days whereby hir husband's country was reclaymed from the sluttish and unclean Irish custome to English bedding, housekeeping, and civilitie'.³⁰

Despite being described as 'the fairest daughter of the Great Earl'³¹ it was as a Butler with Fitzgerald lineage and connections that Margaret emerged as one of the most influential and important women of her time, though she was not unique. Lady Agnes Campbell (1526-1601), daughter of Colin Campbell, fourth earl of Argyle in Scotland and wife of Turlough O'Neil of Ulster (1532-95), was commended by royal officials for her diplomacy and political skills.³² She was, according to Walter Devereux, first earl of Essex (1541-76), 'a wise and civil woman'.³³ Sir Henry Sidney hailed her as 'a grave, wise and well-spoken lady in Scots-English and French, and very well mannered'.³⁴ Likewise, when Margaret O'Brien Burke, Countess of Clannrickarde, died in 1568, she was remembered as 'the best woman in Eirinn in her own time' according to the Annals of Loch Cé.³⁵ The annalists also observed that when Sadbh, daughter of Richard Og, and wife of MacDiarmada, died in Athenry County Galway in January 1542 (the same year as the death of Margaret Fitzgerald), 'it is

²⁸ Edwards, *The Ormond lordship*, p. 146.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Stanihurst, '*The Historie of Irelande*', p. 256.

³¹ Graves & Prim, *The history, architecture & antiquities of the cathedral church of St Canice, Kilkenny*, p. 248.

³² G.A. Hayes-McCoy, *Scots mercenary forces in Ireland, 1565-1603* (Dublin and London, 1937) pp 116-7, 129-32, 183, 187.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *A viceroy's vindication? Sir Henry Sidney's memoir of service in Ireland, 1556-1578*, ed. Ciaran Brady (Dublin, 2002), pp 75-6.

³⁵ *Annals of Loch Cé*, ii, 405.

doubtful if there ever came of the posterity of William the Conquerer, a woman of her age better than she in hospitality and worth, prudence and piety, in charity and liberality'.³⁶ Margaret's dominant influence over her husband is remarked upon by both contemporaries and historians. Again, this stems largely from Stanihurst's depiction of her as a 'help mete'³⁷ for Piers 'by whom he is only ruled'.³⁸ His influence is evident in the eighteenth-century portrayal of her by historian Thomas Carte as a woman who 'ruled her husband with an iron hand', 'a person of great wisdom and courage uncommon in her sex'.³⁹ It also echoes in Donough Bryan's 1933 portrayal of Margaret as an 'active and marital housewife', an extension of her father.⁴⁰ That close association between father and daughter in the minds of contemporaries is reflected in their both being styled 'Great': Margaret was frequently referred to as Mairéad Gearóid in Kilkenny folklore.

With the exception of Margaret's sister Eleanor, it is comparatively rare to find contemporary comment on the personality or legacy of individual aristocratic women. In Margaret's case it was her role in securing the earldom and advancing her husband's interests and standing, along with her loyalty to her affinal family that earned her honourable mention in Holinshed's *Chronicle of Ireland* where Stanihurst applauded 'the singular wisdom of this Countess, so politieque that nothing was thought substantially debated without hir advice'.⁴¹ In 1492, four years after Piers' father James had illegally approved his succession as deputy of the earl in Ireland, the illegitimate nephew, James Dubh, was authorised by his uncle the earl to take Piers's office,⁴² ousting Piers from the position he had usurped through his father.

³⁶ Ibid, 333.

³⁷ Stanihurst, '*The Historie of Irelande*', p. 253.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Carte, *Life of James, duke of Ormonde*, i, 1.

⁴⁰ Bryan, *Gerald Fitzgerald, the great earl of Kildare*, p. 94.

⁴¹ Stanihurst, '*The Historie of Irelande*', p. 256.

⁴² Ibid, p. 326 (also discussed in detail in Chapter two).

From this time onwards, as acknowledged by Stanihurst, Margaret's courage, wisdom and political acumen became key in the couple's rehabilitation of the earldom after decades of absenteeism and in their suppression of threats to his claim. Piers's murder of James Dubh in July 1497 while his pregnant wife Margaret was travelling with him from Donmore to Kilkenny marked the beginning of this process of rehabilitation in earnest. This event also provides a rare insight into the intimacy between husband and wife:

The noble woman being great with childe, and upon necessite constreyned to use a spare dyet for hir onley sustenance was milke she longed sore for wine and calling hyr lorde and trusty servant of hys James White unto her shee requested them both to helpe hyr to some wine for shee was not able any longer to endure so straight a life. Truly Margaret quoth the Earle of Ossorie 'thou shalt have store of wine within thys foure and twentie hours or else thou shalt feed alone on milke for me'.⁴³

The removal of James Dubh brought about a 'prosperous calme succeeding the former boisterous storme',⁴⁴ but it also lent stability to Margaret's life, both domestic and political, since Piers reclaimed his position as earl Thomas's deputy and the couple returned to reside in Kilkenny castle.⁴⁵ Stanihurst, in his detailed account of the circumstances surrounding James Dubh's murder, conveys the fear and struggle experienced by the young Butlers who were intent on securing their titles and the earldom. The murder stirred Margaret's ambitions for advancing the interests of her husband as she manoeuvred Piers a step closer to becoming the head of the Ormond dynasty in Ireland. Recounting how he killed James Dubh, Piers remarked Margaret's enthusiastic reaction:

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

Lackey did forestall hym in the way and with courageous charge, gored the bastard through his speare. Thys prosperous calm succeeding the former boisterous storme, the Lady Margaret began to take hearte, hir naturall stouteness floted, as well by the remembrance of his noble birth as by the intelligence of hir honourable match.⁴⁶

According to Terry Clavin, the murder of James Dubh ‘kindled Margaret’s ambitions’⁴⁷ causing her to set about ‘securing her husband’s recognition as earl of Ormond and as rightful owner of the Butler estates in Ireland’.⁴⁸

On 24 January 1513, while relations between the houses of Ormond and Kildare were still cordial, in another demonstration of the rehabilitation of the earldom of Ormond and of Margaret’s influence over and advancement of her husband, a pact to maintain peace between Piers and his brother-in-law Donal McCarthy, lord of Carbury, was sealed at Dromana in County Waterford. Such was the importance of this agreement that both men took oaths – ‘sacramenta sive juramente’.⁴⁹ These pacts for peace and commitment to the preservation of peace were sworn openly upon ‘the holy gospels’⁵⁰ by those present, including Carbury’s wife, Lady Eleanor (sister of Margaret). The fact that Margaret, though present, did not partake in the oath suggests that the proceedings were conducted at her bidding. Her influence over her husband and her sister is certainly apparent. According to the terms of the agreement, Donal and his wife pledged their support for Piers ‘against all his foes, except the most illustrious earl of Kildare against whom neither of them shall aid the other or rise up

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Clavin, ‘Lady Margaret Fitzgerald, countess of Ormond’.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ *Cal. Ormond deeds*, ed. Curtis, iv (1509–1547), p. 12.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

against him by colour of any excuse'.⁵¹ The wording of the agreement, particularly the commitment to preserve accord and maintain mutual support between both parties, may well have been framed at Margaret's request. On this occasion, she is referred to as Margaret Fitzgerald of the Geraldines, and *Margareta Geraldi de Geraldini*.⁵² Family concord and allegiance to her dynasty, and respect for the house of Kildare were still clearly important to her at that time. It is noteworthy that there was no mention of Kildare's heir (and Margaret's brother) in the document.

As outlined in chapter three, the succession crisis which erupted in 1515 not only set Gareth Oge and the Butlers against each other, placing Margaret at the coalface in the dispute, it also negated the political benefits of the propitious union arranged by Gareth Mor in 1485. Throughout the legal proceedings to determine whether her husband or the two English Butler heiresses should succeed to the Ormond titles and estates, Margaret personally advocated on her husband's behalf. On 29 November 1516 at the Church of the Holy Trinity in Dublin,⁵³ Margaret, Piers and several other members of the Butler family attended deliberations about whether the succession of the earldom of Ormond would be entailed to the heirs' male of the earls of Ormond from that point onwards. An agreement having been reached, a 'public instrument'⁵⁴ was declared in the presence of priors, barons, aristocrats and 'many others.'⁵⁵ This was not her first intervention on her husband's behalf in this succession dispute: on 12 March 1515, she attended a hearing in the same church and spoke in support of preserving the Butler inheritance.⁵⁶ On that occasion she was accompanied by a merchant

⁵¹ *Ibid.* (my emphasis).

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 13.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

named John Becket. Margaret presented him as a witness to a declaration made by Sir James Butler, her father-in-law that the succession of the earldom was to pass through the line of heirs' male. Therefore, her husband, 'son of James, son of Edmund Butler son of Richard Butler, was the next heir male to earl Thomas – seventh earl – if he died without heirs male lawfully begotten'.⁵⁷ It was such timely and shrewd intervention aimed at protecting the Butler inheritance that inspired Stanihurst to remark how 'all estates and realms crouched unto her'.⁵⁸ Margaret was intent on establishing and securing in law not only the validity of her husband's title, but also that of her son and heir.

In 1515, at the very point in Piers Butler's career when he expected support and recognition from his brother-in-law Gareth Oge, neither was forthcoming. Piers had expected to succeed to the earldom, despite the terms of the old earl's will and the challenge mounted by the two heiresses. As Kildare stalled in recognising Piers and his wife as Earl and Countess of Ormond, the English heiresses and their families gained ground in asserting their claims. As Edwards has argued, had the Ormond heiresses' claims been successful, it would have been advantageous for Kildare, prolonging the 'tradition of absenteeism in the earldom of Ormond, a key foundation of the Kildare ascendancy'.⁵⁹ In 1515-16 the opportunity for Piers's rivals to challenge his position presented itself. This was more than just another episodic eruption in an ongoing rivalry between the two dynasties which spilled over into the next generation between Gareth Oge and Piers Butler. So high were the stakes for Piers Butler that his relationship with Kildare came under unprecedented strain, to the point of forcing Margaret to side with him against her brother throughout the rest of her life.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Stanihurst, *The Historie of Irelande*, p. 256.

⁵⁹ Edwards, *The Ormond lordship*, p. 148.

While the Ormond succession dispute ignited the row between Piers and Margaret and Gareth Oge, there were changes afoot in the lordship at that time which made Butler's challenge to Kildare hegemony all the more important. In mounting this challenge, Piers was acutely aware of his need to have the full support of the English population in the midlands and the earldom of Ormond in particular. He was also very conscious of the increasingly disgruntled Palesmen's expectations that he would remove 'the Fitzgeralds from their dominant position in the shire'.⁶⁰ In this wider context, pressing his claim for the earldom of Ormond 'required a dramatic and thoroughgoing break with the past'.⁶¹ As Edwards has also emphasised, the traditional Ormond supporters in Kilkenny were 'hostile to the house of Kildare'⁶² and hoped that Piers would use his 'family ties to prevent the Geraldines from ravaging the region'.⁶³ To break from the Fitzgeralds, Butler needed Henry VIII to back his claim to the Ormond inheritance.

In 1516, having been summoned to attend a meeting of the Irish council in Dublin before the earl of Kildare regarding issues surrounding entail, Piers sent his wife instead.⁶⁴ For the first time at council level, Margaret represented her husband and family before her own brother, the earl of Kildare, and procured an adjournment. By spring of the following year, the battle lines were drawn. From April Piers and Margaret no longer paid the sum of 100 marks which the earl of Kildare formerly charged for this protection.⁶⁵ The Butlers began to prepare for conflict with Kildare, but not immediately. For his part, Henry VIII did nothing to obstruct the growing influence of the Butlers during the next decade. On the contrary, in 1522 he

⁶⁰ Ibid, pp 148-9.

⁶¹ Ibid, p. 148.

⁶² Ibid, p. 147.

⁶³ Ibid, p. 84.

⁶⁴ Richard Bagwell, *Ireland under the Tudors: with a succinct account of the earlier history* (3 vols, London, 1885-90), i, 126.

⁶⁵ Ibid, 149.

offered the Irish lord deputyship to Piers Butler. For Kildare, this show of royal support for Ormond was infuriating. When in 1525 he complained to the king about Butler's oppressive conduct in Leinster and Munster, he was flatly ignored. In Henry's eyes, 'the fact that Piers was the one person in Leinster capable of undermining the Kildare Fitzgeralds acted greatly in his favour'.⁶⁶ Significantly, Piers also had the backing of his wife Margaret. While Piers and Margaret were on the political ascent and in the monarch's favour, Kildare was encountering growing opposition from not alone his traditional rivals the Butlers, but also the royal secretary Cardinal Wolsey and increasingly vociferous critics in council and in the Pale more generally.

In urging Piers to challenge her brother, Margaret was encouraged by her servant Robert Cowley, clerk of the Dublin council and master of the rolls. Cowley, a former advisor to her father, had fought alongside the Great Earl.⁶⁷ He is said to have been the only person 'from whom she took advice'.⁶⁸ In a move that was not only astute and traitorous against her brother, Margaret made clever use of their late father's former advisor for her own and her husband's benefit, in so doing, deepening the hostility between her and her brother. Together, the death of their father the Great Earl in 1513 and the succession of her brother as ninth earl of Kildare was a rubicon in relations between the Kildares and the Ormonds. Crucially, after her father had died and her brother was determined to undermine her Margaret aligned herself

⁶⁶ Lawrence McCorry, *The revolt of Silken Thomas: a challenge to Henry VIII* (Dublin, 1987), p. 145.

⁶⁷ Natives of Kilkenny, Robert and his son Walter Cowley were prominent Ormond supporters having previously supported the Kildares. In 1520 Robert was appointed clerk of the Irish Privy Council by the earl of Surrey. According to Steven Ellis, Cowley's fortunes rose after the collapse of the house of Kildare in 1534 and he was appointed master of the rolls in 1538. Walter succeeded his father and held the additional roles of solicitor general and surveyor general of Ireland: see Ellis, *Reform & revival*, pp 37, 165-66, 220-25; also, *Fiants Ireland. Henry VIII*, nos 50, 68.

⁶⁸ Clavin, 'Lady Margaret Fitzgerald, countess of Ormond'.

with her husband's family. Her swift enlistment of her father's old advisor and opponent of the ninth earl, Robert Cowley, to defend the interests of Kildare's arch-enemies, demonstrates her astuteness and provides further evidence of the deteriorating relationship between the two dynasties.

In her position as a 'Kildare woman' married into the Ormond dynasty, Margaret Fitzgerald was set on her husband's political advancement. By 1516 Cowley was acknowledged as 'servant of Margaret countess of Ormond'.⁶⁹ Clearly this relationship had benefits for both parties, particularly given their shared dislike of Gareth Oge. The relationship between Gareth Oge and Cowley began to turn sour when, soon after the Ormond succession dispute erupted, Cowley fell out with Kildare.⁷⁰ In 1518-19 Cowley was at court, making complaints against Gareth Oge's abuses of his political power and position in Ireland. Margaret's deployment of Cowley proved successful as the former Kildare servant was more than capable of presenting the king with 'damning evidence of the arbitrary manner in which the Fitzgerald's governed both their own lordship and Ireland'.⁷¹ Gareth Oge lost the lord deputyship of Ireland and was detained in London for the next four years.

Seven years after the initial rift between Piers and Kildare, in 1523, aged fifty-one and mother of nine children, Margaret, together with her sister-in-law Elizabeth Grey, Lady Kildare, travelled to London to represent their husbands at court. Both men were refusing to maintain peace as they vied for mastery over the midlands; indeed tensions between them were seriously escalating at that time and would continue to do so for the remainder of the decade. At the time, Gareth Oge and his wife had just returned from London, having been

⁶⁹ *Collins Peerage of England: genealogical, biographical and historical* (London, 1812), p. 145.

⁷⁰ Clavin, 'Lady Margaret Fitzgerald, countess of Ormond'.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

detained there at the king's pleasure since 1519. Piers Butler had been appointed lord deputy of Ireland in Kildare's absence, in 1522.⁷² Yet again, as on the occasion when he had been summoned to Dublin to discuss the issue of his entail in 1516, Piers sent his wife as his ambassador, claiming he was busy fighting. Margaret had proven her capabilities in this regard, having in 1516 'procured [from her brother] a stipulation that no rents should be paid [by the Butlers to Kildare]'⁷³ so long as the issue of succession ensued. Her appearance in London one year after Piers's appointment as lord deputy is evidence of contemporaries' recognition of her first and foremost as a Butler of Ormond, a powerful political negotiator, advisor and ambassador, representing the Ormond lordship at the highest level both in her own right, and in the interests of her husband. This visit to court appears to have been her first.⁷⁴

As the 1520s and early 1530s wore on, the Butlers prospered politically as the Kildares declined. During that time Margaret worked at discrediting her brother at court. In this, she played an influential role which was explicitly recognised by her brother. Commenting on Margaret's representations to the king on her husband's behalf, Gareth Oge cited the influence of his wife by whom he is only ruled.⁷⁵ The overture made by two Kildare women at court in 1523 was a significant demonstration of the importance of aristocratic women's advocacy and agency at the highest political levels. More significantly, it represented an unequivocal expression of Margaret's identity as a Butler of Ormond, and recognition of her

⁷² Edwards, *The Ormond lordship*, p. 40.

⁷³ MacKenna, 'Was there a political role for women in medieval Ireland?', p. 174.

⁷⁴ While the ladies' itinerary is not recorded, it is likely that they rested en route at the Abbey of Osney near Oxford, as thirteen years earlier, in March 1509, Piers and Margaret had 'joined the confraternity of the Abbey at the invitation of the abbot and convent community': see Mary Ann Lyons, 'Lay female piety and church patronage in late medieval Ireland' in Brendan Bradshaw and Daire Keogh (eds), *Christianity in Ireland: revisiting the story* (Dublin, 2002), p. 67.

⁷⁵ Stanihurst, *The Historie of Irelande*, p. 256.

capabilities as an advocate and intermediary for her husband and his family on the part of her brother, the king and his advisers.

Whilst continuing to work closely with Robert Cowley (who according to Stanihurst was well regarded by Margaret as distinct from being ‘well inward with her’)⁷⁶ in a further step to discredit her brother, sometime in 1525 Margaret secured possession of a letter which allegedly had been taken on Margaret’s orders from one of Kildare’s servants and ‘then lodged in her owne house’.⁷⁷ The incriminating letter was allegedly written by Kildare to James, earl of Desmond who had been suspected of treason. With the clear intention of committing an act of political sabotage against her ostracised brother, Margaret had the incriminating letter delivered to the king.⁷⁸ The plan worked, and over the next decade the rivalry for political dominance between the two families continued to intensify at the particular expense of the Kildares.

Piers and Margaret dealt a further blow to Garret Oge when in 1532 they married their eldest daughter, Margaret Butler, to Brian MacGiollapadraig, a long-time ally of Kildare (see chapter five). The marriage provided the Butlers with powerful Gaelic allies between counties Kilkenny and Kildare. Margaret undoubtedly encouraged this alliance, replicating her father’s practice of negotiating propitious marriage alliances such as her own. In arranging, or at the very least assenting to, this marriage Margaret went out of her way to undermine and politically damage her brother in order to advance her husband’s reputation, power and interests, and her own. Terry Clavin contends that Margaret actively antagonised

⁷⁶ Ibid, p. 253.

⁷⁷ C.B. Gibson, *The history of the county and city of Cork* (2 vols, London, 1861), i, 121.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

Garret Oge, arguing that ‘far from being constrained by family ties, she seems to have been the driving force behind the vendetta’.⁷⁹ This marriage was a case in point.

The succession crisis which had dragged on over a decade appeared to reach an end when, as highlighted in the previous chapter, following the intervention of the king and his cardinal, the new earldom of Ossory was created in February 1528 and Piers and Margaret became earl and countess of Ossory, with Sir Thomas Boleyn (son of Margaret Butler) being appointed as earl of Ormond.⁸⁰ Five years later Henry’s marriage to Anne Boleyn dashed any hopes Piers and Margaret harboured for full succession to the earldom of Ormond. However, by 1536 after the royal marriage had failed, the power of the Boleyns had collapsed, and in May that same year, Queen Anne was beheaded. Finally, Piers and Margaret had no rivals for their long sought-after titles.

By then, their son and heir Sir James Butler, who was appointed Viscount Thurles the previous October, had assumed an active public role, sitting with his father at the opening of Parliament on Dublin on 1 May 1536 to hear four bills of ‘especial interest to the Butlers’.⁸¹ The most significant of these Acts for Margaret and Piers was the Act of Absentees which facilitated recognition of Piers Butler as the ‘rightful heir-male of the old seventh earl of Ormond’.⁸² The Act also quashed any future Boleyn claim to the title, as well as those of illegitimate Butler relatives. In 1528 Piers had reluctantly acquiesced to Thomas Boleyn when he accepted the earldom of Ossory. Finally, on 22 February 1538 Piers Butler and his wife Margaret were formally conferred with their new titles.⁸³ Elizabeth McKenna has emphasised how the behaviour of Piers throughout the succession crisis and indeed his

⁷⁹ Clavin, ‘Lady Margaret Fitzgerald, countess of Ormond’.

⁸⁰ Edmund Lodge, *The genealogy of the existing British peerage* (London, 1838), p. 378

⁸¹ NAI, Fergusson MSS, Exchequer memoranda rolls, Henry VIII, 192.

⁸² Edwards, *The Ormond lordship*, p. 90.

⁸³ *Ibid*, p. 90.

response to the marriage of his distant cousin, Anne Boleyn, to the king, 'does not accord with the picture of the rather simple straightforward soldierly Piers as presented by Stanihurst'.⁸⁴ She contends that Piers emerged from the crisis in an altogether more favourable light, arguing that his conduct had 'the hallmark of a much more subtle mind, one which fits Margaret admirably.'⁸⁵

In his studies of aristocratic French women, Theodore Evergates observes that 'since the administration of aristocratic households and lands entailed overseeing knightly tenants and fiefs as well as children and allodial property, married women could find themselves acting with lordly powers'.⁸⁶ This was certainly true of Margaret Fitzgerald who, as noted above, performed public duties at her own instigation and not always at the behest of her husband. She was clearly aware of the power and influence that she could command in both private and public political spheres. Her decisions around how she exercised both demonstrate the means and extent to which aristocratic women used marriage to assert and represent their own interests as well as those of their spouses and families. As daughter of the Great Earl of Kildare and wife of the earl of Ormond, during the period 1485-1542 Margaret demonstrated focus and steadfast support for Piers and the Butler family, and made a vitally important contribution to the stabilisation and advancement of the Ormond dynasty during the early Tudor era.

Margaret was not unique in exercising significant influence over the affairs of her patrimony. Among her rough contemporaries Lady Mary MacDonnell of Tyrone demonstrated her

⁸⁴ McKenna, 'Was there a political role for women in medieval Ireland?', p.169.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Kimberley A. LoPrete, 'Adela of Blois: Familial Alliances and Female Lordship' in Theodore Evergates (ed.), *Aristocratic women in medieval France*, p. 64.

importance and aptitude for making decisive interventions in her own right when she informed Dublin Castle about the seditious activities of her stepson Shane O’Neil (1530-67).⁸⁷ In a similar vein, Lady Agnes Campbell’s influence (1526-1601) over her husband, Turlough Luineach O’Neill (1532-95), proved vital in strengthening his authority within Tyrone: in 1580 she allegedly informed the English seneschal in Ulster, William Piers that she ‘was wholly bent to make a new Scotland in the north parts of Ireland.’⁸⁸

Barbara Harris has emphasised that ‘for the majority of Yorkist and early Tudor aristocratic women, wifedom and motherhood functioned as two closely linked dimensions of their adult careers.’⁸⁹ Motherhood, of course, was vital to enhancing the status of aristocratic women. With the arrival of each child the responsibility and role of the mother was strengthened; in giving birth to sons, the future of the family line was provided for. Harris posits that ‘the aristocratic conception of good mothering was, in short, tailored to meet the demands of their lifestyle and familial and political duties’.⁹⁰ Harris’s observations equally apply to aristocratic women in Ireland such as Margaret who combined their roles as wives, mothers and countesses. The challenge of making provision for her children’s futures drew upon her diplomacy, ambition, networks and connections. Six daughters and three sons born to Piers Butler and Margaret Fitzgerald, survived. Margaret Fitzgerald, like other aristocratic women including her sisters who were strategically married into families across the four provinces, was keenly aware of the need to prepare her children for their futures in carefully planned marriages. Her role as mother and ‘custodians of their futures’⁹¹ would contribute to seamless

⁸⁷ Lord Deputy Sir William Fitzwilliam to Sir William Cecil, 11 Apr. 1560 (TNA, SP 63/2, no.11).

⁸⁸ Sir William Piers to Sir Francis Walsingham, 18 Aug. 1580 (TNA, SP 63/75, no. 58).

⁸⁹ Harris, *English aristocratic women*, p. 99.

⁹⁰ *Ibid*, p. 107.

⁹¹ *Ibid*, p. 127.

continuity in the life cycle of an Irish Tudor aristocratic dynasty, and enhance her legacy. However, this was not without its challenges. McKenna has highlighted the dangers Margaret and her contemporaries faced as mothers and custodians, especially during her husband's political challenges when Margaret 'had small children to protect'.⁹² Indeed the point was made by Stanihurst that Margaret was 'great with childe'⁹³ in 1497 at the time and scene of the murder of James Dubh Butler. Harris highlights how as wives or widows, 'most aristocratic women were mothers'⁹⁴ and how the good mother, 'balanced affection and worldly concerns in much the same way as their vision of successful wifehood'.⁹⁵ However, she also emphasises that motherhood took 'an historically distinctive form'⁹⁶ when women in Margaret's position faced challenges from their sons and heirs when the time came for executing their husbands' wills.

Margaret's married life was spent in Kilkenny between the family seat at Kilkenny castle and nearby Dunmore. It was from these strongholds that aristocratic women like Margaret 'promoted the interests of their husbands, children, and grandchildren'.⁹⁷ By 1538 she and Piers were over fifty years married. He died the following year, having achieved his main aim thanks in no small part to the role played by his wife who was his political advisor, ambassador, advocate, agent, and solid counsel during the many challenges, disputes and crises they encountered. Whereas Harris has emphasised how 'married women and their brothers collaborated as equals when they had mutual interests',⁹⁸ in Margaret and Garret Oge's case relations were anything but mutually beneficial. Margaret's trip to London in

⁹² MacKenna, 'Was there a political role for women in medieval Ireland?', p. 167.

⁹³ Stanihurst, *The Historie of Irelande*, p. 326.

⁹⁴ Harris, *English aristocratic women*, p. 125.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid, p. 100.

⁹⁷ Ibid, p. 175.

⁹⁸ Ibid, p. 182.

1523 together with her brother's wife was undertaken to advance the interests of her husband and of herself. Her relationship with Gareth Oge, as highlighted earlier, had begun to deteriorate after 1516, and worsened throughout the next two decades. Her rejection of the socially expected norm of aligning with her own family, of which she would have been a natural protector given her upbringing and paternal influence, provides an insight into her character. Stanihurst captured the tenor of the relationship between the two Fitzgerald siblings, recognising Margaret as politically astute, loyal to her husband's family and focussed on preserving the interests of future generations of Butlers, declaring that

She sticked not to abuse her husbands honor against hir brother's folly, not withstanding I learne not that she practised his undoing (which enseed....) but that she by indirect meanes lifted hir brother out of credite, to advance hir husband, the common voice and the thing itself speaketh.⁹⁹

The important role played by aristocratic women in sixteenth-century Ireland in the maintenance of political order is attested by individuals such as Margaret Fitzgerald and her sisters, notably Eleanor McCarthy. According to Carol O'Connor, 'a stabilising force was the ability for these Kildare women to gain access to court politics and the ruling agent.'¹⁰⁰ Elizabeth Clinton, Countess of Lincoln and Alice Fitzgerald (nieces of Margaret countess of Ormond), emerged as powerful women in their own right, and helped secure the survival of the house of Kildare, through successive crises in the generation after Margaret Fitzgerald. According to Meek and Simms, 'Margaret Butler and Eleanor MacCarthy were surely among the most powerful of medieval Irishwomen'.¹⁰¹ In this context Margaret's title 'great countess

⁹⁹ Stanihurst, *The Historie of Ireland*, p. 256.

¹⁰⁰ O'Connor, 'The Kildare women'.

¹⁰¹ C.E. Meek & M.K. Simms (eds), 'Introduction' *The fragility of her sex?* p. 15.

of Ormond' requires some interrogation. It was not merely conferred upon Margaret as daughter of the Great Earl of Kildare; rather she acquired it on the strength of her reputation as an astute political tactician in her own right. She balanced effectively the roles of wife, mother and chatelaine during her widowhood. Her marriage and household, like those of many of her contemporaries and peers, provided her with the resources to enjoy a very comfortable aristocratic lifestyle and to exercise considerable autonomy, power and influence in the running of the Ormond lordship, to give her children an aristocratic upbringing, and to oversee family lands and estates.

As a countess in Tudor Ireland, she defied many of the perceived and real constraints that society placed on her sex, combining roles in domestic and public spheres. In balancing her roles in domestic and public life, she emerged as a progressive agent of modernisation within the lordship. In a drive 'to give good example to ye people of that county [she] brought out of Flanders and other countreys diverse artificiers, who were daily kept at work by them in theyr Castle of Kilkenny where they wrought and made diaper, tapistry, turkey – carpets, cushions and other lyke workes'.¹⁰²

Aristocratic female contemporaries of Margaret's who led similarly progressive initiatives include Margaret Ball, lady mayoress of Dublin city in 1553 who organised classes for children of impoverished families in her own home.¹⁰³ Grace O'Malley (1530-1603) in Connacht was an astute sailor and entrepreneur who recruited her own armies, was involved

¹⁰² HMC, *Second report*, pp 224-5; Robert Rothe's Register or Pedigree of the house of Ormond, 1616 (TCD, MS. 842, f.156r.).

¹⁰³ Ciaran Brady, 'Conservative subversives: the community of the Pale and the Dublin administration, 1556- 86' in Patrick J. Corish (ed.), *Radicals, rebels and establishments. Papers read before the Irish conference of Historians, Maynooth 16–19 June 1983* (Belfast, 1985), p. 24.

in international trade between Ireland and the continent, and possessed vast amounts of land inherited from her father, her mother, and several husbands.¹⁰⁴ In England, Elizabeth Talbot, Countess of Shrewsbury, known by the sobriquet ‘Bess of Hardwick’, had by the time she died in 1608 become England’s second wealthiest woman. She was responsible for the building of glass-making workshops, had business interests in mines, and one of her most celebrated achievements was the construction of Chatsworth hall, the home of the Dukes of Devonshire.¹⁰⁵ The development of the Butler estates, castles and manor houses, and specifically Margaret’s role in this regard, mirrored the Fitzgerald family’s progressive and modernising influence in their lordship. Stanihurst, in his favourable account of Gareth Oge, noted how progressive the earl was in his modernisation of the farming and running of the family estates and lands and his reputation in the practise of good husbandry.¹⁰⁶ Similarities between brother and sister are clear in this aspect of progression and modernisation.

Margaret was interested in more than castles and manor houses. Her appearance in March 1517 together with a notary and the bishop of Ferns at St. Saviour's Church in New Ross County Wexford, in a case over the disputed possession of a house in that town,¹⁰⁷ demonstrated her determination to assert her authority in such affairs. Equally the presence of the other dignitaries on that day points to their recognition and acknowledgement of the countess’ standing, authority and interests. While the outcome of the specific case is unknown, that public appearance was another revealing instance of her having ‘exercised a

¹⁰⁴ Mary O’Dowd, ‘Grainne O’Malley’ in *ODNB*, 2008, online edn, 2008 [www.oxforddnb.com] [11 Feb. 2017]]; Anne Chambers, *Ireland’s pirate queen: the true story of Grace O’Malley* (New York, 2003).

¹⁰⁵ Mary S. Lovell, *Bess of Hardwick: first lady of Chatsworth, 1527-1608* (New York, 2005).

¹⁰⁶ Stanihurst, *The Historie of Ireland*, p. 256.

¹⁰⁷ Mary Ann Lyons, ‘Butler, nee Fitzgerald, Margaret, Countess of Ossory and Ormond (d.1542) in *ODNB*, Oxford University Press, 2004, online edn. 2008 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/69168>] [17 Apr. 2014]].

personal role in aspects of the administration of the Ormond patrimony'.¹⁰⁸ The legal setting highlights her influence, ability and experience in conducting official business in the company of men. Furthermore, John Bradley has highlighted how before the dissolution of the monasteries in Ireland in the late 1530s and early 1540s, Margaret (like many other senior religious and lay stakeholders in the monastic properties) took pre-emptive steps to secure possession of some of these properties through speculation. In the years prior to the general dissolution of the monasteries, it was common practice for astute members of the laity to speculate in monastic lands. In 1538 Margaret founded Kilkenny grammar school with her husband Piers, one year before he died. The school, according to Stanihurst, was established 'at her proper costes and charges, built a schoole howese neere the churchyard of St. Kenneses church'.¹⁰⁹ It proved very successful: 'by the 1550s such was its reputation that students came from as far away as Dublin to be educated, Stanihurst himself among them'.¹¹⁰ He was fulsome in his praise of the foundation declaring that 'in the realm of Ireland no grammar school was so good, in England, am assured none better'.¹¹¹ He boasted that from the school educated men sprang 'as if from a Trojan horse.'¹¹²

Margaret Fitzgerald, therefore, made a lasting contribution to the cultural life of the earldom of Ormond. In this she was by no means unusual. Her mother Alison FitzEustace had been patron of bardic poets in the late fifteenth century, and similarly her brother and his wife at

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Stanihurst, 'The Historie of Ireland', p. 256.

¹¹⁰ Colm Lennon, *Richard Stanihurst, the Dubliner, 1547–1618* (Dublin, 1981), p. 246.

¹¹¹ Imelda Kehoe 'Margaret Fitzgerald, wife of Piers Butler, eighth earl of Ormond and first earl of Ossory' in *Old Kilkenny Review; Journal of the Kilkenny Archaeological society*, iii (1991), p. 836.

¹¹² HMC, *Second report*, 224-5; Robert Rothe's Register or Pedigree of the house of Ormond, 1616 (TCD, MS. 842, f. 156r.). The school functioned until the 1650s College in 1667 under the auspices of James Butler, first duke of Ormonde, following the Butler tradition of promoting education in the city.

Maynooth were generous sponsors of poets and rhymers.¹¹³ As cultural patroness, the countess appears to have had a genuine commitment to providing for the education and welfare of the citizens of the earldom and her initiative in employing foreign craftsmen within the castle, testifies her determination to use her influence and resources to develop and modernise the local economy in Kilkenny whilst also demonstrating her aptitude for estate management. The picture of her all-round benevolent stewardship is complete by the peasantry of Kilkenny's reported praise for her as a generous lady who gave 'almes bountifully to poore and needy people.'¹¹⁴

Fleeting glimpses of Margaret's patronage of the church and private devotional practices may be gleaned from surviving evidence of Piers and Margaret's membership of a guild, in 1509, namely the 'confraternity of the Convent of Osney, near Oxford at the invitation of the abbot and the community.'¹¹⁵ The fact that the confraternity was associated with an English abbey is significant in the context of her policy of re-anglicisation and points to its appeal to the wider Old English community. Margaret appears to have had a particularly strong attachment to this convent since she and Piers stayed there on at least one occasion when they travelled to and from court (though no date is specified). In her study of Geraldine involvement in the church between c.1470 and c.1520 Mary Ann Lyons noted that 'abbots, bishops, archbishops, priors and deans of Kildare and elsewhere, are listed among recipients of gifts of horses from the ninth earl [of Kildare], to persons of importance in Ireland and in amity with their

¹¹³ Colm Lennon, *Sixteenth-century Ireland, the incomplete conquest* (Dublin, 1994), p. 78; Steven Ellis, 'Gerald fitzgerald, ninth earl of Kildare (1487–1534)' in *ODNB*, (2004), online edn. 2008 [www.oxforddnb.com] [16 Feb. 2017]]; Mary Ann Lyons, *Gearóid Óg, the ninth earl of Kildare* (Dundalk, 1998).

¹¹⁴ Robert Rothe's Register or Pedigree of the house of Ormond, 1616 (TCD, MS. 842, f. 156r.).

¹¹⁵ Lyons, 'Lay female piety', pp 57-75.

overlord.¹¹⁶ In a context in which gift-giving, patronage and membership of confraternities were the norm among aristocratic families in general and within Margaret's immediate family, she was continuing a longstanding tradition associated with women of her standing.

At Maynooth Margaret 'had been brought up in a sophisticated household, one in which the concept of dynasty and family image promoted in part through artistic patronage, was seen as key'.¹¹⁷ Her brother, Gareth Oge, was a forward-thinking and industrious earl, who took a very active personal interest in the management of his lordship. Part of this involved establishing a chantry college of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Maynooth in 1518.¹¹⁸ While Gareth promoted his dynasty through 'the concoction of ever grander pedigrees',¹¹⁹ Margaret's influence is also evident in the commissioning of a several cenotaphs of her husband's ancestors family in the old Butler seat at 'Gowran and in the Cathedral of St Canice in Kilkenny'.¹²⁰ Whereas this form of patronage and benefaction may have been primarily pious or even noble in intent, given Margaret's very active and assertive role in ensuring and seeking proof of her husband's legitimacy and succession rights to the earldom from the early days of her marriage, such patronage is entirely fitting with the astute political mind and character of the countess of Ormond. The attention and benefaction which she bestowed on her husband's lineage and heritage demonstrated her commitment to 'perpetuate

¹¹⁶ Mary Ann Lyons, 'Sidelights on the Kildare ascendancy: a survey of Geraldine involvement in the church, c.1470–c.1520' in *Archivium Hibernicum*, xlviii (1994), pp 73-87.

¹¹⁷ Colm Lennon, 'The Fitzgeralds of Kildare and the building of a dynastic image' in William Nolan and Thomas McGrath (eds), *Kildare history and society* (Dublin, 2006), pp 195-212.

¹¹⁸ Mary Ann Lyons, 'The foundation of the Geraldine College of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Maynooth, in 1518' in *Kildare Arch. Soc. Jn.*, xviii, pt. ii (1994-5), pp 134-50.

¹¹⁹ Rachel Moss, 'Planters of great civilite': female patrons of the arts in late medieval Ireland' in Theresa Martin (ed.), *Reassessing the roles of women as 'makers' of medieval art and architecture* (Leiden, 2012), pp 275-308.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

the status and good name of the family'¹²¹ and 'was of equal importance and sometimes possibly greater importance than pious intentions.'¹²² According to Edwin C. Rae in his study of sixteenth-century cenotaphs and burial tombs, which include Butler heraldry, only the burial tomb of Piers and Margaret retains a surviving inscription and 'it is generally accepted that the Butlers were the patrons of these eight or so monuments.'¹²³ This resonates with the depiction of Margaret as the 'builder countess'¹²⁴, reflecting her strategic patronage of cenotaphs, tombs, and a school. Furthermore, in bringing craftsmen from Flanders to Kilkenny, Margaret demonstrated her keen awareness of trends and industry outside of Ireland.

Given that their childhood was spent at Maynooth castle, both she and her brother were exposed to an affluent, modern aristocratic and cultural life. The inventory of Gareth Oge's library and personal possessions recorded in 1518 'is a testament to the refined background from which she came.'¹²⁵ The inventory listed vast amounts of jewellery and plate upon which the Kildare heraldic arms were displayed, and much of which had originated on the Continent. According to Mary Ann Lyons 'the Fitzgeralds were unique in being able, by virtue of their wealth, and contacts, to compile a remarkable library by Irish standards at Maynooth and this consisted of a substantial collection of devotional and secular literary works'.¹²⁶ Margaret's 'familiarity with such luxuries doubtless left an impression.'¹²⁷ Aside from her patronage of continental craftsmen in Kilkenny, the Great Parchment Book of

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Edwin C. Rae, 'Irish sepulchral monuments of the late middle ages. Part 1: the Ormond group' in *R. S. A. I. Jn.*, c (1970), pp 1-38.

¹²⁴ Moss, "Planters of great civilite", pp 275-308.

¹²⁵ *Crown survey of lands, 1540-41*, ed. Mac Niocaill, pp 237-357.

¹²⁶ Lyons, 'Sidelights on the Kildare ascendancy', pp 73-87.

¹²⁷ Moss, "Planters of great civilite", pp 275-308.

Waterford contains details of a purchase of foreign items shortly before her death. In a lavish demonstration of patronage shortly before she died in 1542, she donated funds to the cathedral in Waterford for a set of vestments to be purchased in Flanders, ‘whereby Gods divine service might the more honourably be set forth in the church’.¹²⁸

As discussed in chapter one, for aristocratic women whether in Ireland, England or continental Europe, widowhood was frequently the apogee of their careers as wives, mothers and aristocrats. In August 1539, less than two years after Piers Butler was invested as earl of Ormond at Windsor castle, he died in Kilkenny, at Pottlerath.¹²⁹ For Margaret, this next phase of her life not only elevated her in a position of greater prominence; it afforded her the opportunity to further develop her own political and private influence. Writing about French aristocratic women in this period, Evergates has observed that ‘in the absence of their husbands, by either distance or death, aristocratic wives exercised autonomous control over children and family lands.’¹³⁰ This was true in the case of Margaret, but in this regard, she was by no means unique. For instance, in 1587 James Aylmer of County Meath left precise instructions for his wife to continue to hold the manor court on his estate after his death.¹³¹ Equally, in 1501 in England Sir John Sapcotes gave his widow full authority to dispose of his plate, chattles and goods, and to do as she wished with the remainder of his property and goods.¹³²

¹²⁸ *The Great Parchment Book of Waterford: Liber Antiquissimuss Civitatis Waterfordiae*, ed. Niall J. Byrne (Dublin, 1997), p. 10.

¹²⁹ *Cal. Ormond deeds*, ed. Curtis, iv (1509-47) nos 239, 242; Graves & Prim, *History & antiquities of the cathedral church of St Canice, Kilkenny*, pp 232-46.

¹³⁰ Evergates (ed.), *Aristocratic women in medieval France*, p. 72.

¹³¹ *Cal. Inquisitions*, ed. Griffith, p. 277.

¹³² Will of Sir John Sapcotes, 1501 (TNA, PROB 11/12/21 (1501)).

As executors of their husband's wills, aristocratic widows (in their capacities as guardians of their children and simultaneously estate managers) were often more influential than at any other time in their lives. Widowhood frequently provided women with the potential to make significant intervention and decisions that could profoundly shape the preservation and welfare of their families. During her long marriage of fifty-four years, Margaret Fitzgerald had acquired considerable public and private experience of business, politics, and financial knowledge, together with insights into the machinations of various social and familial relationships and networks within the political nexus of early sixteenth-century Ireland. According to McKenna, after the death of Piers Butler, 'the rule of the counties of Kilkenny and Tipperary was committed to the government of the Ladie Dowager of Ormond, and Sir Richard Butler her second son and others'.¹³³ The wording of Piers's last will and testament attests to his acknowledgment of his wife as his successor. He wished to 'appoint and constitute Margaret Fitzgerald my lawful wife, James and Richard my sons, my joint executors, the inventory or sum of my goods moveable and immoveable I leave to be made at the discretion of Margaret my wife'.¹³⁴

During her widowhood, Margaret was said to have spent her time 'most godly, in contemplation and prayer'.¹³⁵ According to historian Patrick Corish, in late medieval Ireland, 'investigating lay piety is a notoriously difficult undertaking'.¹³⁶ While women did participate in religious culture and institutions in a variety of different circumstances throughout the later

¹³³ Cited in MacKenna, 'Was there a political role for women in medieval Ireland?' p. 171.

¹³⁴ Graves & Prim, *The history, architecture & antiquities of the cathedral church of St Canice, Kilkenny*, p. 245.

¹³⁵ Robert Rothe's Register or Pedigree of the house of Ormond, 1616 (TCD, MS. 842, f. 156r.).

¹³⁶ Patrick Corish, 'Women and religious practice' in MacCurtain & O'Dowd (eds), *Women in early modern Ireland*, pp 212-22.

medieval period, there are scant records of their individual personal piety.¹³⁷ When Gormlaith, wife of Aed son of Niall son of Con, died in 1524, she was remembered as a ‘charitable, humane, generous woman, to whom God gave a fair good name in this world and surely the true kingdom hereafter’.¹³⁸ One rare example of a fifteenth-century Irish woman’s piety highlights similarities in devotional practices across the ethnic divide. Describing the pious observance of Olaidh Ó Ceallaigh of County Galway, a contemporary poem recounts how ‘in the presence of holy monuments she bows her head and is ever checking her senses; she leaves her psalter unopened till she has first instructed her family in God’s love’.¹³⁹ Closer to the Ormond circle, Renalda Ní Bhriain, mistress of John Butler, sixth earl of Ormond, entered the abbey of Killone where she became abbess during her widowhood. Margaret did not, however, devote all of her time to prayer and contemplation. When Piers died in 1539 she was in her late sixties. Yet despite her age, she remained focused on maintaining what she and Piers had fought for and achieved. She took several steps to secure her position and that of her son, James. While she was chief executrix of her husband’s will, James received all of his father’s ‘castles towns and manors’.¹⁴⁰ Margaret ensured that she was provided with one third of the will. In May 1540, an indenture which ‘delivers to James 100 Irish milch Kine and 24 stud mares’ was drafted. It also stipulated that the countess ‘shall hold during her natural life the castles towns and manors of Donmore, and castles at Donfert, Bennetsbridge, Ballykyve and Whittisbrowneston in Kilkenny and Tolloo and Bynecorre in

¹³⁷ Diane Hall, *Women and the church in medieval Ireland, c.1140–1540* (Dublin, 2003), p. 21. For a detailed study of medieval and early modern Irish women’s piety see Bronagh MacShane, ‘The roles and representations of women in religious change and conflict in Leinster and South-East Munster, c.1560–c.1641’ (unpublished PhD thesis, Maynooth University, 2015).

¹³⁸ *Annals of Connacht, 1224–1544*, ed. A.M. Freeman (Dublin, 1944, reprint 1970), p. 653.

¹³⁹ *Aithdioghluim dana, A miscellany of Irish bardic poems*, ed. and trans. L. McKenna (2 vols, Dublin, 1939, 1940), i, 26.

¹⁴⁰ *Cal. Ormond deeds*, ed. Curtis, iv (1509–1547), p. 194.

Carlow and Killenale in Tipperary'.¹⁴¹ In the presence of Walter Cowley, son of Robert Cowley (the countess's trusted servant), the recorder of Waterford city and the dean and chancellor of Ossory, this legal instrument was drafted, undoubtedly at Margaret's behest, as she sought to guarantee her rights and privileges as dowager countess. Feeling more secure having received this indenture, she was prepared to demonstrate to the king that she supported her son's claim: two months later, on 8 July 1540, she wrote to King Henry VIII. While she assured him that he was in her prayers and that she beseeched the 'blessed trinity [to] preserve your most Royall Person long and triumphantly to reigne with moche victory'¹⁴², she explained that her motive in writing the letter was to impress upon him, her son and heir James's succession as second earl of Ossory and ninth earl of Ormond, and her family's established and continued support for the Crown. On that occasion, she presented Henry with two goshawks as gifts. Margaret's personal communication with the king highlights her respected position and influence within her family and within the earldom, and how she maintained a relationship with the Crown long after the death of her brother and the execution of her seven Geraldine kinsmen in 1535. The letter is one of only two extant pieces of writing from the countess and as such merits quotation:

Pleas it to your mooste excellent Highnes to be advertised that lyke as my Lord my husband, whose sowle Jhesu rest, at tymes delytid to provide suche pleasure in this land, as sholde be acceptable to your Majestie, soo, in semblable wise, do I recounis myself moche boundyn to declare my hart and duetie towardis Your grace of like sorte and dispocission. And having sentunto your Highnes, by this berrer to goshawkys, to be delyverid unto

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Margaret Fitzgerald dowager countess of Ormond, to King Henry VIII, 1540 in *S.P. Henry VIII*, ii, 222.

Your Majestie as of my pore gifte for lacke of any convenient thingm at this tyme, being in my dispocission to be presented unto Your Grace; in mooste humble wise I beseche Your highness to accept the same in goode parte, not agreant too see unmete a gifte or present sent to soo mightie a Prynce, but as in respect of my hart and intente towardis Your Majestie, whos Grace it may please graciously to accepte the same as proceeding of a confydent boldness. And thus the Blissed Trinite preserve your mooste Royall Person long and tryumphauntly to reigne with moche victory.¹⁴³

Three months earlier, on 20 April, the countess had written from Kilkenny castle to Lord Thomas Cromwell, Lord Privy Seal, on behalf of her niece's husband. Her letter reveals a confident, articulate woman. It also provides evidence that despite having severed all ties with her brother, the earl of Kildare, over two decades earlier, she had maintained her connections with female members of her natal family. Two years before her death, Margaret sought royal assistance for the son-in-law of her younger sister, Lady Ellice Fitzgerald. After thanking Lord Cromwell for his 'manifold goodness' she continued,

I pray you to be good lord to one Gerald Flemyng, my niece's husband, who has done right acceptable service to the King at sundry times, especially in the company of the Lord Deputy [Grey], at this last encountering with O' Neile and O' Donyll. I have always found you especial good lord to my Lord my husband, late deceased, and to myself.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Margaret Fitzgerald dowager countess of Ormond to Thomas Cromwell, 20 Apr. 1540, *Cal. Carew MSS* (1515–1574), doc. 144.

Meanwhile, she was faced with challenges closer to home. In March 1542 three royal judges were appointed to arbitrate between Margaret and her son, James, in a dispute regarding exact delineation of her jointure. This was by no means unusual, with widows and sons frequently finding themselves locked in legal disputes over succession or other matters concerning wills. For instance, sometime about the year 1555 in County Meath, Dame Jenet Sarsfield, third wife of the Lord Chancellor of Ireland Thomas Cusack, became embroiled in litigation with his children over his will, and in particular his son, Edward Cusack. Similar cases were also common in England. Margaret, dowager marchioness of Dorset, noted that when she was in conflict with her son and heir, 'his well doing is and shall be the comfort and maintenance of all the residue of my children'.¹⁴⁵ Also in England, in 1528 Sir Gilbert Tailbois fought with his mother over his inheritance. When he petitioned Wolsey for assistance, his mother, Lady Elizabeth Tailbois, reminded the cardinal that her son already held a very substantial income and her priority was the welfare of her other children.¹⁴⁶

Relations between Margaret and James remained uneasy for the remainder of her lifetime. Further litigation doubtless caused stress and uncertainty for Margaret. The litigious nature of their relationship in her later years was important in shaping the Ormond succession. The three judges involved in the 1542 settlement were the chief justice of the King's Bench Sir Gerald Aylmer of Donadea County Kildare, Sir Thomas Luttrell, knight and also chief justice of the common pleas, and Thomas Howth, secretary justice of the said bench.¹⁴⁷ The hearing took place on 24 March, just five months before the countess died. A bond was struck between Margaret and James, compelling the latter to abide by the ruling concerning the

¹⁴⁵ Lady Margaret Grey, marchioness of Dorset, to Thomas Cromwell, February 1534 (TNA, SP 1/ 82, f.158).

¹⁴⁶ Lady Elizabeth Tailbois to Cardinal Wolsey, 1528 (TNA, SP 1/48, f.165).

¹⁴⁷ *Cal.Ormond deeds*, ed. Curtis, iv (1509–47), 216.

countess's possession of 'Bellaragged, Donaghmore, the Fenans and ballyrahen'.¹⁴⁸ These specific castles and manor houses appeared on numerous occasions in deeds to which Margaret and Piers Butler were parties during their married years. The manor house of Dunmore was especially important to Margaret as it had become the couple's primary residence after Kilkenny castle. The countess was intent on retaining possession of this property and its continued ownership until her death. Harris has noted how husbands' willingness to give their widows 'possession of their chief mansions usually marked the end of long marriages marked by affectionate relationships and successful working partnerships'.¹⁴⁹ She has also highlighted how aristocratic women frequently used their own wealth to 'mute the primogenital bias of the law'.¹⁵⁰ In Margaret's case this is evident in her organisation of the indenture involving the three aforementioned judges. Indeed, after such a long marriage, Margaret's influence and authority as a widow testified to the success of her long career as wife of the earl. Her political astuteness and able fulfilment of her multiple roles as mother, wife, and widow, demonstrated the extensive knowledge, experience and networking abilities within various circles, especially those involving her husband, that she developed during her marriage. These experiences and skills proved vital in enabling her to cope with the challenges she faced as widow and as the figure at the centre of her late husband's patrilineage.

As widow and dowager countess intent upon ensuring that the earldom maintained its value and continued to produce its returns, Margaret proved an able administrator. Undoubtedly, her experience in running the estates alongside her husband and her active role in building up and maintaining the earldom through successive crises, both private and political, were vital

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ Harris, *English aristocratic women*, p. 134.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

to her success. Among contemporaries, ranging from Stanihurst to the peasants of Kilkenny, it was Margaret who was recognised as the strong party in the marriage, and the political brains behind her husband's rise to power. Writing in the nineteenth century Graves echoed Stanihurst's praise:

Large is the place filled by the Red Earl, in the history of Ireland, it is a singular fact that in the traditions of the peasantry of Kilkenny, his existence is utterly forgotten whilst his consorts stands vividly forth as the 'Countess' or often as plain 'Mairgread Gearoid' forming with Cromwell and the Danes a triad to whom almost everything marvellous, cunning or cruel is attributed.¹⁵¹

But positive as the description may seem, Graves counter-balances it by emphasising her responsibility for 'everything marvellous cunning or cruel' in the Ormond lordship. The Ormond deeds include the following example of the countess exercising her authority in such a manner in autumn 1540: 'Lady Margaret Countesse of Ormond hath taken the corne that grewe upon the said land of Donmore where she reked the same and putt it to her own use, which land at this day Gerald Blanchvilde is tenants of Killmodymock do sowe'.¹⁵² That this occurred after the death of her husband highlights Margaret asserting her authority over her tenants and sending a message to all tenants at that time of transition and as a widow was now in charge, her authority should not and would not be challenged by anyone. Margaret was clearly capable of exercising her authority arbitrarily, making her interventions unpopular and unwelcome among her tenants. Significantly, within the same deed, it is recorded that there had never previously been difficulties between these tenants and the Butlers for as long as any Butler seneschal sat at the manor of Dunmore.

¹⁵¹ Graves & Prim, *The history, architecture & antiquities of the cathedral church of St Canice, Kilkenny*, p. 248.

¹⁵² *Cal. Ormond deeds*, ed. Curtis, iv (1509–47), 122.

Jo Ann McNamara and Suzanne Wemple have argued that for the aristocracy as a class to be considered successful in a climate of significant political developments, ‘this broad political change was accomplished largely at the expense of aristocratic women’.¹⁵³ The influence that Margaret Fitzgerald exerted over her husband and brother during the first thirty years of the sixteenth century demonstrates that this aristocratic woman was anything but a fragile pawn whose position was wholly dictated by the decisions of her kinsmen. Margaret resourcefully utilised her noble status and her gender to circumvent many of the constraints she encountered, to effectively carve out for herself an exceptional individual public, private and political identity recognised, by contemporaries of various social ranks. That her status and influence increased during her widowhood is testimony to how her privileged position was not solely dependent upon her husband. In this regard, she resembled Grace O’Malley and Agnes Campbell in Ulster ‘who led lordships and engaged in piracy and political intrigue.’¹⁵⁴ Harris states that ‘the men who empowered their widows to assume critical functions for their families after they died relied on the skills the women had developed during their marriages’.¹⁵⁵ This was true in the case of Piers and Margaret as despite having to contend with opposition from her brother and later her son and heir, Margaret’s administration of the Ormond estates resembled that of aristocratic widows in general for whom the experience ‘amplified their responsibility for the future prosperity of their husband’s patrilineages’.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵³ McNamara & Wemple, ‘The power of women’, pp 126-41.

¹⁵⁴ Moss, ‘Planters of great civilite’, pp 275-308. Agnes Campbell’s daughter, Finola Campbell, wife of Niall Garbh O’Domhnaill of Tyrconnell, engaged with her husband’s political affairs in the name of bringing peace to their lordship, and ‘took up with her husband’s foe whilst he was incarcerated’: see Elizabeth Fitzpatrick, ‘Mairgreag an-Einingh Ó Cearbhaill, ‘the best woman of the Gaidhil’” in *Kildare Arch. Soc. Jn.*, xviii (1992-93), pp 20-38.

¹⁵⁵ Harris, *English aristocratic women*, p. 160.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

Writing to Henry VIII on 27 August 1542, the Lord Deputy of Ireland, Anthony St. Leger, broke the news to the king that ‘the olde ladie of Ormonde is deceased’.¹⁵⁷ On 9 August 1542 Margaret Fitzgerald, countess of Ormond and Ossory, died intestate at Kilkenny. She is buried in St Canice’s cathedral in Kilkenny alongside her husband in a double tomb, which portrays equality between man and wife, at least in death (see fig. 2). The commissioning of this substantial tomb may have been intended to confirm ‘her husband’s place within an ancient lineage.’¹⁵⁸ Margaret’s effigy is

... clad in a supertunic with sleeves and skirt of ample width. The collar is made low and falls back over the shoulders the dress is confined at the waist by a girdle the end of which richly jewelled and embroidered depends below the knee on the head is worn the horned head dress with its richly articulated caul for the hair over which appears the elaborately embroidered coverchef depending in folds to the shoulders and supported at each side by small figures of angels.¹⁵⁹

Historian Elizabeth Wincott Heckett, argues that Margaret’s headdress (see fig. 4) was no longer current among upper-class ‘European’ circles at the time of her death and instead, had unique developments specific to aristocratic women in sixteenth century Ireland.¹⁶⁰ While

¹⁵⁷ Lord Deputy Anthony St Leger to Henry VIII, 27 Aug. 1542 in *S. P. Henry VIII*, iii, 411.

¹⁵⁸ Elizabeth Wincott Heckett, ‘The Margaret Fitzgerald tomb effigy, a late medieval headdress and gown in St. Canice’s cathedral, Kilkenny’ in Desiree G. Koslin and Janet E. Snyder (eds), *Encountering medieval textiles and dress* (New York, 2002), pp 209-22.

¹⁵⁹ Graves & Prim, *The history, architecture & antiquities of the cathedral church of St Canice, Kilkenny*, p. 183. (see fig. 3)

¹⁶⁰ Elizabeth Wincott Heckett, ‘Tomb effigies and archaic dress in sixteenth-century Ireland’ in Catherine Richardson (ed.), *Clothing culture, 1350–1650* (Aldershot, 2004), pp 63-75; eadem, ‘Town and country: an overview of Irish archaeological cloth and clothing, 1550–1850’ in Audrey Horning *et al.* (eds), *Post-medieval archaeology* (Dublin, 2007), p. 464; Susan Flavin, *Consumption and culture in sixteenth-century Ireland: saffron, stockings and silk* (Woodbridge, 2014), p. 75.

similar to early fourteenth century European styles, the 'Irish' style had developed differently, the cloth between the horns being quite distinctive from other examples. According to Heckett, this fashion may have been adopted to represent the conservatism often displayed by aristocrats anxious to convey their independence in defining their identity and an affirmation of their status in society. The year of the countess's death was never inserted; the sculptor appears to have been interrupted in his work as the words *ix die augusti* are merely traced on the stone.

Margaret Fitzgerald, the first Irish-born countess of Ormond since Elizabeth Darcy, second countess (b. 1332 at Platten, County Meath) was one of Ireland's leading aristocratic women in the sixteenth century. She was frequently implicated in contests and campaigns involving aristocratic and political power and its distribution, which took her well beyond the domestic sphere that was the bailiwick of the majority of her peers in Ireland, England and continental European society. While necessarily recognising her exceptional standing and influence, this reconstruction of the life of Margaret Fitzgerald illuminates many previously underexplored dimensions to the lives and experiences of aristocratic women in general in late medieval Ireland. Clearly Margaret emulated her father in policy, shrewdness and strength of character and deployed those skills and aptitudes to advance the position of Ireland's other leading aristocratic dynasty. She played an important role in ensuring the preservation of the house of Ormond while her own ancestral dynasty collapsed dramatically in the 1530s, a blow from which it only ever partially recovered. Having dedicated herself to the consolidation of the earldom as countess of Ormond, she set the example and challenge for her children to maintain their parent's achievements throughout the first half of the sixteenth century. The success of her role as mother, countess and widow, was a crucial contribution to the next

generation of Ormond women. The following chapter explores how her daughters responded to that challenge.



The Ormond women: family, power and politics

c.1450s–1660

by

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Chapter 5

Family, marriage and politics: the six daughters of Margaret Fitzgerald and Piers Ruadh Butler and the ongoing revival of the earldom in the sixteenth century

Matrimonial alliances have always played a vital part in securing and advancing the interests of aristocratic dynasties which relied on (and at times exploited) both sons and daughters to achieve those ends. In sixteenth-century Ireland aristocratic marriage norms and expectations were on the one hand unique owing to the coexistence of Gaelic and Old English social orders, but on the other hand, the negotiations and expectations around carefully arranged aristocratic marriages in Ireland bore several striking similarities with practices in England and throughout continental Europe. Barbara Harris in her studies of English aristocratic women between 1450 and 1550 has concluded that the assets and roles women brought to their affinal families generally helped transform business-like arranged unions into effective and successful relationships over time. As wives, Harris argues, these women ‘encompassed and shaped both the emotional and material dimensions of their lives’.¹ Writing about French aristocratic women in the same period historian Donna Bohanon observes that ‘in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the number of endogamous marriages grew as noble families began to select partners from the growing middle class group’.² The social and financial status of the families of both partners was key, particularly in France where according to Bohanon, the approach to marriage was exceptionally utilitarian.

¹ Harris, *English aristocratic women*, p. 87.

² Donna Bohanon, *Crown and nobility in early modern France* (Hong Kong, 2001), p. 8.

In England, according to Harris, when aristocratic parents arranged their daughters' marriages, their 'ultimate goal was to secure sons-in-law from families with more assets than their own'.³ Furthermore, if they succeeded in arranging a propitious marriage, their position at court could be strengthened. However, Harris cautions that while the majority of Yorkist and early Tudor aristocratic women married men whom their fathers had chosen, there was no one 'simple or universal model of aristocratic marriage or wifehood in Yorkist or early Tudor England'.⁴ During this period the term 'preferment' emphasised the importance of marriage as a means to ensuring successful futures for their daughters and their families, although interestingly as the following examination of the marriages of these Ormond noble women will show, it was their status that enhanced the standing and influence of the men they married.

In English society, 'the daughters and wives of noblemen and knights [aristocratic families] experienced their identity as women, through the prism of class'.⁵ Because of their class, these women brought equilibrium to their affinal families. Aristocratic women as daughters relied firstly on their fathers to provide their dowries, and following their marriage, as wives, they relied on their husbands to ensure their jointures were respected and protected. Harris notes that this dependence on male members of their families for both financial and legal security and provision enabled those men to exploit their daughters, wives, and sisters for their own ends while ignoring the individual woman's choice of marriage partner. In essence, for aristocratic women in general, 'the arranged marriage encapsulated the way in which

³ Harris, *English aristocratic women*, p. 44.

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 87.

⁵ *Ibid*, p. 242.

gender and class converged to shape women's experience and subjectivity'.⁶ This was also true for aristocratic women in Ireland.

Historian Mavis E. Mate, also writing about English aristocratic women, highlights how 'a woman would nearly always be identified by the stage in her life cycle *vis-à-vis* her marriage, a single woman or virgin, a wife or a widow'.⁷ Once married, aristocratic daughters in general, brought resources from their birth family to their new affinal families. While these were usually economic, Harris contends that 'their crucial capital was [in fact] their father's political influence or high rank'.⁸ She also asserts that as they transferred resources between families, aristocratic women 'encouraged men to exploit them for their own purposes',⁹ including their father, brothers, husbands and 'the king himself'.¹⁰ Gareth Mor Fitzgerald's treatment of his daughter, Margaret, in his efforts to forge a relationship between the Kildare and Ormond dynasties, bears out the accuracy of Harris's contention that 'the very importance of aristocratic women's marriages contributed to their subjection as daughters'.¹¹ Gareth Mor, like all of his peers, arranged advantageous marriages for 'five of his six daughters from his first marriage'¹² while 'most of his seven sons from his second marriage also made politically important marriages'.¹³ His offspring's unions served to bolster his dynasty's assets and influence within English areas of Ireland, and to extend the orbit of his authority into Gaelic regions of the lordship. Piers Butler and his wife did the same, arranging

⁶ Ibid, p. 242-3.

⁷ Mavis E. Mate, *Daughters, wives and widows after the Black Death: women in Sussex, 1350–1535* (New York, 1998), p. 3.

⁸ Ibid, p. 43.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ellis, 'Fitzgerald, Gerald, eighth earl of Kildare'.

¹³ Ibid.

unions for their three sons and six daughters with the intention of ensuring the stability, legitimacy and relative prosperity of the Ormond dynasty.

The long marriage of the eighth earl and countess of Ormond (1485–1539) produced nine children, six daughters and three sons – Margaret, Katherine, Ellen, Joan, Eleanor and Ellice, James, Richard and Thomas. A brief review of the marriage alliances of the three Butler sons including James, heir to the dynasty, reveals some of the motivations behind the unions negotiated for the sons of Margaret and Piers and provides a useful basis for a gendered analysis of this generation's marriages.

In 1530 James, the eldest son and first child, married Joan Fitzgerald, daughter and sole heir of James Fitzgerald, tenth earl of Desmond (d.1529).¹⁴ For Piers Butler, this marriage offered several advantages. Not only did it bring an end to decades of Desmond raids into Ormond territories; it bolstered Piers's position against the Kildare Fitzgeralds at a time when he 'was under severe pressure from Geraldine alliances on two fronts, owing to Kildare's insistent raiding to the north'.¹⁵ In contrast with Kildare, Piers and his wife enjoyed the king's favour, having being recognised as earl and countess of Ossory in 1528 just three years after the earl had accused the two Geraldine earls of conspiracy with the French candidate for the English throne. Thus, the marriage was more than a show of defiance to Gareth Oge Fitzgerald; it was one in a sequence of calculated steps aimed at increasing Piers's political advantage over his Geraldine rivals.

¹⁴ David Edwards, 'Butler, James, ninth earl of Ormond and second earl of Ossory (b. in or after 1496, d. 1546)' in *ODNB*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, 2006 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/4189> [19 Apr. 2016]].

¹⁵ Lennon, *Sixteenth-century Ireland*, p. 98.

Piers and Margaret's second son, Richard, married three times. His first wife was his cousin, Eleanor Butler of Neigham, County Kilkenny, whom he married sometime before 1523. It is likely that Eleanor and his second wife, the heiress Catherine Barnewall of County Meath pre-deceased him.¹⁶ His third wife, Lady Ann Plunkett, 'from whom he was divorced in the first year of his marriage', was daughter and heiress of Lord Killeen: they married in 1541.¹⁷ Richard's first marriage settled decades of internal family strife, as Eleanor's father Theobald and his brother Edmund, brothers of Piers Butler, had both challenged Piers's claim to the earldom for decades, and only conceded to him in 1523, just before Richard's marriage to Eleanor. The marriage secured a claim for Eleanor to Butler lands and titles and this most likely contributed to her father and uncle dropping their rival claims. Richard had five sons and four daughters from his three marriages; Edmund was his son by Eleanor Butler.¹⁸ Thomas, the youngest of the three Butler sons, married Elizabeth Sutton, daughter of Sir Edward Sutton, second Baron of Dudley (d.1532)¹⁹ who 'enjoyed some favour under Henry VIII, including the chamberlainship to Princess Mary from 1525 to 1528'.²⁰ The couple had one daughter, Elizabeth.²¹ However, while in his thirties Thomas was murdered at the hands of his uncle, Gareth Fitzgerald, at Ballykealy County Kilkenny at the end of 1532.²²

At a time when in England the Dudleys and Seymours were among the leading families who strongly supported the Henrician reformation, in Ireland, Thomas Butler's older brother

¹⁶ Lodge, *The peerage of Ireland*, iv, 23.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid, p. 27.

¹⁹ Simon Adams, 'Sutton, Edward, fourth Baron Dudley (c.1515–1586)' in *ODNB*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, 2015 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/8148> [7 May 2016]].

²⁰ Ibid. Dudley had been knight of the bath at the coronation of Henry's mother Queen Elizabeth in 1487, and knight of the garter in 1509.

²¹ Lodge, *The peerage of Ireland*, iv, 27.

²² *S. P. Henry VIII*, ii, pt. iii, 157-8 cited in Graves & Prim, *The history, architecture & antiquities of the cathedral church of St Canices, Kilkenny*, pp 239-41.

James, 'continued to plough an anti-papal line' in support of the king. Thomas's marriage to the daughter of the Baron of Dudley was important in signalling support among the Butlers for the Henrician reforms, keeping them in the king's favour. Piers and Margaret's selection of an English bride for their youngest son is also significant, demonstrating their concern to forge unions with aristocratic families in Tudor England.

Of the three Butler sons' marriages, one linked two of the principal earldoms in Ireland, a second joined branches within the extended Butler family, while the third created a direct connection to the court and to the king. When it came to choosing marriage partners for their daughters, Piers and Margaret were motivated by precisely the same considerations.

However, unlike their sons, five of the ten marriages contracted for the Butler daughters were to men from Gaelic families; the remaining five were to aristocratic men of Old English families in Ireland. In the bigger scheme of dynastic calculations, the Butler sons were clearly prioritised for marriages with women from similar Old English family status and the mixed ethnic backgrounds of the daughters' husband's points to Piers's and Margaret's careful strategic planning across the Irish political nexus. The Ormond women's marriages therefore contributed significantly to dynastic consolidation and advancement. Consequently, they will now be analysed as aristocratic women in the context of aristocratic women in not only Ireland but also England. Mary O'Dowd notes that 'the political potential of noblewomen as prospective marriage partners was crucial for the balance of power in early sixteenth century Ireland'²³ and the lives of these six Ormond women – as this chapter seeks to show – vividly demonstrate the generational differences that marked them apart from their parents and previous generations. By examining the importance of marriage alliances, the various roles of women within the family, and their potential and recognition as influential advocates for their

²³ O'Dowd, *A history of women in Ireland*, p. 11.

male relatives, this chapter highlights significant developments and progressions in the lives of these Ormond women specifically, and of aristocratic women more broadly in Ireland throughout the first half of the sixteenth century. Of course, there were major contemporaneous changes to the political order in Ireland, and by the end of their lifetimes in which marriages were crucial to the maintenance and advancement of the house of Ormond, ‘Tudor centralisation of government gradually eroded the importance of dynastic politics’.²⁴ The political influence of this generation of Ormond women is assessed in the case of Katherine Butler. Whether history has represented her fairly or whether her sex resulted in undue criticism because she was firstly a woman and secondly, ruled in her son’s minority, is explored. Apart from Carol O’Connor’s recent study of the lives of Kildare women,²⁵ the scant attention afforded women in historical narrative covering the period before 1800 has left a significant lacuna in scholarship. By examining their marriages and – where possible – stages in their individual lifecycles, this chapter explores ways in which aristocratic women made notable impacts on their family’s histories through their roles as daughters, wives, mothers and widows. In this context, and where sources permit, their aristocratic upbringing and expectations, along with their standing, influence, and reputation are examined. Since in Ireland Gaelic women lived under Brehon law and their Old English counterparts were bound by common law, marriage across the ethnic divide occasioned a unique point of interface between the two as ‘these different codes and traditions met and overlapped’.²⁶ O’Dowd has emphasised how ‘the Butler and Fitzgerald women operated in the hybrid world of Hiberno-Norman and Gaelic lordships and were accustomed to utilising a mixture of English and Irish law’.²⁷ The majority of the Butler sisters’ marriages were unions with

²⁴ Ibid, p. 10.

²⁵ O’Connor, ‘The Kildare women’.

²⁶ Kenny, *Anglo-Irish & Gaelic women in Ireland*, p. 53.

²⁷ O’Dowd, *A history of women in Ireland*, p. 21.

Gaelic families including the O'Briens of Thomond, the O'Moores of Leix and the MacGillapatricks of Ossory. This was not a new departure: as already highlighted in chapter two, there were previous instances of unions that crossed the divide, notably between John, sixth earl of Ormond and Renalda Ní Bhriain during the 1460s. Indeed, the influence of Gaelic female ancestors upon the fortunes of the Ormond dynasty was documented in a seventeenth-century bardic poem in which cultural differences within the dynasty were explicitly remarked; 'on the female side from our race comes Thomas Earl of Ormond, from our stock also sprang the race of the bold Fitzgeralds descended from our womenfolk'.²⁸ In sixteenth-century Ireland intermarriage between Old English and Gaelic families was 'as a means of procuring truces through alliances which would then end periods of warfare'²⁹, 'the Dillons and Nugents both middle-ranking Pale landholders, being notable among those who realised the efficacy of intermarriage'.³⁰ As previously emphasised Gareth Mor Fitzgerald used his political authority in the lordship to negotiate a suite of propitious marriages for his offspring.³¹ Margaret and Piers continued that practice with their daughters as arranged marriages that crossed the ethnic divide were vital in creating and maintaining alliances. From the perspective of Gaelic families, not only did such marriages provide 'a respite from [Old English] raids',³² they were vital in creating networks and 'building up powerful allies'.³³ The O'Carrolls and O'Connor Falys, high-ranking Gaelic Irish families in the Midlands, married several of their offspring into Old English families, including Tadgh O'

²⁸ *Iomarbhaigh na bhFileadh; The Contention of the The Bards*, ed. Lambert McKenna (2 vols, 1918), no. xxix, verse 33, 11, 246, cited in Simms, 'Bards & barons', pp 193-4.

²⁹ Gillian Kenny, 'When two worlds collide: Marriage and the law in medieval Ireland' in Cordelia Beattie and Matthew Frank Stevens (eds), *Married women and the law in pre-modern north-western Europe* (Suffolk, 2013), p. 67.

³⁰ Kenny, *Anglo-Irish & Gaelic women in Ireland*, p. 90.

³¹ See O'Connor, 'The Kildare women'. Other Fitzgerald aunts of the Butler daughters married men from Old English families.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 91.

³³ *Ibid.*

Connor Faly who married a sister of the seventh earl of Kildare, and his sister, Mor O'Connor Faly who married MacWilliam Burke of Clanricarde.³⁴

For the Ormonds in the sixteenth century, contracting marriages with Gaelic partners marked a departure from previous generations when there had been a dearth of daughters and when as only English noblemen were considered as spouses, the women either moved to or were born and lived in England. While none of the marriages of Piers and Margaret's daughters matched their parent's union in terms of impact on the Ormond dynasty's advancement, nevertheless, marriage remained important in shaping the lives and fortunes of this new generation of Butler women.

Gillian Kenny contends that down to the mid- and late sixteenth century, the 'majority of intermarriages between Gaelic and Anglo-Irish took place far from the centre of English administration in Dublin'.³⁵ While such marriages were strictly disapproved of by the Crown since the statutes of Kilkenny (1366) had stated 'no alliance by marriage, gossipryd, fostering of children, concubinage or amour or in any other manner be henceforth made between the English and the Irish on the one side or the other',³⁶ in reality prohibitions were widely ignored because 'the government had no effective means of enforcing its strictures in this matter'.³⁷ For instance, in 1531 in County Meath, one Edward Nugent married a Gaelic woman, Owny Niny Molloy³⁸. The king initially took possession of Nugent's lands as punishment for the marriage, but he was later exonerated.³⁹ Clearly there was little if any

³⁴ Ellis, *Tudor Ireland*, p. 90.

³⁵ Gillian Kenny, *Anglo-Irish & Gaelic women in Ireland*, p. 89.

³⁶ *Irish historical documents, 1172–1922*, ed. Edmund Curtis and R.B McDowell (London, 1968), p. 53.

³⁷ Kenny, *Anglo-Irish & Gaelic women in Ireland*, p. 88.

³⁸ *Cal. Inquisitions*, ed. Griffith, p. 35.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

enforcement of prohibition on intermarriage as by the end of the sixteenth century, a daughter of another Nugent, Thomas Nugent, married one Philip O'Reilly.⁴⁰ In the fifteenth century several members of a branch of the Desmond Geraldines who lived in Allen, County Kildare entered into marriages with Gaelic Irish women including Philip Fitzgerald who married Elizabeth O' Dunne of County Laois, and Richard Fitzgerald who had a daughter who married Hugh O' Coffey of County Westmeath, also in the second half of the fifteenth century.⁴¹

During the 1540s under the policy of surrender and re-grant whereupon Gaelic lords surrendered their titles and lands to the Crown and were re-granted new titles to those lands, many of the Butler women's husbands surrendered their families' ancient lands and ancestral titles. In this new order, no penalty was imposed by the king for such cross-cultural marriages. For example, the Gaelic Barnaby Fitzpatrick, who was the last person with a claim to the ancient kingship of Ossory in County Kilkenny, was married to Piers and Margaret's eldest daughter, Margaret Butler, and became first baron of Upper Ossory following his surrender to the Crown in 1541.⁴² Undoubtedly in the changing political milieu of the 1540s ambitious and opportunistic men like Fitzpatrick astutely recognised the advantages that a propitious marriage could offer. As O' Dowd has argued, 'a wife who could speak English and was literate was a valuable asset to a Gaelic lord'.⁴³

⁴⁰ P. O'Connell, 'The parish of Iniskeen' in *Ríocht na Midhe*, ii, no. 3 (1961), p. 24.

⁴¹ K.W. Nicholls, 'Geraldines of Allen' in *Irish Genealogist*, iv, no. 1 (1968), pp 93-108, 98; see also Mary Ann Lyons, *Church and society in County Kildare, c. 1470-1547* (Dublin, 2000), p. 51.

⁴² David Edwards, 'The MacGiollapadraigs (Fitzpatricks) of Upper Ossory, 1532-1641' in Padraig Lane and William Nolan (eds), *Laois history and society* (Dublin, 1999), pp 327-375.

⁴³ O'Dowd, *A history of women in Ireland*, p. 26.

Being as politically important to their parents as to their future husbands, aristocratic brides played a vital role in realising dynastic strategies to achieve and maintain political equilibrium. The daughters of Piers and Margaret were no exception. In all of their unions, especially those with Gaelic families, the couple's daughters enjoyed privileged status as their parent's representatives just as their mother had done since her marriage in 1485. In keeping with their mother's focus on restoring stability to the earldom and maintaining it, this generation of Butler women all lived and married in Ireland, and in contrast to their female Ormond ancestors, all married men from Gaelic or Old English families. (It should be borne in mind that the last Butler daughter born in Ireland was Lady Elizabeth Butler (*fl.*1420s), daughter of James, fourth earl (d.1452). She married an English man, John Talbot (1413-60), second earl of Shrewsbury).⁴⁴

Each daughter's marriage alliance – if it lasted and was successful – was expected to contribute to the prosperity and political security of the earldom, providing additional men and resources during military campaigns. However, as O'Dowd has emphasised, marriages that spanned the ethnic divide were 'often of a short duration and wives often had little time to develop a strong political presence'.⁴⁵ Hence, the marriages of Butler women and Gaelic men are less revealing than those of their sisters who married into Old English families.

⁴⁴ A.J. Pollard, 'John Talbot, second earl of Shrewsbury and second earl of Waterford (c. 1413–1460)' in *ODNB*, University Press, 2004, online edn 2008 [www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/26933] [12 Feb. 2017]].

⁴⁵ O'Dowd, *A history of women in Ireland*, p. 21.

Aristocratic upbringing in the Ormond patrimony: balancing continuity and change in a modernising Ireland

As the nineteenth century historians James Graves and H.F. Hore emphasise, the *modus operandi* of aristocratic landed estates in Ireland was ‘formed on the plan of royalty itself’,⁴⁶ with dynasties such as the Ormonds, Kildares and Desmonds, like their counterparts in England and continental Europe, living in households akin to small-scale royal courts complete with officers, stewards, seneschal, butlers, clerks and so on. The nine Butler offspring were no exception from their Old English peers or the offspring of Gaelic aristocratic families who, in the course of their upbringing, moved between their parents’ homes and dwellings. The Butler’s moved mostly between Donmore, Ballyragget and Kilkenny castles, their principal residences within the earldom.

Much of what survives in the way of contemporary comment on the upbringing and childhood of the Butler children and of the children of their aristocratic Irish contemporaries, the Desmond and Kildare Fitzgeralds, is inherently critical and hostile. Among a collection of documents bearing no signature and addressed to the king in 1534 (the only contemporary source referring to the early lives of the Butler children) is one titled ‘The state of Ireland during the recall of Kildare from the deputyship’.⁴⁷ The unknown author expressed general dissatisfaction regarding the conduct of Ireland’s leading Old English families, complaining that

the earls of Kildare, Desmond and Ossory, with ther wiffiis, childyrne, and servauntes, do use, afftyr the custumbe and usage off wyld Iryshmen, to come with a gret multitude of peple to monastereis, and gentylnen ys howsis, and ther to contynu

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Unknown author to Henry VIII, November 1534 in *S.P. Henry VIII*, ii, pt. iii, 185.

two dais and two nightes, taking met and drink at ther plesurs, and ther horssis and kepers to be sheiftyd or dyvydyt un the pore fermors, next to that place adjoynyng, paing nothing therfor, so as they be found, in thys maner, in other mens is howsis moo then halff the yere, by the wild irish cusume of extorcion and spare ther own howsis.⁴⁸

This sheds light on the lifestyle to which these aristocratic offspring were accustomed during their childhood and adolescence and also their status and expectations as a noble dynastic family unit, both as the children of the earl and countess of Ormond specifically and as aristocracy in general. Given their upbringing in an aristocratic household, the children were accustomed to practices that were resented as exploitative by the gentry and lower social groups. Notwithstanding disturbances and intrusions caused by these impositions and practices upon the gentry and labourers, the daughters of Margaret Fitzgerald regarded these obligations as their feudal right, as befitted their aristocratic life-styles. As the Butler family travelled, the children not only witnessed, but were clearly influenced by, such practices. In particular Lady Katherine Butler, whose fractious relationship with those on whom she (like her father and mother) made impositions continued these customs into the next generation, during the wardship of her son in the 1530s.⁴⁹ The continuity of such practices from parents to offspring is best represented in the activities of Katherine who of all the Butler children was most impactful in maintaining the customs, traditions and focus on her aristocratic sense of entitlement.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ It is unknown whether the rest of Katherine's siblings with the exception of her brother James ninth earl, practised coign and livery on any scale. That the only extant sources concern Katherine and James, is not sufficient to assume that the other siblings did not at some point practise the same customs.

While hospitality (voluntary or involuntary) was accepted as essential in the political and economic *modus operandi* of Gaelic society in particular, several leading Old English magnates, notably the earls of Ormond and Kildare, practiced coign and livery (imposing one's entire travelling retinue on subordinates). As Colm Lennon argues, 'a sixteenth century lord's power was measured by the extent of his ability to impose this form of exaction, involving both customary and arbitrary dues demanded by intimidation'.⁵⁰ The provision of cuddies, namely a night's supply of food and drink for the lord and his retinue, was similar to the practice of coisir, or provision of adequate feasting for their overlord. Moreover, the billeting of the lord's entire retinue together with the provision of food and shelter for his animals was also demanded under the bunnacht system.⁵¹ While 'the duty to serve in the general hosting or rising out was universal in sixteenth century Ireland'⁵² as far as the gentry and tenants of the Ormond and Kildare territories were concerned, the burdens imposed by the Butler and Fitzgerald earls in the early decades of the sixteenth century went well beyond what could be regarded as either legitimate or even just. As highlighted below, it was for this reason that in 1537 the critics of Ormond and his immediate family vented resentment at decades of unfair treatment they had endured, once the opportunity to do so presented itself. Margaret Fitzgerald, was also signalled out in the backlash against the Ormonds. Leonard Grey, lord deputy of Ireland, fearing the Butlers would reduce or minimize his status in Ireland, had encouraged the king to send such a commission to Ireland and to 'pay special attention to abuses in the Butler territories'.⁵³ Four royal commissioners, led by Sir Anthony St Leger, arrived in Ireland in autumn 1537, and remained until the following April, hearing the presentments that came before them concerning economic and political conditions in

⁵⁰ Lennon, *Sixteenth-century Ireland*, p. 55.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ Edwards, *The Ormond lordship*, p. 166.

Ireland. Piers Butler, together with his wife and family, were the principal subjects of criticism and ire vented by the local juries (mostly urban based)⁵⁴ of counties Kilkenny, Tipperary and Waterford'.⁵⁵ They accused Piers 'and all his children' of extending the practice of coign and livery well beyond his own and immediate subjects 'to the greate costs and detriment of the said inhybytauntes and ayenst all right and consyence'.⁵⁶ The juries alleged that the earl and his family's continuous and sustained imposition upon the subjects of these counties and within the Ormond lordship itself was widespread, noting that Piers and 'his whole family restorteyth to the mansions of diverse gentyllmen and other inhabytauntes within the said Countye [Kilkenny] and takeith of them cuddyes and cosshers, withoute anything paying therfor'.⁵⁷

Among complaints against the Butler family that were frequently presented before the king's commissioners between autumn 1537 and April 1538 was the allegation that 'the children of the said Erlle use lyke imposicions upon the said inhabytauntes, at ther pleasure, to ther greate costs and chargeis'.⁵⁸ The complainants insisted that these practices would result in 'the utter impoversement and undoing of the said inhabytauntes, oneles reformation be therof shortly ordeyned and provideid'.⁵⁹

Wives in the making: marriage as a political power base

One of the most crucial assets any aristocratic daughter could bring to her marriage was her parent's political status, influence and strength. The daughters of Piers and Margaret ranked among the leading nobility of Ireland and England, not just as single women but throughout

⁵⁴ Ibid, p. 152.

⁵⁵ The exaction of hospitality and free entertainment imposed on one's subjects for their entourage, including family and servants, at the entire expense of the unwilling subject.

⁵⁶ *The social state of the southern and eastern counties of Ireland*, ed. Hore & Graves, p. 88.

⁵⁷ O'Dowd, *A history of women in Ireland*, p. 90.

⁵⁸ Ibid, p. 91.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

their lives as aristocratic women. As wives, mothers and widows they balanced their political status and roles with their developing individual influence and strengths within their affinal families and the wider realm of their fathers' and husbands' territories. Their contemporaries in Ireland were their cousins in Kildare, the five daughters of Gareth Oge Fitzgerald – Ellis, Anne, Elizabeth, Margaret and Catherine Fitzgerald – and Joan, Honora and Ellice Fitzgerald, daughters of James, tenth earl of Desmond.⁶⁰ Outside of the Old English sphere, women such as Alison Kelly (*fl.* 1530s), Joan Maguire (d. 1600) and Mary MacDonnell (*fl.* 1530s) from Gaelic society were contemporaries of Margaret Fitzgerald's daughters. As wife of Con O'Neil, first earl of Tyrone (d. 1559), Mary MacDonnell was her husband's principal support 'without whose advice he did nothing'.⁶¹ Mother to Hugh O'Neil, Joan Maguire was recorded in the annals of Ireland as 'demure, womanly, devout, charitable, meek and benignant'⁶² and was referred to by the same annalists as 'counsellor'⁶³ in her obituary when she died. Alison Kelly, a Gaelic woman, bore a child for Con O'Neill and created a lot of trouble for the O'Neill clan in her attempts to have her son recognised as heir in the face of challenges from O'Neill's legitimate sons.⁶⁴ In England, families such as the Boleyns (cousins of the Butlers) and the Brandons, both of whom sent their daughters abroad to 'learn or perfect their French',⁶⁵ together with others (Elizabeth Petre, wife of Lord Dacre, renowned for her estate management and financial skills,⁶⁶) were contemporaries of the Butler sisters in Kilkenny. The Dennys, Beauchamps and Bryans were among the many other aristocratic English-based families whose children were the counterparts of the earl and countess of Ormond in Ireland.

⁶⁰ The earl of Desmond's daughter, Joan, married their brother James Butler, ninth earl of Ormond.

⁶¹ O'Dowd, *A history of women in Ireland*, p. 23.

⁶² *Annals of the Four Masters*, 1600, ed. John O'Donovan (7 vols, Dublin, 1848-51) vi, 2223.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ O'Dowd, *A history of women in Ireland*, p. 23.

⁶⁵ Harris, *English aristocratic women*, p. 36.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

Margaret Fitzgerald was actively involved both in arranging her offspring's marriages and their subsequent lives in her capacities as countess, mother, and mother-in-law. In 1537 the citizens of Waterford acknowledged her decisive role in investing 'her numerous daughters in marriage to the principal peers in the south of Ireland, namely, the Earl of Thomond, Lords Cahir, Dunboyne, FitzMaurice, Decies and Curraghmore'.⁶⁷ Furthermore, as the presentments from the county of the Decies and Curraghmore testify, she advised her sons-in-law in relation to governance of their patrimonies, Lords Decies and Curraghmore being 'as much assisted by her governing talent, as the Viceroy earl [Piers] was'.⁶⁸ The absence of Piers Butler and his three sons names in the above account, and the sole mention of the daughters and their mother specifically, suggests that it was Margaret who personally arranged their daughters' marriages while Piers arranged the marriages of his sons. In arranging her daughters' marriages, Margaret was not unique in either Irish or English contexts. These complex negotiations and in particular financial arrangements could occasionally be controversial as in the case of the aristocratic Parr family of Essex in England. Mabel Parr (1441–1508) ended all discussions concerning the possibility of a marriage between her daughter Katherine (future wife of Henry VIII) and Lord Scrope's son and heir, Henry (1494–1503). Horrified at Scrope's jointure terms, Mabel categorically stated that she would no longer entertain any of Scropes unreasonable demands.⁶⁹ As well as exerting decisive control over her daughter's marriage options, Lady Parr offered great sums of money to the earl of Essex to marry her only son to his only daughter and heiress.⁷⁰ In another similar case, such was Dame Anne Rede (1510–1585) of Buckinghamshire's control of bargaining for her daughter Anne's marriage with Sir Giles Greville (d.1528), he informed her agent that 'the

⁶⁷ *The social state of the southern and eastern counties of Ireland*, ed. Hore & Graves, p. 80.

⁶⁸ *Ibid*, p. 80.

⁶⁹ Cited in Harris, *English aristocratic women*, p. 46.

⁷⁰ *Ibid*.

cause standeth so, the conclusion not had, obloquy and diverse speeches will follow, to little praise and no worship to the gentlewoman neither to me'.⁷¹ Notwithstanding his protest, the marriage subsequently went ahead.⁷² Margaret Fitzgerald was by no means exceptional therefore, in exercising influence and control over the marital alliances of her six daughters. While each of the marriages were political unions mostly contracted in a changing political milieu in the 1520s and 1530s, these developments involving the Ormond women were also connected with higher level developments in Ireland. Their uncles and the wider Kildare Fitzgeralds were coming under increasing pressure from the crown, while at the same time their father was positioning himself to take over from Kildare in the period before and after the subsequent fall of the Kildare Fitzgeralds in 1534. The timing of their marriages coincided with the Tudor administrations resolve to extend its influence beyond the four shires of the Pale, and in the post-Kildare years the Ormond dynasty's importance in realising that aim was crucial. Against the background of the marriages of the Ormond women, the Act of Kingly title was passed in 1541 which saw Henry VIII titled King of Ireland, and, his government's policy of Surrender and Re-grant which saw Gaelic Irish lords surrender their titles and lands to the crown, in exchange for English titles and loyalty to the crown.

Margaret Butler: daughter, sister, mother.

Lady Margaret Butler was Piers and Margaret's second child and eldest daughter. Sometime before 1510 she married Richard Mór de Burgh (d.1530), ninth lord of Clanricard in Galway, and second son of Uilleag Fionn, sixth lord of Clanricard.⁷³ According to historian David Beresford the primogenitural inheritance pattern of the Clanricard Burkes altered in the early

⁷¹ Giles Greville to Dame Ann Rede, 1527 (TNA, SP1/235, f.167 (1527)).

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ David Beresford, 'Richard Mor Burke (de Burga)', James McGuire and James Quinn (eds), *Dictionary of Irish Biography*, Cambridge University Press, 2009; online edn., 2009 [www.dib.cambridge.org/, 29 Aug. 2015].

sixteenth century when Uilleag Fionn was succeeded by his brother, Richard Óg, who ruled from 1509 to 1519 and not, as would have been expected, by his son, Uilleag Óg. Beresford contends that, after twenty years together, the marriage of Richard Mor and Margaret clearly demonstrated the Clanricard Burkes keen desire to re-establish close ties with ‘the mainstream of Anglo-Irish society’.⁷⁴ Around that time, a major concern for the Burkes was the ‘increasing influence of the O’Donnells in northern Connacht, especially after their final capture of Sligo castle in 1516’.⁷⁵ (The O’Donnell’s had long sought the over lordship of Northern Connacht.)⁷⁶ In that context, Richard Mor’s marriage into the Ormond dynasty was a timely and political move. Through this union, Margaret’s parents began strengthening their influence in lordships adjacent to the Ormond patrimony. In the years after Margaret’s first marriage, this strategy acquired greater significance as relations between the Butlers and Kildares rapidly deteriorated and the need for security and forging further alliances surrounding the earldom of Ormond grew.

The marriage of Piers and Margaret’s other daughters, notably Katherine Butler, helped secure their foothold and control within territories in south-east County Waterford. Furthermore, Margaret evidently calculated that, arising from her daughter’s marriage to Burke, her grandson would be the rightful heir to the earldom of Clanricarde, thereby owing his mother’s family a debt of gratitude and future loyalty. As it turned out however, although Burke was eulogised after his death in 1530 as ‘the most bountiful and noble, the best governor and ruler who had arisen among the posterity of William [Burke] the conqueror’,⁷⁷

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid

⁷⁶ Lennon, *Sixteenth-century Ireland*, p. 264.

⁷⁷ MacWilliam of Clanricarde, Richard Burke, son of Ulick, son of Ulick, son of Ulick of the Wine, head-letter of the Galls and Gaels of Connacht, the most bountiful and noble and the best governor and ruler who had arisen among the posterity of William the Conqueror for a

Richard Mor was not succeeded by his son, Uilleag na gCeann Burke. Instead, he was succeeded by his uncle's grandson, John, who ruled until 1536.⁷⁸ In 1504, six years before Margaret and Richard's marriage, her grandfather, Gareth Mor, led a successful battle at Knockdoe in County Galway against the Clanricarde Burkes. Ostensibly at least, this was in defence of another of his daughters, Eustachia Fitzgerald, who was allegedly ill-treated by her husband, Ulick Burke.⁷⁹ However, notwithstanding the fact that she was the sister of the countess of Ormond, and that Piers Butler fought as a member of Kildare's force at Knockdoe,⁸⁰ in their construction of a 'system of alliances'⁸¹ Piers and Margaret's marrying their eldest daughter to Burke was part of a strategy to extend their own (Ormond) sphere of influence, independent of the Kildare Fitzgeralds.

Following Richard Burke's death in 1530 the Butlers sought to capitalise on their eldest daughter's re-marriage as a further opportunity to extend their power at the expense of the earl of Kildare. As previously discussed, relations between Ormond and Fitzgerald (and the countess and her brother) deteriorated swiftly throughout the 1510s. Between 1530 and 1532 a former supporter of the earl of Kildare, Brian MacGillpatrick (b.1485) of Upper Ossory in Kilkenny⁸² emerged as a suitable husband for Margaret: their marriage is a revealing example of the real politik with which women and men had to contend in this era. Brian's brother Dermot, the 'tanaiste' or leader of the MacGillpatricks and ally of Kildare, had, in 1532, killed Margaret's brother, Thomas Butler, third and youngest son of Piers and Countess

long time, died after a very short illness in the last month of spring: available at <http://curia.ucc.ie/published/T100011/text293.html> [29 Aug. 2015].

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Bryan, *Gerald Fitzgerald*, pp 236-7.

⁸⁰ Edwards, *The Ormond lordship*, p. 152.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid, p.160.

Margaret.⁸³ By 1532 Kildare's refusal to accept Ormond's increasing favour with the Crown, together with his frustration at Thomas Cromwell and the new lord deputy of Ireland, Sir William Skeffington's support for his arch rival, pushed Fitzgerald and the Butlers further apart, and ultimately 'forced his family into revolt'.⁸⁴ Following an inquiry into Thomas Butler's killing, Kildare had 'evidently procured the death'⁸⁵ according to Piers and Margaret's son-in-law, Brian MacGillpatrick. The evidence against Kildare was damning, as witnesses to his response upon hearing of his nephew's death, contributed their evidence under oath, and news of the outcome of the case became public before being officially despatched to London.

While Brian was keen to convert his Gaelic chieftainship for an English title and barony, his brother, Dermot, was not in agreement. In December 1532 Brian married Margaret and that same year, her eldest brother James, future ninth earl of Ormond, married Joan Fitzgerald of Desmond. The date of Margaret's birth is unknown but according to the nineteenth-century historian William Carrigan, Fitzpatrick had been married before, and it is likely that Margaret was younger than her husband who was forty-seven when they married. In 1541 Margaret's husband changed his name to Brian Fitzpatrick, having submitted to the Crown, and became Baron Fitzpatrick of Upper Ossory. From the former MacGillapadraigis, who had been Kildare's 'most dependable midland allies',⁸⁶ Margaret's husband Brian wished to affiliate himself with Piers. He was, therefore keen to marry the earl's daughter. For his part, Piers was anxious to have Kildare's former supporter, allied to the house of Ormond through

⁸³ Graves & Prim, *The history, architecture & antiquities of the cathedral church of St. Canice, Kilkenny*, pp 239-41.

⁸⁴ Lyons, *Gearóid Óg Fitzgerald*, p. 47.

⁸⁵ Graves & Prim, *The history, architecture & antiquities of the cathedral church of St. Canice, Kilkenny*, pp 239-41.

⁸⁶ Edwards, *The Ormond lordship*, p. 160.

marriage. Brian was also attracted by the prospect of having closer connections to the Dublin administration. As Baron Fitzpatrick and husband of the earl's daughter, he became the first Gaelic chieftain to take his seat in the House of Lords.⁸⁷ For the Butlers, this marriage meant that they now had 'allies among all of the major Gaelic dynasties whose territories lay to the north and east of Kilkenny, and who separated them from Kildare'.⁸⁸

Margaret and Brian, had three sons – Brian Oge (or Barnaby) his heir, Finghin or Florence, who succeeded to Upper Ossory on the death of his older brother in 1582, and Donnall, Geoffrey – and one daughter, Grainne (Grace or Grizel). Margaret's eldest son and heir, Brian Oge, was educated at London where he befriended the young Prince Edward, future King Edward VI.⁸⁹ Margaret's commitment to raising her children in English civility was also acknowledged by Lord Deputy St Leger when he wrote to the king in February 1540-41, describing Margaret's son Barnaby as 'well brought up, and speketh good Inglishee'.⁹⁰ In keeping with her mother's policy of Anglicisation which the countess encouraged the earl to pursue from their first days in Kilkenny in the 1490s (see previous chapter), Margaret Butler's son was reared and educated as a Protestant in London in the company of the future king. Furthermore, by embracing the religious reforms introduced in Ireland from the 1530s, Margaret Butler was endeavouring to ensure the dynasty's continuation into the next generation. With the absence of sufficient source material regarding this generation of Ormond women's religious attitudes, it is difficult to ascertain whether they showed

⁸⁷ Jane Ohlmeyer, 'Conquest, civilisation, colonization: Ireland, 1540–1660' in Richard Bourke and Ian MacBride (eds), *The Princeton history of modern Ireland* (New Jersey, 2016), p. 34.

⁸⁸ Edwards, *The Ormond lordship*, p. 160.

⁸⁹ Ohlmeyer, 'Conquest, civilisation, colonization', p. 34.

⁹⁰ Lord Deputy Sir Anthony St Leger to Henry VIII, Feb. 1540-41, quoted in Carrigan, *The history & antiquities of the diocese of Ossory*, i, 81.

themselves as favourably disposed or not, to the religious reforms that took place during their adult lives.

Henry VIII's policy of surrender and re-grant in the 1540s offered amenable Gaelic lords a route – through marriage– to their desired status and bolstered their own position as earls, barons and lords. However, despite Edwards' assertion that 'the Barons of Upper Ossory remained cattle lords in the classic Gaelic tradition'⁹¹ specifically, for the Butlers the union with their eldest daughter was successful. In the wider context, it contributed to the Anglicisation of hitherto unengaged Gaelic lords, one of the principal aims of the policy of Surrender and re-grant. Once married, the men who had surrendered their Gaelic titles, customs and laws and were re-granted titles by the Crown, 'embraced Tudor reform as a means of minimizing English interference and of bolstering their own position within the lordship of Ireland'.⁹²

In September 1533, it emerged that Margaret Butler's brother Thomas was murdered at the behest of their uncle, Gareth Oge Fitzgerald, ninth earl of Kildare, with Dermot MacGillaPatrick, her husband's brother, acting on Kildare's behalf. Lord James Butler blamed Kildare directly for the murder of his younger brother. Margaret's husband, Brian (brother of Dermot) gave the most fulsome testimony against Kildare when evidence was heard at Waterford in 1533 'before the mayor of the city and the bishop of Lismore'.⁹³ With no documented proof, it is impossible to assert whether Piers or Margaret Butler knew of the connection between the death of their son, and their daughter Margaret's brother-in-law, not

⁹¹ David Edwards, 'Collaboration without Anglicisation: the MacGiollapadraig lordship of Tudor reform' in Patrick J. Duffy, David Edwards and Elizabeth FitzPatrick (eds), *Gaelic Ireland, c.1250– c.1650: land, lordship and settlement* (Dublin, 2001), pp 78-96.

⁹² Ohlmeyer, 'Conquest, civilisation, colonization', p. 34.

⁹³ Edwards, *The Ormond lordship*, p. 160.

to mention the countess's brother's involvement. Following the hearing in Waterford and its damning outcome for Kildare who had not long been reinstated as lord deputy of Ireland, he was summoned to court for the final time in late 1533. Margaret's marriage to MacGillpatrick came as one of the final blows in the deteriorating relationship between the earl of Kildare, her uncle, and her parents.

Countess Margaret's brother had killed her son, and her daughter married the brother of an accessory to his murder. If the connection was known before the marriage, the tragedy of the death of her son was lost amidst the din of dynastic politics in which she played a pivotal part. Whether it was known or not, the countess did not prevent the marriage of her daughter, and loyalty to the dynasty superseded any sentiment around the murder of a son and brother. Furthermore, such pragmatism was not exceptional. In 1533, the year after Margaret and Brian Fitzpatrick married, one Richard Fitzgerald murdered James Marwart of Skryne in County Meath, who as a child was married to a granddaughter of his guardian, and following the murder she subsequently married her husband's killer.⁹⁴ In Ulster, Hugh O'Neil, threatened to remove his daughter from her marriage to Sir Ross MacMahon, if MacMahon did not pay the dowry as promised when the marriage contract was drawn up.⁹⁵ Rose O'Neil, another of O'Neil's daughters, was likewise threatened by her husband Sir Hugh Roe O'Donnell with being 'cast off' after the alliance arranged with her father no longer met the political requirements of her husband; the couple subsequently divorced.⁹⁶ A less serious, but nonetheless noteworthy example of the real politik of parents and families rigidly enforcing dynastic politics occurred in the 1540's in England. Anne Tyrrell and her son Thomas, Lord

⁹⁴ Kenny, *Anglo-Irish & Gaelic women in Ireland*, p. 111.

⁹⁵ Paul Walsh, (ed.) *The will and family of Hugh O'Neill, earl of Tyrone*, (Dublin, 1930), p. 33.

⁹⁶ *Ibid*, pp 37-8.

Wentworth (1501-50), did not forgive his sister Thomasine for eloping with a man of lower status and withheld her dowry for which her father had bequeathed her on condition that she marry with his consent.⁹⁷ The circumstances surrounding the Butler Fitzpatrick marriage were therefore far from unique. The experiences of women such as Margaret Butler, and indeed her five sisters, demonstrates not only the importance of marriage but the ‘use’ that was made of these aristocratic women by their parent’s in their pursuit of power and status. When St Leger and the council of Ireland wrote to Henry VIII from Maynooth in September 1542, they acknowledged Margaret as a woman of importance in her own right, referring to her not only as the sister of the (ninth) earl of Ormond, but also as the mother to the Baron of Ossory’s son, ‘a very proper childe, and one whom he moche tenderyth; the mother beyng systyr to the Erle of Ormonde’.⁹⁸

Carrigan noted that MacGillaPatrick married for a third time, despite the fact that his wife Margaret Butler was still living. It appears that their marriage ended for some unrecorded reason as in the late 1540s he married Elizabeth O’Connor, daughter of Brian O’Connor, Lord of Offaly⁹⁹ with whom he had two sons, Dermot and Turlough. Macgillpatrick also fathered a number of illegitimate children outside of his marriages.

Margaret Butler also married a third time, which was not uncommon or unique to aristocratic men or women. With each consecutive marriage, a woman could add significantly to her wealth, thereby accruing substantial assets if she reached widowhood. Margaret married her

⁹⁷ Richard Pownder vs Thomas, Lord Wentworth, Apr. 1545-Apr. 1546 (TNA, Court of Requests Req 2/10/157, PROB 11/22/40).

⁹⁸ As quoted by Carrigan in *The history & antiquities of the diocese of Ossory*, i, 81.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

third husband, Rory Ua Mordha, also known as Lord O'Moore of Leix¹⁰⁰ sometime in the late 1540s at which time she was in her late thirties. The couple had two sons. This union was also somewhat overshadowed by sinister political machinations. After the crown re-granted the O'Moore's titles, and following his marriage to Margaret, Rory's family, in particular his brother Gillepatrick O'Moore, contested the legitimacy of his submission to the crown. In 1555 Gillepatrick attacked Leix, and in the ensuing battle killed his brother Rory. Three years later, in 1558, following the accession of Elizabeth to the throne, Margaret Butler, presented herself at court as an advocate for her two sons, Kedagh and Callagh (Charles)¹⁰¹ whose interests she sought to protect from their uncle who had killed their father. In this, she followed the precedent set by her mother who in 1523 represented her father Piers at the court of Henry VIII. Elizabeth, Countess of Kildare, likewise presented herself at the Henrician court when her husband was either incapacitated in Ireland or simply unwilling to meet the king. Such visitations by aristocratic wives and mothers from Ireland were not unusual. As O'Dowd has argued, 'in the absence of an Irish court, access to the royal court became more important as the century progressed'.¹⁰² In 1533 Mairgreag, daughter of the Irish chieftain O Conchobhair Failghe, went to court and was successful in her petition for the safe return of her father, who was held prisoner there.¹⁰³ Some years later but with the same intention, in 1593 and again in 1595, Grace O'Malley from Connaught lobbied Elizabeth I for the freedom of her male kin, including her brother and her son. On each occasion, O'Malley was

¹⁰⁰ *The social state of the southern and eastern counties of Ireland*, ed. Hore & Graves, p. 104.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰² O'Dowd, *A history of women in Ireland*, p. 25.

¹⁰³ Anonymous, 'A cold house of clay: annalistic obituaries and notices, 900 – 1600', in Angela Bourke, Siobhan Kilfeather, Maria Luddy, Margaret MacCurtain, Geraldine Meeney, Maire Nic Dhonnchadha, Mary O'Dowd, and Clair Wills, (eds.) *The Field Day anthology of Irish writing: Irish women's writings and traditions* (New York, 2002), vol iv, pp. 332-340

successful and ‘returned to Dublin with royal instructions to have her requests implemented’.¹⁰⁴

Fearing that her sons would lose their inheritance after the murder of their father and the taking of Leix by their uncle, Margaret was quick to present her case to the new monarch. As a distant cousin of the new queen (the two were related through Margaret’s father’s cousin, Thomas Butler, seventh earl of Ormond, who was the queen’s great-grandfather), Margaret explained her son’s’ perilous situation and informed the queen of the grave injustice done to them, following the loss of their inheritance as a result of their father’s death. Her efforts proved successful. Elizabeth responded by sending Kedagh to Cambridge ‘allowing him one hundred pounds per annum for his maintenance’,¹⁰⁵ and dispatched Charles to Oxford, ‘with a yearly allowance of sixty pounds’.¹⁰⁶ Margaret’s representation on behalf of her sons at court, demonstrates her skill and determination to ensure that justice was done in respect of their inheritance and prosperity.

Through her three marriages to men from Gaelic Ireland, Margaret’s fulfilled her parent’s expectations. Her marriages to Richard Burke, and to MacGiollapadraig of Ossory, served to consolidate the bulwark of their mounting antagonism with Kildare. While Margaret was used as collateral in forming both unions, her marriages provided Piers with further alliances and much needed military support which was increasingly required during the 1520s and 1530s. Margaret’s final marriage into the powerful O’ Moore sept from Laois crucially bolstered the Butler borders with Kildare. In fulfilling her duty as an aristocratic daughter, her role as widow added to her value as a future bride and regardless of the number of times she

¹⁰⁴ Chambers, *Granuaile*, pp 127-50, 155-7, 195-204.

¹⁰⁵ *The social state of the southern and eastern counties of Ireland*, ed. Hore & Graves, p. 104.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

married, her currency on the marriage market derived first and foremost from her being the daughter of the earl and countess of Ormond. Her value as a bride resulted in significant benefits both to her natal family and to her husband's.

Moreover, her being of aristocratic stock on all three occasions positioned her as a facilitator for each husband in his attempts at Anglicisation and fostering closer ties with the Tudor administration, however sincere their commitment to this may have been in reality. Each husband embraced the Henrician policy of surrender and re-grant, and Margaret was the ideal bride. As a woman who was left by her first husband and widowed by the second and third, her status and wealth – following three marriages – and with her mother as her role model, strengthened her case and enhanced her political prowess and efficacy, evident from her advocacy and intervention on her son's behalf with Elizabeth.

As the eldest daughter of the earl and countess she was directly in the front line at a pivotal point in social, religious and cultural change in mid-sixteenth-century Ireland. As such she bore the brunt of the political fallout that unfolded, in particular at the time of her second and third marriages. Living through the fall from power of her mother's birth family dynasty in the mid-1530s, as a prominent female in the rival house of Ormond, she was exposed to sweeping changes in the social and political milieu around her. Soon after, when constitutional changes arising from Henry's Act of Kingly title in 1541 began to be implemented in Ireland Margaret and her sisters became the focus of attention as Gaelic lords looked to the highest level of aristocratic women from Old English families (in Ireland) as potential brides.

A valuable insight into what sixteenth-century Gaelic men sought in a wife may be gleaned from a letter written by Shane O'Neill¹⁰⁷ (1530-67) of County Tyrone to Elizabeth I in 1561 in which he expressed his wish for a wife from a noble family who had a 'good civil...upbringing'¹⁰⁸ and that she would 'from time to time certify my grief and the country's unto Your Majesty'.¹⁰⁹ He declared that such a woman would benefit him and his country too as it would 'become civil and brought to good reformation'¹¹⁰ through the role of civil gentlewomen from noble families. This personal plea to the queen sheds significant light upon the desires of men, in this case from Gaelic Ireland, as well as the conduct and duties expected of aristocratic women in general. Margaret Fitzgerald's daughters fitted these expectations.¹¹¹

Katherine Butler: Extortionist tyrant, or defender of tradition and family?

In contrast to her older sister, Margaret, and more than any of her five sisters, Lady Katherine Butler (b.1506), earned a reputation similar to that of her mother. The second oldest of the six Butler sisters, she married Sir Richard Power, baron of Curraghmore and the Decies in County Waterford, when she was aged twenty.¹¹² The son of Sir Piers Power and Lady Katherine Fitzgerald of the Decies,¹¹³ Richard served as sheriff of Waterford in 1499 following in his father and grandfather's footsteps. The Powers were a long established, minor aristocratic family who originally settled in Ireland after the arrival of the Normans in the twelfth century. According to Gabriel Redmond they had a distinguished record of service

¹⁰⁷ O'Neil was a nephew of Countess Margaret Fitzgerald; his mother, Alice, was Margaret's sister.

¹⁰⁸ Shane O'Neill to Queen Elizabeth, 8 Feb. 1561 (TNA, SP/63/3/4).

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Stanihurst, *The Historie of Ireland*, p. 256.

¹¹² Gabriel Redmond, *An historical memoir of Poher, Poer, or Power with an account of The Barony of Le Power and Curraghmore, County Waterford*, pt. 3 (Dublin, 1891).

¹¹³ Ibid.

to the monarchy, having ‘preserved their faith and loyalty to the crown of England, which carries the fame and antiquity of the family to the fifty-sixth year of the reign of Henry III, in 1270’.¹¹⁴

Undoubtedly, Henry VIII’s grant of a baronetcy to Richard in 1536 resulted at least in part from correspondence initiated in June 1535 by Piers Butler who wrote to the king suggesting that his son-in-law, Richard, ‘should be enabled to be a baron of parliament with some profits in the county of Waterford’.¹¹⁵ Clearly it was through marriage to Ormond’s daughter that the Powers of Waterford were elevated to the peerage, just as the marriages of Katherine’s sister, Margaret, had served to elevate the status of her husbands’ families. In a matter of weeks Lord Chancellor Thomas Audley responded to Piers’s suggestion, making two patents for barons in Ireland, one of which was for Richard Power.¹¹⁶ Three years later, in 1538, while serving the Crown against Irish rebels, Richard was killed. At the time his heir, Piers, was a minor (aged twelve) and his ward-ship was granted to his uncle, James, Earl of Ormond. The immediate impact of Piers’s death was the Crown’s seizure of the family’s castles and manors of Curraghmore, and Kilmacthomas (both in County Waterford) along with several others.

Determined not to lose more family property after the death of her husband who less than five years earlier had been granted a baronetcy, and because their son and heir was a ward of the king, Katherine, as baroness Power, immediately took steps to protect her family’s interests. She was mother of three sons including the heir Piers, Edward Power, abbot of Mothel abbey in Waterford, John, known as ‘Shane Mor’ and one daughter, also Katherine. Given her son’s

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Piers Butler Earl of Ormond and Ossory to Henry VIII, June 1535 in *L. & P. Hen. VIII*, viii, 249.

¹¹⁶ Redmond, *An historical memoir*.

age she took it upon herself to govern his country at least in the early years in a style similar to her own mother when she, also a widow, oversaw her deceased husband's territory after his death in 1539. By 1542 the Power family's finances were in crisis. Throughout her son's minority Katherine took full control of the family's affairs, and in the ensuing vacuum created by the absence of her son, took full control of the Power territories as the management and rule of the estate effectively reverted to her, a position which she took upon herself without being legally invested with the authority.

As will be seen, Katherine and her brother James had a close working relationship, the latter remaining fully supportive of his sister and her family down to his death in 1546. James lent practical, and more particularly moral, support to his sister throughout her years in Waterford. From the commencement of the commissioners arriving in Ireland in 1537, complaints were immediately aired about Katherine's allegedly wilful conduct. Between 1537 and 1538 the gentry and common people of County Waterford objected that

the said lady Katherine hathe taken to exacted of the king's people for the fornissing to sending for the of her sonne Piers Power into England in company with the lord treasurer [her brother James] a certeyn some of money the quantity wherof they know not.¹¹⁷

In light of the numerous allegations made against her to the commission, a brief explanation of the purpose and composition of that commission is instructive. The commissioners consisted of Sir Anthony St. Leger, George Paulet, Thomas Moyle, and William Berners (all

¹¹⁷ *The social state of the southern and eastern counties of Ireland*, ed. Hore & Graves, p. 200.

knights), who were sent to Ireland by Henry VIII in 1537 where they remained until the middle of 1538, to achieve ‘the reduction of the said land to a due civillite and obedience and the advancement of the public weal of the same’.¹¹⁸ As they travelled throughout the south-eastern counties they held inquiries into the disturbances, offences, and grievances of the king’s subjects in those counties. The juries were comprised of the gentry and respected merchants of each individual region, who dealt with various issues that presented from the towns and wider countryside. According to their testimonies Katherine had stirred resentment and animosity throughout Power territories and the south-eastern counties in general. The presentments include numerous accusations against her, especially relating to her time as widow when it was alleged she

daylye useith lyke extortion, impositiions, and unlawful exactions, as used the aforesaid Piers by ther tyme; and now in the name of younge Pyers Poer, sonne unto the late deceased Sir Rychard Poer and Katheryn Butler pretending as lord and inheritor of the king’s countye [Waterford] by cessation of inherytaunce.¹¹⁹

Clearly they refused to acknowledge Katherine as an authority figure in the absence of both her husband and her son. Nonetheless, as a widow and mother to the heir of the barony, she took it upon herself to assert her son’s authority, and her own, as did her mother, who after the crisis of succession in 1515, was intent on asserting her husband’s rightful claim as she saw it, to the earldom of Ormond. Given that Katherine’s husband had only been granted a baronetcy five years before his murder, the family’s elevated standing was still relatively newly established. The age and absence of her son added to her predicament and this, coupled with her alleged formidable, and at times, despotic behaviour, resulted in Katherine’s widowhood being entirely different from that of her mother. It was also different from that of

¹¹⁸ Ibid, p. 2.

¹¹⁹ Ibid, p. 185.

her sister-in-law, Joan Fitzgerald, countess of Ormond. Whereas Joan faced numerous challenges following the untimely death of her husband (and Katherine's brother James earl of Ormond in London in 1546), she was referred to as the 'angel of peace'¹²⁰ by Elizabeth I, having evidently endeared herself to the queen to a far greater degree than Katherine did to Henry VIII. Among other accusations levied against Katherine was her imposition of 'coyne and lyv'ye bothe horsse and man, contynually upon all the king's subjects'.¹²¹ In keeping with her own upbringing, she continued the imposition of coign and livery upon the citizens of the southern and eastern counties, causing her critics to complain that, 'if the Lord Deputy or any greater man be conveevyed by the said Katherine, but she wylle commaunde a subsidye to be levyed upon the countrey for meate, drynke, and candel llyght, to the lords plersar'.¹²² Further insights into Katherine's life reveal aspects of her wider family, namely her mother and brother James, and sheds light on a family who clearly worked in concert for their individual and wider family gains. Their critics alleged that

the counties of Kylkenny, Typary and of Waterford are all misgoverned by the lady of Ossory [Countess Margaret Fitzgerald] and the Lady Katherine her daughter, and that the Lord Butler mayntaigneth his syster the said Lady Katheryn in her extorcyon.¹²³

The accusation of misgovernment is levied against both mother and daughter, and features among the last items in the long list of presentments. One particular presentment; 'The Verdyct of the Comyners of the Countye of Waterford' makes explicit reference to

¹²⁰ *Annals of the Four Masters*, as quoted in John Kirwan, 'Lady Joan Fitzgerald, Countess of Ormond, Ossory and Desmond' in *Journal of the Butler Society*, iv, no. 2 (2000), p. 301.

¹²¹ *The social state of the southern and eastern counties of Ireland*, ed. Hore & Graves, p. 185.

¹²² *Ibid*, p. 186.

¹²³ *Ibid*, p. 205.

Katherine's in-laws. Complainants declared that the Powers had for generations ruled according to their office but that following Richard's marriage to Katherine – derisively referred to as Mageen by her critics – the Power family's reputation changed significantly, 'untyll Maghyn and they ruled the hole countye at ther pleasures by extort power oppressing the king's subjects'.¹²⁴ The complainants explicitly recognised that the 'countie of Waterforde belongeth onely to oure sovereign Lorde the king ... and none other, no Poer, Butler, ne Geraldyn, nether beryth to none of them no sure nor service'.¹²⁵

In referencing the Geraldines, they rejected any relative of the Countess Margaret, and may well have intended the reference to be applicable to the wider Fitzgerald dynasty of Kildare and Desmond. From that complaint, both mother and daughter as members of families whose actions caused initial grievances, were feared and despised by many of the king's subjects, and both were specifically blamed for the disquiet and unrest within the wider counties of the south east of Ireland during the late 1530s and early 1540s.

There are several references to the close and cordial working relationship between Katherine and her brother James within the presentments. In a list of 'Bylles of Complaynte founde by the sayde Jurye' and presented to the king's high commissioners, further glimpses into their relationship in their father's lifetime are revealed. It is stated that during the

wyke before xmas in the xxvii, yere of king Henry VIII, [1536] one Jamys Butler sonne to Pyers Erle of Ossery and the king's high treasurer in Irlande came into the sayde tenants and robbed them, wyth suche companye as came wyth hym of Dame

¹²⁴ Ibid, p. 184.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

Katheryn Butlers servants, of the some of 19 capelles [horses] with household stuff ...
It may please youre audyence as well to cause the said lorde tresorer to make
restytucon of the saide hurts as the foresaide Katheryn and this done for the love of
Godde and in the way of charytie.¹²⁶

The complainants requested that the king's commissioners provide compensation for the losses incurred through the destruction and theft perpetrated by Katherine and her brother. Katherine and James were accused of continually carrying out widespread theft and destruction in their territories as they and their servants allegedly mistreated the inhabitants of the south-eastern counties. However, the only evidence presented in relation to these alleged practices by Katherine and James's servants was given in Waterford in 1537 to the king's commissioners, and on that occasion 'the jury fynde this byll to be but for certentye'.¹²⁷ Nevertheless, no action was taken against either Katherine or James. In a further plea to the king's commissioners Katherine was accused of murder, theft and breaching the peace with a neighbouring Waterford family over an extended time period. The allegation was made that she broke a peace agreement and murdered at least four men

after the peace made attuix the saide Nicholas [of Donnyll] and dame Katheryn and
about midsomer 1535 the saide servants came unto Kilbride and robbed your
supplyante oute of the churche yard of the same ii horseis never had restorance.¹²⁸

In the absence of any surviving evidence, it remains unknown if anything came of this charge levelled against her.

¹²⁶ Ibid, p. 206.

¹²⁷ Ibid, p. 207.

¹²⁸ Ibid, p. 207.

Katherine and Ellen Butler were two of James Butler's six sisters who benefitted from his will, in which he made provision that

my syster Katheryn Butler shall have the farmes of ballygerderry and of the Cordery during the nonage of her son John ['Mor'] and from that fourth to have the rest of the late abbey of Knocktofer during hir lief.¹²⁹

Knocktopher abbey in Kilkenny had been established by James Butler, second earl of Ormond, for the Carmelite friars in the mid-fourteenth century. Following the dissolution of the monastery in 1542, four years before the death of James, ninth earl, the abbey was dissolved with the majority of lands acquired by the Barnewell family. What remained was in the possession of James, thus permitting the transfer of his share to his sister in his will. Legally, there was nothing untoward in his bequest and aristocratic men frequently left property and possessions to sisters. For example, when in 1570 Mark Barnewall of County Meath compiled his will, he specifically delineated those lands which were to be left to his 'male heirs and those to his female heirs, with remainder to his sister in tail male and the remainder to her issue female'.¹³⁰ Given that the lands of Ballygerderry and Cordery were among the largest farms owned by James Butler, his bequest of these properties to his sister is further testimony to their close relationship and the esteem in which he was held Katherine. The earl provided for his sister and his nephew by bequeathing land and former church property to both; 'my syster Katherine to have hir chayne which I have here and my small bracelet for a tokyn'.¹³¹ Undoubtedly Katherine's new-found wealth and estates from her

¹²⁹ Will of James Butler, ninth earl of Ormond, Oct. 1546 in *Cal. Ormond deeds*, ed. Curtis, iv (1509–1547), 292.

¹³⁰ *Cal. Inquisitions*, ed. Griffith, pp 216-17.

¹³¹ Will of James Butler, ninth earl of Ormond, Oct. 1546.

brother enhanced her attractiveness as a potential bride for the earl of Desmond. Of all his sisters, it was Katherine who benefitted most from James's will.

As daughter of the countess of Ormond, and wife and widow of the baron of Curraghmore, Katherine Butler lived her life quite independently of any higher authority, including the king's lord deputy. From a close examination of these presentments (the single richest source about her life), broad if deeply partisan insights into Katherine can be gleaned revealing a woman who emulated her mother in personality and, at times, reputation, and caused disquiet throughout the Power territories and south-eastern counties of Ireland. As wife and widow in the Power family, Katherine continued the practices that she witnessed as a child in an aristocratic household and family (including coign and livery) and showed formidable strength of character and authority following the example of her mother. A multitude of allegations continued to be presented to the commissioners about for instance, Katherine's travels, including details of when she travelled from Waterford to Dublin, when her detractors claimed that, 'Lady Katherine, entendeing to goo to Dublyn, cesseyth the countrey for her going thyther, and for the conviveing gyven by her to her fader, to the sum of xxi marks and this to be levied of the king's subjects'.¹³²

That she borrowed money from the dean of Waterford to fund her travels to Dublin city seems curious given that she undoubtedly had access to some private funds, despite the Powers being in financial crisis following the death of her husband. Furthermore, her alleged influence over the clergyman was such that he in turn could only supply her with the money

¹³² *The social state of the southern and eastern counties of Ireland*, ed. Hore & Graves, p. 188.

after he acquired it from his parishioners acting on the orders of Katherine's own officer. Her critics alleged that

as often tymes as my Lady Katheryn goo, or is goyng into Dublyn she cesseyth the countrey with score charges of money, and at herre last being at Dublyn she borowid of the Deane of Waterford for which money the pore men or subjects were compelled by her officer, Teyge O Kennedy, to pay the foresaide Deane in whete at ii Yryshe; whereas yt was worthe the iiii Iryshe.¹³³

While no accounts survive of Katherine's visits to Dublin, her travel was evidently at the cost of the king's subjects and between charging them a cess and imposing coign and livery upon the same citizens, she earned an appalling reputation. All of her travels to the city of Dublin caused her to 'cesseth her charges upon the king's people of this country at any time she goeth to Dublyn about her private cawses'.¹³⁴

Furthermore, according to several complainants, she did not adhere to or accept any instruction from the Crown. In fact, she was accused of preventing the seneschal, James Wyse, appointed by the king, from taking up his office; 'Katheryn Butler denyed and dysobeyed the king's autorite, forbyddeing Jamys Wyse to execute the office of sencyallship, in which office the said Jamys was autorysed by the king's deputye, which autorite he declared to herre, and to herre audyence'.¹³⁵ She was also accused of many counts of theft of crops and livestock from the peasantry and citizens of her own and surrounding counties, and

¹³³ Ibid, p. 193

¹³⁴ Ibid, p. 201.

¹³⁵ Ibid, p. 190.

it was alleged that, ‘the saide Katherin did levye and take up of the subjects xviiiix shepe for her hande and maydens’.¹³⁶

Katherine’s alleged cavalier treatment of tenants was cited as an accusation that if any of her own horses were left fasting overnight, the tenants on whom she was imposing coign and livery were obliged to forfeit bags of oats as compensation.¹³⁷ On another occasion she and her brother James were said to have forcibly taken ‘certayne kyne and cattall from the king’s subjects, and from them that was doing the king’s service’,¹³⁸ including Mr William St. Loo and Sir William Wyse, of Waterford, who, the presentments notes, could have protested ‘further at lengyth’.¹³⁹ In her dealings with church personnel within her patrimony she was said to have been equally high-handed. The commoners of County Waterford alleged that

it is enacteid by the said Lady Katheryn that no beoffe, ne mutton, hogge, ne butter, hony, ne whete, nor malte, shalle come to the cytye, but suche as the countrey shalle refuse; the permission to be bydde to salys at Church, upon payne of eighteen score sheep, and forfeiture of the goods.¹⁴⁰

Her imposition of a strict ‘penalty for sale’ of any of the listed items to the church without her permission, at the cost of losing livestock and goods, reinforced her formidable reputation. A number of citizens from Kilkenny and Waterford protested that her servants, ‘invadeid and preyed one Richard Lunde, and forcebly toke away from him certen kye, and feryed the

¹³⁶ Ibid, p. 188.

¹³⁷ Ibid, p. 187.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid, p. 188.

same at Portglashe by Waterford into the countie of Kylkenny'.¹⁴¹ From there, the thieves brought these cattle to Katherine's castle, where they placed them at her disposal. A sense of her personality also emerges from this account which alleges how 'moreover, none dare be so hardye to wytt her, or any of hers of the foresaide prey, the prmisseis by Walsheis, in the countye Kylkenny'.¹⁴²

Hore and Graves explain that the Walshes had long been supporters of the house of Ormond, and were in Katherine's employ. When she was displeased with or considered an individual or a family to be a nuisance or inconvenience, her critics complained that she 'entyseyth and drawyth certen persons oute of other countres as smashaghe [a designation of retainers used for coercion] to spoyle and robbe all thoo that she owyth any dyspleasor unto'.¹⁴³

The baroness harboured a particular dislike of the Tobins from Lower Ormond and Kilkenny who, according to Hore and Graves, were a 'degenerate Anglo-Irish family'¹⁴⁴ in her eyes. The Tobins were among those families against whom she allegedly carried out her punitive exactions. Her sense of autonomy and authority as the dowager baroness was clear. As a woman of significant status and authority in her own right, many feared and loathed her, and accused her of having 'usurpeth a domynyon upon the king's subjects in parcell of the countie of Waterford celled by her, Powers countrey, without title or grante of the kings magesty or his deputie of this his land of Ireland', and alleging that she did that 'contynually from yere to yere'.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴¹ Ibid, p. 189.

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid, p. 198.

That Katherine was publicly accused of usurpation gives a clear indication of one of the principal gripes that her critics had with her as an individual, in addition to the fact that she was a woman and ruled in the absence of her son. Her critics did not see this conduct as the legitimate actions of a mother protecting her son's interests until his return to Ireland. They accused her of practising Brehon law as she deemed necessary and when it suited her. As well as appointing her own judge,¹⁴⁶ she operated independently and, 'with all opprobry and rebukeful words comaunded the said seneshall to be disobayed and none officers there to be allowed but only hers, wherby the said seneshall for jeopardy of his lif waws fayne to entremedle no ferther.'¹⁴⁷

In the absence of counterbalancing sources regarding Katherine's life, it would be easy to conclude that she was more audacious than her mother. Katherine was consistently represented in a hostile light in surviving presentments and was repeatedly accused of all manners of ill-treatment by people who felt bitterly aggrieved at her alleged maltreatment of them, and by extension, the punitive treatment afforded them by the Butlers and Fitzgeralds in general.

The biased nature of the surviving source material necessarily mitigates against forming a balanced representation of a woman whom contemporaries accused of subverting 'the king's laws as hanging men without autorite, pardonyng theves by taking canes and letting felons at libertie'.¹⁴⁸ The only recorded account of her mother being accused of killing or specifically hanging anyone survives in legend and folklore within Kilkenny. However, Katherine was accused by the gentlemen, commonalty and citizens of her own territory of committing

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 199

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

murder, taking bribes, and the pardoning of criminals: no such accusations appear within the available records of similar crimes against any of her five sisters, or her mother. It was claimed that when she extended or built castles or manor houses, she exploited citizens for her own ends and ‘often tooke persons oute of every village called in Irishe at their owne costs, to buylde her manors and howsws paying nothing therfore’.¹⁴⁹

It is clear that in her role as wife, widow and mother within the Power family, Katherine’s actions as listed here at length were no different from those of her father, brothers, wider male kin, of other aristocratic families in Ireland at that time. What is also clear, however, is that she was singled out as being particularly formidable and arbitrary in her exercise of power because she was a woman. Moreover, that she took charge of the Power estate in the aftermath of her husband’s death and during her son’s absence, aggrieved the tenantry to such an extent that every action she took apparently resulted in a litany of allegations and complaints within the presentments to the king’s commissioners. Her sex not only set her apart in the eyes of her tenants, it contributed to her condemnation at every turn.

Each year at Christmas and again at Easter, as she travelled about her territories, it was alleged by the tenants that she imposed as she wished, ‘a coidoiche [nights portion] otherwise called a night’s mete with as many as she list to bringe, and he that is not mete or redy to receave her and her company be set to xl Christmas and xx for easter and others more’.¹⁵⁰

When Katherine’s brother, James, or her father, Piers Butler, and other aristocratic men visited any of her castles or manors, ‘what is spente in mete and drink is cessed upon the countrey besides levying of all their horses and genets and money by the cessing of the same which is committed in iii yeares’.¹⁵¹ On an occasion when food, specifically meat, was

¹⁴⁹ Ibid, p. 200.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

required for her castle in Kilmacthomas, County Waterford, it was reported that some of Katherine's servants, including Robert More, 'constable of her castle at Kilmacthomas, hath robbed certain victuallers which used to bring this cities victuals from the Commeragh mountains and this was committed on the king's high waie'.¹⁵²

In a move to enhance her daughter and namesake's marriage dowry, Katherine was accused of theft of livestock. It was claimed that before 'marrying her daughter to Nicholas Deveux of Balymegy, took often kyne [cattle] and shepe towards her marriage, of every village in the cuntry, which catell her daughter Katheryn Power had awaye to her use'.¹⁵³

The seemingly endless stream of accusations against Katherine Butler to the king's commissioners ostensibly presents an image of a woman who used and abused her position and status to achieve her own ends. It is regrettable that no other account of her life survives which would permit a more rounded interpretation and allow for a fuller representation here. In particular, Stanihurst's celebration of Margaret Fitzgerald as patron whose progressive contributions to the Ormond patrimony included school building and bringing civility to the household and the wider earldom allow for a more balanced, wholistic assessment of her life character, and contribution to the preservation and advancement of her adoptive dynasty and its interests.

Five years after the king's commissioners commenced hearing presentments, in a response to the number of complaints and allegations laid against her which continued long after the four commissioners had completed hearings, and by way of attempting to deal with the behaviour

¹⁵² Ibid, p. 201.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

and obstinacy of Katherine Butler, on 29 July 1542 the lords of the council of Ireland issued the following orders. Katherine's brother, James, as earl of Ormond, and Chancellor John Allen, pronounced that one William Wyse of Waterford should not have his house or property in any way used by Katherine, her son or other nobles, for hostings or any form of coign and livery impositions. Furthermore, the lords noted that this instruction had previously been ignored, and must be adhered to in the future at pain of cost to all who disobeyed the order. The precise terms dictated that,

Lady Katherine Butler, Piers Power her son, and the gentlemen and freeholders of the barony of Galtyre in the county of Waterford reciting that it had been decreed by the Lord deputy and council, that William Wise as well for setting forth of civil order amongst them, as for other good reasons, should have his manor or house free from all impositions or hostings, but as this decree, hitherto had no effect, their lordships, marvelling much as they do "villipende" [ignore] the same, require them so to conform themselves to the decree as their lordships shall hear no further complaint of their obstinacy, and assure them that if they attempt the contrary, they shall be pursued to their great displeasure.¹⁵⁴

While on first inspection this response to the mounting tide of accusations against her might appear ominous, in reality it had little significance. That her brother was one of the chief signatories was of little consequence. As earl of Ormond, he was seen to be upholding the king's wishes, particularly when the Act of Kingly Title and surrender and re-grant were ushering in significant constitutional changes in the governance of Ireland. As the king's

¹⁵⁴ The Lords of the council to Lady Katherine Butler, Piers Power her son and the gentlemen and freeholders of the barony of Galtyre, County Waterford, 29 July 1542 in *Cal. pat. & close rolls, Ireland, I, Henry VIII–Elizabeth I, 1514–1575*, p. 112.

representative and lord deputy of Ireland her brother merely went along with the council's decision to issue the order. It did not impact on his own behaviour, either with, or on his sister's behalf. Five years earlier, in 1537, 'the common people of County of Waterford' had requested that the king's high commissioners, 'appoint a sheriff and officers, and these officers to be English and not of the birth of this land'.¹⁵⁵ They specifically proposed 'Mr. Seyntleger [as] the meetest to be sheriff'.¹⁵⁶ They were, as 'freeholders of the county,' willing to 'gladly bear such charges' as thought necessary for the maintenance of these officers. As emphasised in chapter four, the subjects of the wider earldom of Ormond had neither rejected nor despised Katherine's mother Margaret, as dowager countess.¹⁵⁷ She was not subjected to a fraction of the vitriol directed against her daughter. It is unclear why on 27 April 1539, shortly before the death of her father Piers Butler, Katherine,

relict of Robert Poer of Rathgwoll, in her pur viduity [widowhood] grants to Piers, Earl of Ormond and Ossory, Margaret his countess, and their heirs and assigns for ever all her messuages, lands, tenements, etc, in the towns or tenements of Rathbyrne and Coroneston, county Tipperary.¹⁵⁸

Clearly Katherine regarded these lands as particularly important to her own interests. Although it appears that she may have granted them to her parents as a gift, in reality, it is likely that she did so in an effort to protect her hold on lands, tenements and property in these townlands.

¹⁵⁵ Verdict of the Commoners of County Waterford, Peter Dobbyn and twelve other jurors, Oct. 1537 in *L. & P. Hen. VIII*, 12, 2, 313.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁷ Robert Rothe's Register or Pedigree of the house of Ormond, 1616 (TCD, MS. 842, f. 156r.).

¹⁵⁸ *Cal. Ormond deeds*, ed. Curtis, iv (1509–1547), no. 233.

Significantly just as Stanihurst chose masculine terms such as manlike and tall of stature to describe Margaret, Countess of Ormond, Hore and Graves also describe Katherine Butler as Lord Power's 'masculine widow'.¹⁵⁹ The almost endless list of complaints mainly covered the period of Katherine's widowhood when she allegedly 'pretending the king's county [Waterford] was [her son's] by succession of inheritance'.¹⁶⁰ The securing and preservation of the family dynasty was a common concern for women as wives, mothers and in particular as widows, when their position – as in Katherine's case – was undermined and could be threatened by external enemies and from within their own families. As outlined in chapter four, after the death of her husband Piers, Margaret Fitzgerald encountered significant difficulties with her own son and heir James, ninth earl, regarding her share of the earl's will. Katherine Butler's problems only worsened throughout her widowhood. Her son, Piers, served with King Henry VIII's army at the Siege of Boulogne in 1544 for which he was subsequently knighted.¹⁶¹ However, Katherine's position was seriously weakened as Piers did not live long enough to assume his father's title and succeed as second Baron le Poer. He died in October 1545 and his remains were shipped back to Ireland and buried at Mothel Abbey in County Waterford.¹⁶² Writing from Waterford on 5 January 1546, Sir William Wyse, a royal commissioner serving in Ireland during Katherine's tenure as baroness after Piers's death, wrote that she and her brother, James, would be 'in attendance at the Abbey of Mothel in Waterford where they would celebrate a memorial for the soul of Lord Power, amidst much

¹⁵⁹ Ibid, p. 183.

¹⁶⁰ As quoted in *The social state of the southern and eastern counties of Ireland in the sixteenth century*, ed. Hore & Graves, p. 183.

¹⁶¹ Stanihurst, *The Historie of Ireland*, p. 314.

¹⁶² Sir William Wyse to Lord Deputy Sir Anthony St Leger, 3 Jan. 1545 in *Cal. S.P. Ire., 1509–1573*, p. 70.

provision of meat and drink'.¹⁶³ Wyse noted that 'the poor people are likely to sing *requiescant in pace*, but the more they cry the more sorrow increaseth'.¹⁶⁴

On 2 December 1545 Wyse explained to the lord deputy that he could not successfully raise taxes or collect rent in the shire of Waterford, without sufficient 'protection from the extortions of Lady Katherine Power'.¹⁶⁵ In keeping with the pace of change that was occurring throughout Ireland following the dissolution of the monasteries and the subsequent windfall of land and ecclesiastical property that came into the hands of aristocratic families such as the Butlers and the Powers, Katherine took steps to ensure that she did not lose out on her family's share of the spoils. She set about securing her hold on church property, some of which was in County Waterford. A lease relating to Mothel abbey, dated 1 August 1545, refers to the abbey and all its possessions which in 1540, were granted to Katherine's son, Edward Power, the last abbot. The lease granted the 'same monastery and all its possessions to Katherine Butler, of Curroghmore for 21 years'.¹⁶⁶ Edward was forced to surrender the abbey in 1540 but owing to his family connections the outcome proved very favourable for him as he was granted the abbey lands for life.

Katherine's other son, John, known as 'Shane Mor', succeeded his brother, Piers, as third Baron Power. John was married to Alice Fitzgerald, third daughter of James Fitzgerald, thirteenth Earl of Desmond (d.1558) who was by then his step-father. Sometime before 1550 Katherine remarried; her second husband was James Fitzgerald, thirteenth earl of Desmond. She was his third wife. By then, Katherine was in her late forties and the couple had no

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶⁶ See Redmond, *An historical memoir*.

children.¹⁶⁷ With no surviving record of Katherine's relationship with her son, John, or her time as wife of James Fitzgerald, it is difficult to ascertain whether her alleged domineering behaviour and reputation continued in her second marriage, or if she was content now that her younger son had succeeded as a new peer. There is one brief mention in 1547 of a royal pardon having been granted to 'Lady Katherine Butler of Curraghmore in the County of Waterford, widow,'¹⁶⁸ and another to her son John 'of Curraghmore in the County of Waterford, gentleman'¹⁶⁹ but no reason for the issuing of the pardons is recorded.

While she may have been a widow and beyond childbearing years, by the time of her second marriage, Katherine was the aunt of Thomas Butler, tenth earl of Ormond (her brother, James, was killed in London in 1546)¹⁷⁰ whose mother (Katherine's sister-in-law) was Joan Fitzgerald, countess of Ormond and Ossory, daughter and heir general of James, tenth earl of Desmond (d.1529) (see chapter six). Thomas was a close confidante of the queen as well as being the queen's cousin, and the union between his aunt, Katherine, and the house of Desmond further united the Ormond and Desmond dynasties and proved important in maintaining peaceful relations between both dynasties during the mid-sixteenth century. Although there were no children from this marriage, it positioned Katherine as countess of Desmond, while her third son from her first marriage had successfully succeeded as baron of Curraghmore, a minor baronetcy in Waterford, created in 1375.¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁷ Anthony M. MacCormack, 'James Fitzgerald, thirteenth earl of Desmond (d.1558), nobleman' in *ODNB*, University Press, 2004, online edn 2008 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/> [4 Sept. 2015]].

¹⁶⁸ Pardon for Lady Katherine Butler, 1547 (no. 53) in *Cal. pat. & close rolls, Ire., i, Henry VIII–Elizabeth I, 1514–1575*, p. 161.

¹⁶⁹ Pardon for John Power, 1547 (no. 57) in *Cal. pat. & close rolls, Ire., i, Henry VIII–Elizabeth I, 1514–1575*, p. 162.

¹⁷⁰ John Burke, *A general and heraldic dictionary of the peerage and baronetage of the British Empire* (London, 1833), p. 266.

¹⁷¹ *Debrett's illustrated peerage of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland* (London, 1865), p. 344.

Through her two short-lived marriages, Katherine maintained her aristocratic status and lifestyle and, in a manner similar to her mother, remained committed to her second husband's family with whom she elected to be buried. Widow of Sir Richard La Poer, and wife of James, earl of Desmond, she died on 17 March 1552 and her remains are interred at the Franciscan friary in Askeaton County Limerick, where generations of Desmond Fitzgeralds are buried.¹⁷²

The political importance of marriage

The success or failure of Old English families in maintaining or advancing their dynastic interests and holdings within both anglicised and frontier areas often hinged on marriage which, according to Carol O'Connor, 'as the core institution of the wider kin group, was crucial to this style of family orientated politics'.¹⁷³ To understand their individual and collective contributions to this grander process of dynastic aggrandisement, one must analyse these women's lives and alliances within the context of rapidly socio-political structures, unprecedented opportunities for advancement within a new political regime, and intensifying competition between rival magnates and factions in Ireland during the 1530s and 1540s as well as in relation to their female contemporaries in other aristocratic families in Ireland, England and continental Europe. The Kildare women, unlike their Butler cousins, were well connected at court, especially Elizabeth Fitzgerald (1527-90), daughter of Gareth Oge, ninth earl of Kildare. She married twice, her second spouse being Lord Edward Clinton, first earl of Lincoln. Having been reared at court as a companion to Princess Elizabeth in the 1530s, she

¹⁷² James Graves, 'The Earls of Desmond' in *Journal of the Historical and Archaeological Association of Ireland*, 3rd ser., i, no. ii (1869), pp 459–98 [www.jstor.org/stable/25497799 [16 May 2017]].

¹⁷³ O'Connor, 'The Kildare women', p. 9.

later became a close friend and lady-in-waiting to Elizabeth as queen in 1558.¹⁷⁴ Apart from the Kildare women, Lady Agnes Campbell (1526–1601), daughter of Colin Campbell, fourth earl of Argyle in Scotland, brought 1000 mercenary soldiers with her as part of her dowry when she married Turlough Luineach O’Neil in 1569.¹⁷⁵ By contrast, none of the six Butler sisters were raised at court, served time as ladies-in-waiting, or became close companions of the monarch. However, some of their children including Thomas, son of James Butler, and Barnaby Fitzpatrick, son of Lady Margaret Butler, spent considerable time at court as children and ‘became the school-fellows of the [young] prince, subsequently King Edward VI’.¹⁷⁶

By keeping her six daughters in Ireland and arranging their marriages with men from Gaelic and Old English families, Margaret Fitzgerald and Piers Ruadh made full use of their daughter’s marriages for the benefit of the earldom. On the whole, their strategy was successful. The institution of marriage enabled them as parents and rulers to rebuild and maintain the earldom, and it was the lives and unions of their children, which made that possible.

Regrettably a dearth of source material for Ellice, Joan, and Eleanor Butler, the three youngest daughters of Piers and Margaret, limits our ability to assess the significance of their contributions to the advancement of Ormond interests on a level comparable to Margaret or Katherine. What is clear, however, is that they were recognised as the highest status brides in

¹⁷⁴ Lady Elizabeth Clinton was also the great-granddaughter of Queen Elizabeth Woodville, (d.1492) wife of Edward IV (d.1483).

¹⁷⁵ Hayes-McCoy, *Scots mercenary forces in Ireland*, pp 98-107.

¹⁷⁶ Sir Edward Sullivan, Baronet, *Account of facsimiles of National manuscripts of Ireland, from the earliest extant specimens, to 1719* (London, 1884), p. 169.

Ireland, alongside their Fitzgerald cousins, particularly in Gaelic circles¹⁷⁷ at a time when Gaelic men sought to get ahead by surrendering titles and lands to the Crown and allying with the powerful houses of Ormond and Kildare.

Joan Butler: middle daughter and promoter of the dynasty

Joan Butler (d.1528), third eldest daughter of Piers and Margaret, was one of two daughters who married within the wider Butler dynasty. Her husband was Lord James Butler, baron of Dunboyne, whom she married c.1519¹⁷⁸ and the couple had two sons, both of whom, together with Katherine Butler's son, Lord Power, the earl of Ormond offered as captains general 'to have the rule and conduyct of one hundrethe of [the earl's] men'¹⁷⁹ as they fought for Henry VIII 'in this moste Royall voyage for the subduyng of your majesties auncient ennemye the Frenche king' at Boulogne in the mid-1540s.¹⁸⁰ Although these are the only surviving references to Joan Butler, they suggest a close relationship between Joan, her brother and her sons who were clearly willing in serving interests of the Crown, and by extension, the earldom.¹⁸¹ The Boulogne campaign marked the high point in Henry's relationship with elements of the aristocracy in Ireland, both Old English and Gaelic, including James, ninth

¹⁷⁷ Ibid, p. 29.

¹⁷⁸ Charles Mosley (ed.), *Burke's peerage, baronetage, and knightage*, 107th edn (3 vols, Delaware, 2003), i. p. 1212.

¹⁷⁹ Correspondence between the governments of England and Ireland, 1538-46 in *S.P. Hen. VIII*, iii, 496.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

¹⁸¹ Mary Ann Lyons, *Franco-Irish relations, 1500–1610: politics, migration and trade*, (Suffolk, 2003), p. 15. according to Lyons, 'Henry VIII's deployment of 600 Gaelic soldiers during the Boulogne campaign in 1544-46 represented an important, symbolic and practical demonstration of Irish confidence in and support for the English crown, it was neither unprecedented nor unique'. See also D.G. White, 'Henry VIII's Irish kerne in France and Scotland, 1544-45' in *Irish Sword*, iii (1957-58), pp 213-24.

earl of Ormond. By enlisting his nephews James Butler displayed his personal loyalty and that of his immediate family, including his sisters, to the king.¹⁸²

Ellice Butler: the importance of marriage as a political power base

Ellice was the fourth daughter of Margaret Fitzgerald and Piers. Like several of her sisters, she married twice. Her first marriage to Oliver Morres, whom she outlived, took place sometime between 1505 and 1507.¹⁸³ Her second husband was Gerald FitzJohn Fitzgerald of Dromana, Lord Decie, whom she married some time before 1529. As part of the dowry for her first marriage, her father the earl, gave to Oliver Morres a sizeable share of lands which he (Piers) had usurped from his other son-in-law, Barnaby Fitzpatrick, husband of his second daughter, Margaret. While it seems Piers favoured one son-in-law above the other, it is clear from having two daughters married to men within close proximity that the earl wished to strengthen the Ormond presence in Tipperary. Ellice and Oliver had two sons, Oliver Oge, and Edmond. According to the Lodge manuscripts, in her will – which no longer survives – Ellice paid particular attention to her ‘dearly beloved son, Oliver – Oge’.¹⁸⁴ In 1523 her

¹⁸² Other contemporary female aristocrats in Ireland were instrumental in providing their husbands with soldiers, albeit mercenaries as distinct from sons. For instance, Lady Agnes Campbell’s daughter Finola (also known as Inion Dubh, d.1608), wife of Hugh O’Donnell (d.1602), provided her husband with direct access to Scottish military resources as part of her marriage agreement. In 1560 the family of Catherine MacLean (fl.1540s) agreed to provide 500 soldiers as well as artillery as part of her marriage agreement to Calvagh O’Donnell of Ulster (d.1566): see Hayes-McCoy, *Scots mercenary forces*, pp 98-107; John MacKechnie, ‘Treaty between Argyle and O’Donnell’ in *Scottish Gaelic Studies*, vii (1953), pp 94-9.

¹⁸³ Hervey De Montmorency-Morres, *Genealogical memoirs of the family of Montmorency, styled De Marisco or Morres* (Paris, 1817), p. ccxxxviii.

¹⁸⁴ Most of the original wills and administrations in the Public Record Office were destroyed in 1922, along with almost all the Will and Grant Books into which they had been transcribed. In his account of the memoirs of the MacMorres family, Henry MacMorres did not elaborate on the specific details of Lady Ellice’s will, other than noting how it was that she remembered Oliver Oge in particular. (Will originally held in Prerogative Office, Lodge MSS.)

husband, Oliver, died and was buried in the abbey church of Holy Cross in County Tipperary. It seems she was buried with Oliver, as ‘the arms of Butler and Fitzgerald may be deciphered’¹⁸⁵ from the tomb, displaying her family’s arms and those of her mother Margaret. Ellice died in 1546,¹⁸⁶ pre-deceasing her second husband Gerald Fitzjohn Fitzgerald who lived until 1553. By that marriage, she bore three sons, Sir Maurice, Sir James and Sir Gerald, the eldest, Maurice, was twenty-three when his father died.

Eleanor Butler: propitious marriage alliances

Like her sister Joan, Eleanor – second youngest and fifth daughter of Piers and Margaret – also married within the wider Butler dynasty. She married Thomas Butler, first baron of Cahir, sometime after November 1525. The background to Eleanor Butler’s marriage with her cousin provides a rare insight into the authority that her father, the eighth earl, exercised in choosing marriage partners and negotiating the details of his daughters’ marriage jointures. The following deed shows that Eleanor’s husband was bound not only to his wife, but to her father and the earldom

Thomas Fitzedmund Butler shall truly accomplish all such articles ... and agreements made between the said earl, [Piers Butler] and Edmund FitzThomas Butler, father unto the said Thomas, and that the said Thomas shall make a jointure of ‘Ballydrenan’ and ‘The Rekyll’ unto Eleanor Butler ... as the learned earl’s council shall devise and ordain ... Thomas shall during his life well and truly accomplish and observe all the ordinances made between his said father and the earl as well as the covenants here

¹⁸⁵ Montmorency-Morres, *Genealogical memoirs*, p. 58.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid*, p. 55.

above made, upon performance of which the above bond shall be null and void, otherwise to stand in full force.¹⁸⁷

So important was the marriage contract that this deed was created and approved by the earl's council. A detailed settlement, it provides insights into the intricate negotiations associated with aristocratic daughters' marriages. That Eleanor's jointure included just two specific farms, namely 'Ballydrenan' and 'The Rekyll', reveals that as the second youngest daughter, her marriage jointure was considerably smaller than those of her older sisters. As with all aristocratic and middle-ranking families in Ireland, England and Continental Europe, there was clearly a pecking order among siblings.¹⁸⁸

Ellen Butler: pawn or player?

Ellen was the youngest child and sixth daughter of the Butler family. Her marriage to Donough O'Brien, which took place before 1533, was not the first relationship between members of the two families, John Butler, sixth earl, having fathered an illegitimate son, James, with Renalda Ni Bhriain during the 1460s (Chapter two). As highlighted, the O'Briens remained supporters of the Ormonds long after the liaison between Renalda and the sixth earl and the marriage between Ellen and Donough in 1533 suited both families. Donough and his uncle, Murrough, were keen to ingratiate themselves with Henry VIII.

In that context, Donough's marriage to Ellen augured well for him and for his family's political status. John Alen, Master of the Rolls, in a report written in April 1533 to Thomas Cromwell, explained the reason for the marriage: it was intended, he stated as a 'means of

¹⁸⁷ *Cal. Ormond deeds*, ed. Curtis, iv (1509–47), p. 107.

¹⁸⁸ For further insights into the pecking order within an aristocratic family, see Simon Payling, "The politics of family: late medieval marriage contracts" in R.H. Britnell and A.J. Pollard (eds), *The McFarlane legacy: studies in late medieval politics and society* (New York, 1995), pp 21-47; Pollock, "Teach her how to live under obedience", pp 231-58.

remedying the “mysorders” of the country’.¹⁸⁹ The O’Briens of Thomond, together with two of the Gaelic Irish families into which Ellen’s sister, Margaret, had married, the Burkes of Clanricarde and the O’Moorees of Leix, were opponents of the Fitzgeralds of Kildare. As far back as 1504, the O’Briens and O’Moorees had sided with ‘the Burkes of Clanricarde, against Kildare and his host of allies’.¹⁹⁰ From the 1520s onwards, increasingly Piers and Margaret contracted marriages for their daughters with families who were not supporters of the Kildares. While strengthening and consolidating the Ormond dynasty’s network of allies and territories, the daughters’ marriages served to alienate the Kildares even further. John Alen’s comments in April 1533 shed light on two of these marriages, highlighting the high esteem in which Ellen’s husband’s family was held in sixteenth-century Ireland;

The Erle of Ossorie hath maryed oon of his doughters to ‘MacGyllipatrick, and, is denyzyn whome I know, the Erle of Ossory willing, wolbe conformable to the same. O’ Brenes elder son, whoo is the moste man of power amonge the Irishrie, hath married another daughter of the Erle of Ossorie, who may be like allured, and is also denyzyn.¹⁹¹

Donough O’Brien ‘the fat’¹⁹² was eldest son of Conor O’Brien, King of Thomond. As Donough was a minor at the time of his father’s death in 1540, he was set aside from the succession by his uncle, Murrough, on the principle of tanistry. Hore and Graves contend that O’Brien must have been very young when he married Ellen, as her father, in a letter to the

¹⁸⁹ John Alen to Cromwell, Apr. 1533 in *S.P. Henry VIII*, ii, pt. iii, p. 171; Carrigan *The history & antiquities of the diocese of Ossory*, i, 82.

¹⁹⁰ *Annals of Ulster*, iv, 349 cited in Edwards, *The Ormond lordship*, p. 152.

¹⁹¹ John Alen to Cromwell, Apr. 1533 in *S.P. Henry VIII*, ii, pt. iii, p. 171; Carrigan, *The history & antiquities of the diocese of Ossory*, p. 82.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*

government dated 17 January 1536, referred to Conor O'Brien being still alive. Piers remarked how with much 'cost and charge' he had kept his son-in-law (Donough) from becoming an outlaw against his country with his father and his wider family, and prevented O'Brien from joining 'in werre with Thomas of Kyldare, or nowe'.¹⁹³ Conscious that his uncle, the taniste, would prevent his succession to the chieftainship of the O'Briens, and keen to promote his own interests, Ellen's husband benefitted from contracting a marriage with a daughter of the house of Ormond. He did so 'with the view of obtaining their powerful interest towards securing him in the seigniorie', of which according to English usage he was the rightful heir.¹⁹⁴ The marriage served his political aims. For the Ormonds, the outcome was more complicated. Through Ellen's marriage to a young, powerful Gaelic Irish man who submitted to the Crown, and was recognised became Earl of Thomond, Ormond was drawn into the succession dispute within the Thomond lordship.

The Butlers attempted unsuccessfully to 'restore Donough to his father's position, by making hostile inroads into O'Brien's country, and besieging their principal castles'¹⁹⁵ which, once taken, they handed over to Donough. However, his clan refused outright to recognise his claim to the chieftainship, and instead continued to support Murrough O'Brien, his uncle. After a decade of strife between the Butlers, the government, and the O'Briens, in 1543 Murrough's right was recognised by the Crown: 'having proceeded to England and made a humble and free submission to the king, entering into an undertaking to observe English customs and laws for the future',¹⁹⁶ he was created earl of Thomond, and Baron Inchiquin,

¹⁹³ Piers Butler to Privy Council, 17 Jan. 1536 in *S. P. Hen. VIII*, ii, pt. iii, 280n; Carrigan, *The history & antiquities of the diocese of Ossory*, i, 82.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁶ Archdall's *Lodge's peerage*, ii, 27-8, cited in Graves & Prim, *The history, architecture & antiquities of the cathedral church of St Canice, Kilkenny*, p. 278

with remainder to the heirs' male of his body.¹⁹⁷ Donough was created Baron of Ibracken as compensation for the frustration and injustice he had suffered and was given full right of succession to the earldom of Thomond upon his uncle's death in 1551. In turn, the titles passed to his posterity. During his life, he was considered 'the most man of power amongst the Irishrie',¹⁹⁸ and by the time he died in 1553, he and Ellen had two sons and three daughters.

There is no surviving account of Ellen's widowhood or involvement (if any) in the affairs of either Thomond or Ormond prior to her death in 1597.¹⁹⁹ According to historian John O' Donoghue in his account of the history of the O'Briens, Ellen is thought to have 'retired from the troubles and dissensions of Thomond to her native place, as her monument is to be seen in the cathedral of St. Canice, Kilkenny'.²⁰⁰ It is likely that she was interred in her native Kilkenny owing to her having been a widow for such a long time, longer than she had been married.

On 6 October 1535, an English officer in the Lord Deputy's forces sent to assist Ellen's brother, James, informed Cromwell that O'Brien, under pressure within his own patrimony, had confronted James Butler and reminded him that,

I have marryd your syster and for bycawys that I have marryd your syster I have forsakyn my father, myn unkle, and all my frendes, and my counterey to come too

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁹⁸ Irish Council to Sir Thomas Cromwell, July 1533 in *S.P. Hen. VIII*, ii, pt. iii, 285; John O' Donoghue, *A historical memoir of the O'Briens with note, appendix, and a genealogical table of their several branches* (Dublin, 1860), p. 166.

¹⁹⁹ *Annals of the Four Masters* [www.ucc.ie/celt/online/T100005F/text009html] M1597, 12 Feb. 2016].

²⁰⁰ O' Donoghue, *A historical memoir*, p. 485.

you to helpe too doo the kyng servys. I have been sore wounded, and I have no rewarde, nor nothing to leve upon. What wold ye have me do?²⁰¹

This outburst by Ellen's husband vividly illustrates the real politik of such marriages. O'Brien demonstrated little or no concern for his wife. He vented his frustration at the earl, and by extension his wife's family, raging that he had given up everything to marry Ellen. The episode offers a glimpse of the vulnerable position in which even aristocratic women such as the Butler sisters found themselves, effectively being deployed as pawns in provincial contests for power.

Ellen's tomb in St Canice's Cathedral, Kilkenny city is inscribed:

Here lies the illustrious and noble Lady Ellena Butler, daughter of the noble lord Peter Butler, Earl of Ormonde and late the pious wife of the most illustrious lord Donald O'Brien, Earl of Thomond, who died 2 of June 1597.²⁰²

The extent of her piety and indeed her relationship with her siblings and her parents is unknown. Some parallels may be drawn between Ellen as the youngest sister and her older sister, Margaret. Both women's marriages were with men from Gaelic Ireland, and were unions which augmented the strength and resources of the dynasty into which they were born. Their four contracted unions with men beyond their immediate sphere did not lead to a deterioration of Ormond interests. While their affinal families initially benefitted from having a wife and mother of the highest social status in sixteenth-century Ireland, the

²⁰¹ Graves & Prim, *The history, architecture & antiquities of the cathedral church of St. Canice, Kilkenny*, p. 278.

²⁰² *Ibid*, p. 276.

Ormond dynasty also reaped benefits through these strong alliances, which generally translated as military support in times of strife, notably against the Kildare Fitzgeralds. Donough O'Brien (who as mentioned above complained about receiving no reward for his support of the Ormond dynasty while on an expedition to Cork in 1535 and about having surrendered a lot upon his marriage), lamented the loss of support from his father, uncles and wider family. Ellen's marriage was clearly a union that, from his perspective at least, benefitted the interests of her family.

Conclusion

As with all aristocratic families a good education and securing the eldest son's inheritance of their assets (and when relevant, titles), were priorities for all of the Butler sisters and to achieve these goals, several among them made personal representations on their son's behalf. Margaret presented herself at the court of Queen Elizabeth in 1558 requesting that provision be made for her sons' education following the death of her husband and their father, Rory O' Moore, at which time she faced threats from the wider O' Moore family. Countess Margaret's granddaughter, Lady Mary Bourke, daughter of Ellen Butler, countess of Thomond, appeared before the lord justice and council of Ireland in Dublin on 17 January 1579. She requested that members of the council present her cause to the lords in England. The council recorded that on,

this day the Lady Mary Bourke came hither, sister to the Earl of Thomond ... and did bring her eldest son unto us to this city, and exhibited a supplication, the substance whereof is, that her Majesty should take the care of the education of her said son, and that we would appoint some relief unto herself, that had been lately spoiled by the

rebels of her whole living; which relief, if it might not be during her life, yet she prayed it during the continuance of the war in Munster.²⁰³

Such representation by both sisters on behalf of their sons was far from exceptional among women from Gaelic Irish or Old English families, and for the majority of such women, their petitions were successful. The participation of Irish women into politics, including at a private, familial level, reveals how wives and mothers, made significant interventions at court and in the Irish Council chamber.

Margaret Butler's three marriages together resulted in more alliances for the dynasty than did her younger sister Ellen who remained a widow for over forty years after the death of her husband. Margaret's collateral as a potential bride steadily increased after each of her marriages ended. By contrast, in living a pious life during her widowhood, Ellen appears to have resembled her mother who in her widowhood spent her time 'most godly, in contemplation and prayer'.²⁰⁴ Whether through making representations at court or living pious lives in widowhood, the daughters of Margaret Fitzgerald emulated their mother in their own lives as wives, mothers and widows. Her six daughters, whilst living and operating in a strongly patriarchal society, were undoubtedly cognisant of the advantages of a carefully chosen husband not only for themselves but crucially for the dynasty itself. As this chapter has shown, three of the six sisters married on more than one occasion. The advantages of such unions were not restricted to men alone. Marriage placed each of these Butler women in key positions between her natal and affinal families and as mothers of the future generation

²⁰³ Lord Justice Sir William Drury and the Council of Ireland, 17 Jan. 1579 in *Cal. Carew MSS*, 1575–1588, p.201

²⁰⁴ Robert Rothe's Register or Pedigree of the house of Ormond, 1616 (TCD, MS. 842, f. 156r.).

of the families into which they married. Women such as their mother Margaret, their aunt, Eleanor Fitzgerald, and their cousin Lady Elizabeth Clinton, capitalised on the advantages available to them through marital political unions. Such women bore ‘the responsibility of both her gender, and the position of the family unit in the wider political mechanism’.²⁰⁵ Moreover, it was the institution of marriage itself which challenged the ‘patriarchal principles upon which early modern society was ruled’²⁰⁶ and paradoxically launched many women into positions of power, both privately and publicly that they may not otherwise have had the opportunity to do. To that end, while marriage was an avenue for women to develop and exert their authority within a male dominated society, it was also the foothold and stage from which they ‘could exert political and public influence within their respective family’s lordship’.²⁰⁷ This was not unique to Ireland, and was also applicable to English and continental aristocratic women.²⁰⁸

Through her marriage, Katherine Butler, as mother and widow, wielded her authority and dominance in a way that would not have been possible had she remained single. Her portrayal as a vengeful and wicked woman in contemporary presentments, reveal a woman who negotiated a milieu ‘that may have necessitated the development of women who were particularly pugnacious’.²⁰⁹ Likewise, her sister Margaret through her status as wife widow and mother, presented herself at the court of Queen Elizabeth and appealed successfully for

²⁰⁵ O’Connor, ‘The Kildare women’, p. 12.

²⁰⁶ Harris, *English aristocratic women*, pp 61-87.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 3

²⁰⁸ David Cressey, *Birth, marriage and death: ritual and the life cycle in Tudor and Stuart England* (Oxford, 1997); Keith Dockray, ‘Why did fifteenth-century gentry marry?: the Pastons, Plumpton and Stonors reconsidered’ in Michael Jones (ed.), *Gentry and lesser nobility in late medieval England* (New York, 1986), pp 61-80; Evergate (ed.), *Aristocratic women in medieval France*.

²⁰⁹ Gillian Kenny, ‘The women of County Louth in the later medieval period, 1170–1540’ in *Louth Arch. & Hist. Soc. Jn.*, xxvi, no. 4 (2008), pp 579-94.

the secure futures of her sons, in a manner similar to her niece, Lady Mary Burke. Their concern for their children's welfare and future reflects their lives as mothers, despite the scant evidence of their private lives within both kin and affinal families. Had these women remained unmarried, their private lives as single women would not have afforded or facilitated them the opportunities and position which they acquired and cultivated through the institution of marriage. It was the multiple marriages of the 'Ormond women' which served to repair and re-establish the earldom in keeping with the determination of their mother. She weathered a succession crisis in which her husband – and thereby she, as his countess – was central to his assuming the earldom, together with the legacies of the Wars of the Roses, namely the deterioration of the Irish earldom in the ensuing vacuum of decades of absent earls, whose primary interests lay in the expansion of the English earldom, and establishing ties at court predominantly through their own marriages. Whether in Ireland, England or on the Continent, the 'lifecycles' of aristocratic women from daughter through to widowhood, was a common denominator. Through fulfilment of these roles associated with these life cycle stages they demonstrated 'their ability to shape and influence political events'.²¹⁰ Following the fall of the house of Kildare (1534-5) a swing away from reliance on overmighty magnates as the Butlers and Fitzgeralds on the part of the Crown led to the passage in 1541 of the 'Act of Kingly Title for Ireland'.²¹¹ This Act resulted in a policy of surrender and re-grant in Ireland as many Gaelic lords submitted to the crown and relinquished their customs and titles pledging to live by English laws and practices.²¹² The lives of the Ormond women discussed in this chapter were directly impacted, not only as their family was at the front and centre of many of these changes, but they themselves were placed

²¹⁰ O'Dowd, *A history of women in Ireland*, p. 18.

²¹¹ G.A. Hayes-McCoy, 'The Tudor conquest (1534–1603)' in T.W. Moody and F.X. Martin (eds.), *The course of Irish history* (Cork, 1984), p. 176.

²¹² *Ibid*, p. 178.

at the fore, in the competition for suitable wives who facilitated the advancement of their parents and husbands. The changes which took place in the middle decades of the sixteenth century set these women apart from the generation of Ormond women who had preceded them, as the ‘dual nature of lordship, landholding and the fabric of society’²¹³ was changing irrevocably. Their experiences shaped the ways in which the Ormond women who came after then fulfilled the same roles of daughters, wives, mothers and widows, not only within their own dynasty but on the wider political stage in early modern Ireland.

When James Butler earl of Ormond died in London on 28 October 1546, his widow, Joan Fitzgerald, dowager countess of Ormond, emerged as a woman who made an impact from then down to her death in 1565 that extended well beyond the domestic realm of the Butler dynasty. Through her subsequent marriages, her role as guardian of her son and heir, Thomas, and her political relationship with Queen Elizabeth I, she emerged as a key figure in both the preservation of the earldom and the maintenance of peace in Ireland in the middle of the sixteenth century. She successfully adapted to the rapidly changing society in which she operated. Alongside her six sisters-in-law, she adhered to the priorities of her mother-in-law, pursuing the preservation and maintenance of the earldom as her primary goal. Given her exceptional importance, Joan Fitzgerald, ninth countess of Ormond is the focus of the next chapter.

²¹³ Steven G. Ellis, ‘The collapse of the Gaelic world, 1450–1650’ in *IHS*, xxxi, no. 124 (1999), pp 449-69.

Chapter 6

‘You have too piteous a face to be a warrior’¹:

Joan Fitzgerald, Countess of Ormond Ossory and Desmond – agent, peace broker, advocate

Unlike earlier generations, the Ormond women of the mid-sixteenth century found themselves at the epicentre of its expansion and indeed its apogee. As attested by the roles of Margaret Fitzgerald and her daughters, and the Kildare and Desmond women, their lives ‘best represent the existence of a coterie of Irish aristocratic families bartering for political control in much the same way as political factions operated for power in the English court’.² In Ireland, the coterminous lives of the Kildare, Desmond and Ormond women reveal the political possibilities available to aristocratic women from Old English families. This thesis has sought to demonstrate how such women proved very capable of exercising influence and power through their roles in the private and public arenas within which they operated. Their families, well positioned in the world of sixteenth-century Irish politics, presented them with such opportunities. This chapter explores the means by which the Ormond women could have what O’Connor terms ‘a definable impact on the public sphere’.³ On the strength of these women’s astute ‘manipulation of the male centred marriage network’⁴, their involvement in guardianship, estate management, or their individual activities in the political sphere, their

¹ Brian Jones to Joan Fitzgerald, September 1549, quoted in ‘The constable of Carlow’s words of such things as my Lady of Ormond spake unto him’ in HMC, *Cal. Salisbury MSS*, 1306–1571, no. 78.

² O’Connor, ‘The Kildare women’, p. 39.

³ *Ibid*, p. 52.

⁴ *Ibid*.

lives were not restricted to domestic or familial roles. This chapter examines the life of Joan Fitzgerald, daughter-in-law of Countess Margaret Fitzgerald, a woman who, like Margaret, took on the role of a powerful and influential woman at the centre of dynastic politics between the houses of Ormond, Desmond, and the Crown.

I

Little is known about Joan's early years, including the year of her birth. She was the only legitimate child and heiress of James Fitzgerald, eleventh earl of Desmond (*d.*1529). The earldom in which she grew up was extensive, well developed, and included

three cities; Waterford, Cork and Limerick. The Earl of Desmond has lordships and vassals. He has dominions among the wild tribes; he has lords and knights on his estates who pay him tribute. He has ten castles of his own, some of which are strong and well built.⁵

No account of Joan's life between her father's death in 1529 and her marriage in 1532 exists. As heiress to the deceased earl, the wardship of Joan's body and her inheritance should have gone to the king; yet, there is no reference to Joan Fitzgerald until her first marriage.

According to historians F. Pollack and F. Maitland, there is uncertainty about 'whether the wardship of a woman was to endure until she attained the age of twenty-one, or was to cease when she attained the age of fourteen'.⁶ What is, however, certain is that 'marriage with her lord's consent put an end to the wardship of a woman'.⁷ One possible explanation for Joan's absence from the written record may be because the wardship of a female ceased when she

⁵ Cited in Brian Fitzgerald, *The Geraldines*, p. 186.

⁶ Sir Frederick Pollock and Frederic Maitland, *The history of English law* (Cambridge, 1923), p. 320.

⁷ *Ibid.*

was fourteen, but if her wardship continued until her marriage in 1532, she would have been a royal ward in the interim.

Joan would have been prepared from childhood to be the wife of an Irish chieftain or an Old English lord. By the time of her death in 1565, she had married three times and was twice widowed which was not unusual for a woman of her rank. As wife and mother, she was pivotal in maintaining peace between the rival houses of Desmond and Ormond. Fiercely protective of her son and heir, Thomas's interests during his wardship, Joan corresponded with successive Tudor monarchs – in particular Queen Elizabeth I – and earned a reputation among the most political women of her generation. As has been highlighted in this study, between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries, despite being rival dynasties, a number of Butler and Fitzgerald women married into the other family, in line with the norm, not just in Ireland, but among aristocratic families in England and on the Continent.⁸ Historian Anthony McCormack has emphasised that in light of Desmond-Ormond rivalry dating back several generations, these marriages and these wives 'performed a valuable service not only for the Butler and Fitzgerald families, but also for the political life of Ireland in the medieval and early modern periods'.⁹

At Christmas 1532 Walter Cowley, the loyal Butler retainer and close ally of Countess Margaret Fitzgerald, writing from Kilkenny, informed Thomas Cromwell that 'my Lord

⁸ See Harris, *English aristocratic women*; Francis Gies and Joseph Gies, *Marriage and the family in the middle ages* (New York, 1978); Jack Goody, *The development of the family and marriage in Europe* (Cambridge, 1983); Jennifer Ward, *English noblewomen in the later middle ages* (London, 1992); Sparky Booker, 'Intermarriage in fifteenth-century Ireland: the English and Irish in the four obedient shires' in *R.I.A. Proc.*, cxiii, c (2013), pp 219-50 [www.jstor.org/stable/42751274 [2 Feb. 2017]].

⁹ Anthony McCormack, 'Sleeping with the enemy: intermarriage between the Butlers of Ormond and the Fitzgeralds of Desmond' in *Journal of the Butler Society*, iv, no.1 (Nov. 1997), p. 475.

Butler is married to the late Erll of Dessmond's daughter and heyr generall'.¹⁰ The circumstances and motives for Joan and Margaret Fitzgerald's marriages into the Butler family were, broadly-speaking, similar. In 1529 Thomas Fitzgerald, aged 75, became twelfth earl of Desmond, following the death in June of his nephew, James Fitzgerald, eleventh earl. He immediately set about securing the earldom for himself and for his heir and grandson, James FitzMaurice, as that same year, his son, Maurice, had predeceased him. According to Anthony McCormack, the ongoing internecine warfare between the Desmond Fitzgeralds, in particular during the period 1510–c.1541, largely centred on internal Geraldine disputes regarding the inheritance to the earldom since the 'majority of the Geraldine Desmonds, felt that Thomas's heir should be his brother Sir John, and not his grandson James FitzMaurice'.¹¹ To strengthen his case and provide James with allies in the future, Thomas arranged a series of propitious marriages that he believed would secure James's succession following Thomas's death. The most significant of these which took place before December 1532 when Joan married James Butler, future ninth earl of Ormond.¹² As James's wife, the earl of Desmond hoped that Joan might in time come to have sufficient influence over her husband and events in Ormond to facilitate the peaceful succession of James Fitzgerald to the

¹⁰ Walter Cowley to Sir Thomas Cromwell, 21 Dec. 1532 in *L. & P. Henry VIII, 1531–1532*, no. 1675. Cowley, and his father, Robert, were loyal Butler servants, following a falling out with the Kildare Fitzgeralds. Yet they were spokesmen for Thomas Cromwell. Robert served as clerk of the council under Lord Deputy Surrey. Piers Butler at times encouraged the Cowleys to communicate with Cromwell concerning Irish affairs. Robert and Walter held several important government posts, Robert serving as Master of the Rolls and Walter as Surveyor General: see Ellis, *Reform & revival*, p. 37.

¹¹ Anthony McCormack, 'Internecine warfare and the decline of the house of Desmond, c.1510–c.1541' in *IHS*, xxx, no. 120 (Nov. 1997), pp 497-512. James Fitzmaurice's legitimacy was the subject of dispute among the house of Desmond as his parents were cousins and therefore the wider family disputed the legitimacy of James and the validity of his parent's marriage. They supported Sir John Fitzgerald brother of Thomas, twelfth heir, as the next rightful heir.

¹² Walter Cowley to Sir Thomas Cromwell, 21 Dec. 1529, in *S.P. Henry VIII*, ii, 161-2; 'Unpublished Geraldine documents', ed. S. Hayman, J. Graves & D. Fitzgibbon in *R.S.A.I. Jn.*, 3rd ser., i (1868), facing p. 460.

Desmond earldom. So concerned was the old earl of Desmond with protecting his claim and that of his grandson, that while he was content to arrange the Butler-Desmond marriage, he nonetheless distrusted the Butlers. Consequently, in 1532 he sent messengers to Henry VIII to ‘counteract anything that might be said by Piers Butler, or anyone else concerning his inheritance’.¹³ Other alliances too were arranged by Desmond, including one between his grandson, James, and Mary MacCarthy, daughter of the ‘long time Desmond ally’¹⁴ in the south of the earldom of Desmond, Cormac Og MacCarthy: they were married in 1529.¹⁵ Joan’s marriage brought her from the small town of Askeaton in County Limerick to the larger and prosperous city of Kilkenny.

Through a series of carefully orchestrated marriage alliances joining Old English and Gaelic Irish families, the twelfth earl of Desmond was confident about the preservation and protection of his grandson’s future claim. But what of the Ormond interests in the marriage of Joan Fitzgerald and James Butler? When Thomas Fitzgerald died four years later in 1532, the viability of his carefully executed plans and the strength of his array of alliances were about to be tested. The succession dispute that ensued between his grandson, James, and his brother, Sir John Fitzgerald, soon brought Ormond interests to the fore, and revealed the motives of Piers Butler and his son, James. James Butler believed that in addition to his rightful claim to the Desmond patrimony through his marriage to the Desmond heiress, he had a legitimate claim to the Desmond title and lands.¹⁶ This was not unlike the claim

¹³ Thomas Fitzgerald, earl of Desmond to Henry VIII, 5 May 1532 in *S.P. Henry VIII*, ii, 160-61.

¹⁴ McCormack, ‘Interneccine warfare’, pp 497-512.

¹⁵ With the earldom of Ormond stretching from the Shannon in the west to County Wexford in the east, the entire Northern territories of the earldom of Desmond, formed the earldom of Ormond. Immediately south of the earldom of Desmond, and occupying much of counties Cork and Kerry, lay thousands of acres of Munster, ruled by the Gaelic Irish MacCarthys.

¹⁶ McCormack, ‘Sleeping with the enemy’, pp 466-75.

asserted by his father, Piers, in 1515 after the death of Thomas Butler, seventh earl of Ormond.

Of the two Geraldine claimants to the Desmond earldom, Sir John Fitzgerald was *de facto* earl, with his grandnephew James Fitzmaurice, *de jure* thirteenth earl.¹⁷ Once the succession dispute commenced, Piers and James Butler asserted a challenge to both Fitzgeralds as they sought to pursue the earldom for themselves, through Joan Fitzgerald. The contest was partially resolved as, by March 1536, one of those claimants was dead. Sir John Fitzgerald died of natural causes, and his son John FitzJohn Fitzgerald, continued to press his claim. That same year, James Fitzmaurice, who was one of Henry VIII's courtiers, having been at court since he was a royal page as a boy,¹⁸ was sent back to Ireland by the king 'so that he be made, by thaide of the Deputie and armye, an instrument for the suppression of the saide pretended Erle'.¹⁹ However, James Fitzmaurice Fitzgerald did not return to Ireland for another three years. During that time, James Butler and Joan Fitzgerald succeeded as ninth earl and countess of Ormond following the death of Piers Butler in 1539. Before Fitzmaurice eventually arrived in Munster, Ormond had defeated James Fitzjohn, the resident rival of Ormond, and Fitzmaurice. Not content with that, Ormond wrote to the king seeking military assistance and advising Henry that unless he sent a sufficient army, the king's efforts to reform 'all the hole lande, it shall be mucche better, than yerelie to exburse grete somes of money, and noo good successe to ensue of the same'.²⁰ As long as one of the claimants to the Desmond earldom was out of the country, and the other was losing territories to the Butlers –

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Cockayne *et al.* (eds.), *The complete peerage*, iv, 251.

¹⁹ Irish Council to Sir Thomas Cromwell, 22 Aug. 1536 in *S.P. Henry VIII*, ii, 308.

²⁰ James Butler, earl of Ormond to Sir Thomas Cromwell, 20 Dec. 1539 in *S.P. Henry VIII*, iii, 164-7.

with the military assistance of the king – James Butler stood a good chance of acquiring his wife’s native earldom through the destruction or suppression of either Geraldine claimant.

Clearly confident in pressing his claim, and with the Kildares gone since 1534-5, Butler’s attention was focused on the Desmond earldom to the south-west of the Ormond earldom. In 1536, three years before he died, Piers Butler wrote to Thomas Cromwell to impress upon him how the Desmond claimants did ‘blasfeme the king’ and ‘have their eyes and iers open, every daye gaping to have asistence in this highe rebellion oute of Spayne’.²¹ In February the following year Lord Deputy Leonard Grey informed Cromwell and the king of ‘the feare and doubt which Fitzjohn and all the Geraldynes in Munster, have in the Lorde James Butler’.²² As Ormond’s pursuit of the earldom of Desmond gained momentum, Piers moved swiftly to inform the Dublin Council that the Desmond Geraldines facilitated Gerald Fitzgerald, heir to the defeated Kildare earldom, escape to Ulster.²³ For the remainder of the 1530s several military encounters ensued between Ormond and Fitzjohn (*de facto* earl of Desmond). Despite Piers Butler’s elevation to the earldom of Ormond in 1538, and a brief moment in 1539 when Ormond appeared to have seized much of Desmond’s territories in Cork, circumstances were about to suddenly change.

By 19 March 1540 James Fitzmaurice was dead. He was murdered by Maurice Fitzjohn Fitzgerald brother of John Fitzjohn Fitzgerald.²⁴ With each of the original rival claimants and one of their heirs removed from the dispute, and despite Fitzmaurice having been at court for most of his life and a friend of the king, in July 1540 Henry pardoned James Fitzjohn and his

²¹ Piers Butler to Sir Thomas Cromwell, 16 Feb. 1535 in *S.P. Henry VIII*, iii, 285-90.

²² Lord Deputy Grey to Thomas Cromwell, 4 Feb. 1537 in *S.P. Henry VIII*, iii, 404-7.

²³ For more on the Butler–Fitzgerald feud in the 1530s, see Edwards, *The Ormond lordship*, pp157-63.

²⁴ See *Annals of the Four Masters* [www.ucccelt.ie].

brothers ‘for all offences against the laws of England or Ireland’.²⁵ The following January (1541) in the same year as the Act of Kingly title which proclaimed Henry, King of Ireland, Sir James Fitzjohn, submitted to the king and was created fourteenth earl of Desmond.²⁶ In the wake of Henry’s recognition of the new earl of Desmond, James Butler and Joan Fitzgerald’s hopes of acquiring her family’s earldom evaporated. Despite the good tenor of relations between the king and the Butlers, and after the fall of the house of Kildare, Henry was unlikely to countenance any suggestion of the earl of Ormond attaining the Desmond patrimony which might lead to his becoming ‘an overmighty subject’ as had been the case with Kildares.

Thus, the marriage in 1532 between Joan Fitzgerald and James Butler at the behest of the elderly twelfth earl of Desmond initially served Desmond’s interests. It secured Butler support for the old earl and his grandson heir. It presented the Butlers with the possibility of the acquisition of the earldom of Desmond for themselves, and future generations of the Ormond dynasty. Yet, as will be seen, in the long term, the marriage had detrimental consequences for both earldoms, from the 1550s until the 1580s.

Throughout her first marriage and as countess of Ormond and Ossory, Joan Fitzgerald remained in the background, removed from the din of dynastic politics and inter-family rivalry. Apart from land deeds referring to both the earl and countess of Ormond after 1539, there is little evidence of Joan’s early years as the wife of James Butler. However, evidence of the beginning of her involvement with officials of the Dublin government began to emerge

²⁵ Grant to James Fitzjohn, Maurice Fitzjohn and John Fitzjohn, 29 July 1540 in *L. & P. Henry VIII, Jan.–Aug. 1540*, no. 92 (grant 79).

²⁶ Lord Deputy Sir Anthony St Leger to Henry VIII, 21 Feb. 1541 in *S.P. Henry VIII*, iii, 285-90.

by Christmas 1538 when Joan and James entertained at their Carlow castle some of the highest-ranking members of the government including Archbishop George Browne of Dublin, Lord Chancellor Sir John Alen, Under treasurer William Brabazon, and Justice Gerald Aylmer. The members of the council had come to Ormond to follow up on earl James's efforts to enforce 'good and obedient conformity'²⁷ within his earldom, and later reflected that while visiting the earl and countess Joan, they had been 'well entertained there'.²⁸

In addition to her husband's influence, Joan was also exposed to her mother-in-law, Margaret Fitzgerald's, ideas. (Both women would have been raised and educated in similar households.) As a member of the Butler family during a period of significant changes in the earldom, she witnessed the machinations around inheritance during the final years of the Ormond succession crisis and around recognition of her father-in-law as earl of Ormond in 1538. She became countess of Ormond and Ossory when Piers died the following year, and her mother-in-law, Margaret Fitzgerald, as widow, became dowager countess, outliving her husband a further three years until August 1542.

While the Desmond succession dispute was ongoing during the period 1510-40, James Butler had become involved in the campaign to suppress the monastic houses of Ireland. Brendan Bradshaw has emphasised the prominent role played by Butler in this campaign, claiming that he was 'indefatigable in his attendance upon the suppression commissioners while in the south and in pressing his claims to the properties'.²⁹ As countess, Joan too benefited from the

²⁷ Myles V. Ronan, *The Reformation in Dublin, 1536-1558* (London, 1926), p. 121; Lennon, *Sixteenth-century Ireland*, pp 136-37.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Brendan Bradshaw, *The dissolution of the religious orders in Ireland under Henry VIII* (Cambridge, 1974), p. 195.

monastic dissolutions. For instance, in 1537, she acquired the lands of the abbey of Blessed Mary of Inishlounaght in County Tipperary, at the expense of Lord Deputy Leonard Grey.³⁰ By early 1538 Grey expressed his interest to lease the abbey's lands when the foundation was finally dissolved. The abbey was not surrendered until spring 1539, at which time Grey secured a lease for the Tipperary portion of the estates.

Joan's handling of this dispute demonstrated her capacity to defend what was rightfully hers. Two months after the official dissolution of the monastery, in June the countess and her second son, Edmund, received a lease for the Waterford lands of the abbey from the abbot of the monastery. Although such abuses were forbidden, punitive legislation was seldom used against the nobility. In Joan Fitzgerald's lease with the abbot and convent of Inishlounaght, she received a sixty-year interest in sixty acres of arable and pasture land and eight acres of woodland in Kilmackthomas, County Waterford. She was expected to pay 'from that point annually, for the first twenty years, one kernel of grain at the Feast of St. Michael and thenceforth £4 of good and legal Irish tender at two periods of the year, namely at Easter and at the Feast of St. Michael, in equal portions'.³¹

During her first marriage of fourteen years' duration, Joan does not appear to have participated in political affairs at any level, focusing instead on rearing their seven sons, all of whom lived to adulthood. The heir to the earldom, was Thomas 'Dubh' or Black Tom who had six brothers – Edmund, John, Walter, James, Edward and Piers.³² As heir, Thomas was

³⁰ Rev. Colmcille Conway, 'The Cistercian Abbey of Inishlounaght' in *Journal of the Proceedings of the Clonmel Historical and Archaeological Society*, i (1955-56), no. 4, pp 3-52, 80-81.

³¹ *Irish monastic and episcopal deeds, 1200-1600*, ed. Newport B. White (Dublin: IMC, 1936), no. 254.

³² Edwards, *The Ormond lordship*, p. 41.

barely a teenager when he was sent to court to be educated. From that point on, the countess only saw him on occasional trips to England during her widowhood. Thomas was raised at court as a companion and schoolmate of Prince Edward and Princess Elizabeth.

It was not until James, ninth earl of Ormond, died in London on 28 October 1546³³ that Joan Fitzgerald, then aged in her thirties, emerged onto the political scene. James was poisoned as he dined at Ely house in Holborn along with seventeen of his servants on 17 October and despite much intrigue surrounding his death, no reason was ever conclusively found and no one was convicted for his murder.³⁴ Historian R. Dudley Edwards argued that the death of Ormond was advantageous for both St. Leger and the king since Butler had become too powerful a figure in Munster since he and Desmond moved closer together through a series of advantageous alliances and intermarriages.³⁵ Against this background, in March 1546 James Butler drafted his will. Given that it was St Leger who had appointed the earl of Ormond to Scotland as general of the Irish forces on 17 November 1545, and in light of their acrimonious relationship, it has been suggested that St. Leger ‘deliberately threw Ormond into a situation out of which it was hoped he would not escape alive’.³⁶ Butler was cognisant of St. Leger’s intentions having been alerted to the lord deputy’s plan. On 15 November 1545 Butler wrote to Lord Russell, ‘my Lorde Privey Seale’, informing him about the warning he had recently received. The unsigned letter warned that ‘there is a commen saing, that ye [Ormond] shalbe sent into Scotlande to be cast away. My Lord Deputies servauntes say openly, that they woll kepe their Cristmas in your strongest houses’. Should Ormond be

³³ David Edwards, ‘Malice a forethought? The death of the ninth earl of Ormond 1546’ in *Butler Society Journal*, iii, no.1 (1986-7), pp 30-41.

³⁴ Paul Flynn, *The book of the Galtees and the Golden Vale: a border history of Tipperary, Limerick and Cork* (Dublin, 1926), p. 119.

³⁵ R. Dudley Edwards, *Ireland in the age of the Tudors* (London, 1977), p. 58.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

fortunate enough to return to Ireland alive, ‘for his labour, he shall shortly aftr be set in the Tower’.³⁷ In light of such threats, James Butler set about drawing up his will, in which he provided for his wife, some of his sisters and each of his sons.

An examination of James’s will reveals some insight into his marriage to Joan. In it, James amply provided for his widow. Just as his father, Piers, had provided for his mother, the dowager countess Margaret, as part of her jointure, so James assigned ‘the manor of Dunmore, with all its appurtenances’³⁸ to Joan. His mother, countess dowager of Ormond, had acquired Donmore in the north of County Kilkenny in an indenture dated 18 May 1540 which was executed between Margaret and her son, James. At the time of Margaret’s death in 1542 Donmore and her other holdings reverted to James, who in his will bequeathed them to his wife. The high esteem in which James held his wife of fourteen years is also evident in his bequest to her of additional lands ‘over and besides the third parte of my lands that the lawe intytlethe hir unto’.³⁹ As Barbara Harris contends ‘some husbands placed greater weight on their relationships with and responsibilities to their wives and younger children than on their heirs’ immediate possession of their inheritances’.⁴⁰ On the granting of lands over and above Joan’s share, Harris argues that such practices are ‘surprising in the context of historical scholarship that treats widows as burdens on their marital families and assumes that men resented these claims on their patrimonies’.⁴¹ Joan, dowager countess of Ormond and

³⁷ James Butler earl of Ormond, to Lord John Russell, 15 Nov. 1545 in *S.P. Henry VIII*, iii, 539; Karen A. Holland has suggested that it is generally accepted that Walter Cowley, then solicitor general of Ireland, was the author of the anonymous letter. She noted that Cowley was a tool in the hands of Chancellor Alen, who fomented the discord between St. Leger and Ormond: Holland, ‘Joan Desmond, Ormond & Ossory’, p. 91.

³⁸ Will of James Butler, ninth earl of Ormond, Oct. 1546 in *Cal. Ormond deeds*, ed. Curtis, iv (1509–1547), 292.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Harris, *English aristocratic women*, p. 131.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

Ossory, received through her husband's will, the full guardianship for life of Butler lands. Given that her heir, then aged fifteen, was still too young to assume the earldom, these would have automatically reverted to the Crown had James not made provision for this eventuality in his will. Clearly, their marriage had been cordial. The will not only elucidates their relationship, but reveals his recognition of her in a personal and public capacity. On the day after he was poisoned, and aware that he was dying, James added a codicil of 18 October [1546] that 'my wife is to have my best bracelet of golde sent hir for a tokyn'.⁴² As Piers Butler had recognised Margaret Fitzgerald's ability and character through his will, so too his son, James, demonstrated similar confidence in his wife's ability to defend and protect not only herself in her widowhood, but also the wardship of their son, who had to wait another six years to come into full possession of his inheritance, in 1552. In the interim, and with the assistance of her brother-in-law, Sir Richard Butler, Joan managed and preserved the earldom in accordance with her deceased husband's wishes. James Butler also provided in his will for many of his servants, including some who had been in the employ of his parents, namely Nicholas and Walter Cowley. As historian John Kirwan has argued, the earl 'no doubt hoped thus to retain this group of faithful and trusted advisors, about his widow, to assist and guide her in the days of her widowhood'.⁴³ As a widow, Joan also received the assistance of the lawyer, Nicholas Moling, chancellor of St Canice's cathedral, Kilkenny.⁴⁴ Arising from these developments, as George Butler has noted, on the death of James Butler in 1546 'there were European reigning princesses less wealthy and powerful than Joan of Desmond, Countess of Ormond now became'.⁴⁵

⁴² Cal. *Ormond deeds*, ed. Curtis, v (1547–84), nos 3, 6, 29, 59, 108, 120.

⁴³ John Kirwan, 'Lady Joan Fitzgerald, Countess of Ormond Ossory and Desmond' in *Butler Society Journal*, iv, no.1 (Nov. 1997), p. 293.

⁴⁴ Cal. *Ormond deeds*, ed. Curtis, v (1547–84), nos 352, 360.

⁴⁵ George Butler, 'The Battle of Affane' in *The Irish Sword*, iii (1967-68), pp 43-51.

Despite this comfortable and secure position, Joan operated under the king's supervision, as was the norm for women of her noble status. To that end, she was 'under the nominal control of the lord deputy and the Irish council in consultation with the king',⁴⁶ and not at liberty to marry at her own discretion. As was the normal convention, the Crown was 'entitled to seize two-thirds of the profits of the estate, so long as the wardship [of Thomas] lasted'.⁴⁷

However, the remainder of Ormond estates were invested in her endowment and, to that end, were immune from Crown seizure. The following March, after a post mortem on the body of her husband which 'sat principally at Kilkenny'⁴⁸ six months after his death, Joan's jointure became legally hers. Although a widow with a young family, she was now a freer woman to exercise and wield her own authority as she saw fit. Clearly aware of the opportunities open to her in her new-found status, she wasted no time in asserting her authority. Once she had secured her position within the earldom of Ormond, by for instance entrusting many of her dower lands to various trustees, she turned her attention to her own family, the Fitzgeralds, intent on reaffirming her place among the Geraldines. Some of these lands included the manors of Clonmel, Kilfeakle and Kilsheelan in County Tipperary which formed part of Joan's marriage dowry in 1532.⁴⁹ Located in Tipperary on the border between Desmond and Ormond these manors were the focus of a centuries old dispute between the two dynasties. Joan not only took control of her own affairs, she also conducted business on her son's behalf, adding to his wealth while he resided in England.

⁴⁶ Kirwan, 'Lady Joan Fitzgerald', p. 293. Kirwan notes that as a 'King's Widow', in England Joan would have come under the supervision of 'The Master of the King's Wards and Widows' William Paulett, Lord of St. John.

⁴⁷ Edwards, *The Ormond lordship*, p. 41.

⁴⁸ *Cal. Ormond deeds*, ed. Curtis, v (1547-84), no. 361.

⁴⁹ Quitclaim of James, earl of Desmond to Joan, countess of Ormond, 26 Apr. 1547 in *Cal. Ormond deeds*, ed. Curtis, v (1547-84), no. 8.

In April 1547 her cousin James, earl of Desmond, formally transferred to Joan his claim and rights to these lands.⁵⁰ Not content with these lands having been originally confirmed as hers in 1541 when James was created earl of Desmond, once she became a widow, she moved quickly to ensure absolute certainty of her ownership of these lands, for her own use, and for the benefit of the Ormond earldom and the future heir. As Margaret Fitzgerald had taken preemptive steps to ensure the inheritance of the earldom for her son James following the 1515 succession crisis, and Katherine Butler, sister-in-law of Joan, had her own interests and those of her son Piers Power protected, Joan sought likewise to protect herself and her family. Therefore, she was not unique among the many Ormond women whom she succeeded or with whom she was a contemporary. According to Gillian Kenny, ‘the willingness of women to go to court over their dower and other rights signifies not only how important these were to them but also the freedoms that these rights represented’.⁵¹ However, John Kirwan has observed that in the wider context of early modern widows, ‘it was rather rare for one of Joan’s class and rank to bring her dower lands rather than the more usual dower of cash and or movable commodities’.⁵² As discussed in Chapter three, it was only in 1528 after the intervention of Henry VIII following the protracted succession crisis in the Ormond dynasty that the matter was eventually resolved. Having lived through this period, and now as a potential vulnerable widow who could have easily found herself in a similar position to Margaret and Anne Butler (daughters of the seventh earl of Ormond), Joan as heiress to her father, took steps to prevent such a crisis and in doing so, she succeeded. As Kirwan notes ‘the feudal and Gaelic systems of land ownership sought wherever possible to retain all clan or family lands within the agnatic group’⁵³ and in Ireland, this system benefitted Joan regarding her dower. The

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Kenny, ‘The women of County Louth’, pp 579-94.

⁵² Kirwan, ‘Lady Joan Fitzgerald’, p. 294.

⁵³ Ibid.

transferral of these lands between the earl of Desmond and his kinswoman Joan countess of Ormond, without delay or dispute, represented a very significant landmark in recognition of Joan's individual profile, and that of women as heiresses in general.

During her first marriage, Joan as wife and mother was focused on home and family, 'bearing the sons who would carry on the Butler legacy'.⁵⁴ However, as a widow approaching about thirty years old, she gained a significantly more public profile as she emerged into the public arena. In his account of French aristocratic widows in the sixteenth-century, historian Robert Kalas suggests that young widows with families 'could expect to move from the private to the public domain and to a leadership role in the family'.⁵⁵ Widowhood allowed the dowager countess to assert her authority within the earldom of Ormond, and also to exercise authority as a noble woman in Tudor provincial politics. Her role within the Ormond lordship was greater in her capacity as widow of the ninth earl than while he was alive. As Carol O'Connor has observed, 'with her Kildare counterparts, the public status of widowhood provided Joan with the means to make her mark beyond the domestic realm of the Ormond household'.⁵⁶ Her profile as mother and protector of the future earl, as well as her subsequent navigation of the marriage network following the death of her first husband, positioned her as a significant figure in the public arena of sixteenth-century Irish politics.

Joan faced challenges that women in her position as widow and mother of a future earl frequently faced, be it in Ireland, England or continental Europe. Widows were vulnerable to threats to their son's wardship from either within the wider family or externally. Within

⁵⁴ Holland, 'Joan Desmond, Ormond & Ossory', p. 86.

⁵⁵ Robert J. Kalas, 'The noble widow's place in the patriarchal household: the life and career of Jeanne de Gontault' in *Sixteenth Century Journal*, xxiv, no. 3 (1993), pp 519-39.

⁵⁶ O'Connor, 'The Kildare women', p. 39.

months of the earl's death Joan began to encounter threats. However, her capabilities as a defender of her rights and the rights of her son quickly emerged. For instance, writing on the 6 March 1547 to the Lord Protector, Edward Duke of Somerset, Joan vehemently complained how Sir Robert St Leger (brother of lord deputy Anthony St Leger) was attempting to 'impose 20s. upon every tun of her third part of the prize wines.' She continued: 'St Leger declared that her late husband's ancient servants and tenants shall be put from their dwellings, and others appointed in their rooms'.⁵⁷ In essence, this was an attempt to levy a tax on her jointure by the Dublin Council headed by St. Leger. As Butler's opponents within the government eyed potential opportunities to threaten the earldom and the wardship of young Thomas, St Leger continued to thwart the efforts of the dowager countess to protect her son's inheritance. Next, St. Leger advised Joan that all Butler military retainers 'from those parts of the estate that would fall into the hands of the crown during her son's wardship'⁵⁸ would be dismissed, and be replaced at the behest of the Dublin Council. Having already notified Somerset of St. Leger's threats, Joan continued to vent her frustration. She immediately reminded the Lord Protector that her husband James 'had committed his son [Thomas] to Somerset's tuition and protection alder next unto the king'.⁵⁹ The countess successfully stalled any such plans and defended herself and the earldom against such threats. Within weeks, she was en route to London to personally endorse her solid commitment to the continuance of established Ormond policy as implemented by her husband and his parents. As her mother-in-law, Margaret Fitzgerald represented the earldom on at least two occasions at court – facing down challenges to her authority and the future of the earldom itself – Joan steered the earldom through the first serious crisis since the death of her husband in 1546.

⁵⁷ Joan, countess of Ormond and Ossory to the Lord Protector Edward Duke of Somerset, 6 Mar. 1547 in *Cal. S. P. Ire., 1509–73*, p. 77.

⁵⁸ Edwards, *The Ormond lordship*, p. 94.

⁵⁹ Joan, countess of Ormond and Ossory to the Lord Protector Edward Duke of Somerset, 6 Mar. 1547 in *Cal. S. P. Ire., 1509–73*, p. 77.

Like the French noble woman of Kalas's sixteenth-century account, Joan 'moved into the leadership of the family so competently she must have been familiar with the financial and economic world of her husband before he died'.⁶⁰

During the first week of July 1547, writing from Lambeth Palace, Joan petitioned the king's Privy Council through the Master of Requests, William Cecil.⁶¹ On that occasion she sought to renew the lease⁶² of the former Abbey of Leix which her deceased husband had originally held following dissolution of the abbey.⁶³ However, on this occasion while Joan succeeded in preventing any take-over of Ormond properties by St. Leger and the Dublin Council, including one by St. Leger's successor Sir Edward Bellingham, she was unsuccessful in renewing the lease of Leix Abbey. While in London, where she remained until 1548, and with no rumours of re-marriage, she campaigned as a leading Ormond advocate protecting her son's wardship, and travelled widely in her family's cause.⁶⁴ One of her priorities while in England was to seek financial aid, and as Karen Holland has argued, 'it was undoubtedly much more expedient and safer for Joan to borrow in England than to have her servants travel from Ormond to deliver money to her'.⁶⁵ Whether Joan's need for additional funds arose from the fact that she had underestimated her expenses or was detained in London longer than she expected cannot be determined.⁶⁶ Significantly, her financial requests were consented to, despite the law denying married women from borrowing money.

⁶⁰ Kalas, 'The noble widow's place', p. 523.

⁶¹ Joan Fitzgerald, countess of Ormond and Ossory to Sir William Cecil, 6 July 1547 (TNA, SP 61/1/1).

⁶² The abbey was eventually re-granted to her son Thomas in February 1563: see Carrigan, *The history of the diocese of Ossory*, ii, 391.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ Warrant of the council to deliver £200 to the Countess of Ormond to be repaid in Ireland, 30 Oct. 1547 (TNA, SP 46/1/fo55).

⁶⁵ Holland, 'Joan Desmond, Ormond & Ossory', p. 130.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

The first of her loans was recorded on 30 October 1547 and by the end of the year she appealed for financial aid on two further occasions, each of which were granted. On 2 and 16 May 1548 Joan received two further advances, with all four loans to be repaid 'to the King Majesties use by her or her assignes in Ireland'.⁶⁷ The editor of the Acts of the Privy Council interprets this as 'a device for conveying money across the Irish Channel, as it expressly stated that the money was to be repaid in Ireland'.⁶⁸

From one such occasion while in London in the late 1540s, a unique and revealing insight into Joan's personality has survived, giving vivid detail about her own perception of her roles as wife, mother, widow and Irish woman. This reveals a woman who chose to play upon stereotypical English views of the Irish in the mid-sixteenth century. Despite her noble status and aristocratic background, she chose to entertain her company with flippant and self-deprecating accounts of life in Ireland. While dining one evening in London with Sir Thomas Smith⁶⁹ (1513-77), who observed that the Countess of Ormond was 'merrily disposed' and during a discussion about childbirth and the customs surrounding the pregnancies of aristocratic women, Joan informed all present how she had borne at least ten children. (Seven sons survived).⁷⁰ According to Smith, the host for the evening, Joan revealed how 'she was brought to bed, not so nicely as the ladies and gentlewomen there present, but either in a tent or a wide barn, after the manner of her country Ireland'.⁷¹ As wife of James Butler while he was heir presumptive, and as his countess upon his succession to the earldom in 1539, it is highly likely that the majority if not each of her many childbirths were carefully managed and

⁶⁷ *Acts of the Privy Council of England*, ii, 141, 154, 165, 189, 199; i: preface. The October 30, 1547 entry was subsequently struck out and a note added, 'Qua postea ultimo Januari'.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ Smith who subsequently became Principal Secretary of State to King Edward VI and Queen Elizabeth I, was an English scholar, parliamentarian and diplomat.

⁷⁰ J. Strype, *The life of the learned Sir Thomas Smith* (Oxford, 1820), appendix iii, p. 202.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

suitably prepared for events, befitting her aristocratic status. Nevertheless, she regaled her listeners; ‘and I tell you, I felt in a manner no pain at all these births nor I see no cause why I should make so nice of the matter as you do here in England, we do not [do] so in our country’.⁷²

Smith observed how in response to Joan’s candid statements, ‘an old lady was wonderfully offended, and said they [Irish women] were beasts, and she [Joan] was but a beast to say so’.⁷³ He went on to refer to the countess as ‘a witty lady, [thereupon] turned the matter and said “it was a gift which St Patrick begged for her country folk, the Irish women, of our Lady”’⁷⁴ by which case she meant freedom from the pains of childbirth. In what was perhaps clever use of a rhetorical strategy, such as that used by Joan on this occasion, some aristocratic women may have chosen to exaggerate to their own advantage, socially negative ideas regarding their sex, or identity. For example, in 1535, Gertrude, marchioness of Exeter, sought to pardon herself for her involvement with the Nun of Kent, when she reminded King Henry that she ‘was first and chiefly a woman whose fragility and brittleness is such as most facilely easily, and is seduced and brought into abuse and light belief’.⁷⁵

Since the death of her husband, James, Joan had successfully managed control of her dowry lands, and in so doing, affiliated herself with several of the most powerful and influential men in Kilkenny whom she appointed as her feoffees. This, in turn, provided her and her sons with a substantial and steady income. Her transactions with the earl of Desmond gave her the chance to secure her claim to her own property in the face of potential threats from within her

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Gertrude, marchioness of Exeter to Henry VIII, 1535 (BL, Cleopatra E., iv, f.94).

wider family orbit. Like her mother-in-law who was intent on securing her husband's and her son's claim to the earldom, Joan sought to ensure her own and her son's financial security by legally obtaining any territories and profits which her brother-in-law Richard Butler had attempted to keep from her. As dowager countess, her actions concur with historian Jennifer Ward's conclusion that 'virtually all widows had a strong sense of their own and their family's rights over patrimony. They were as ready and able to defend and increase these rights as their husbands and sons'.⁷⁶

II

In order to protect Ormond interests and in light of her status as a 'King's widow' Joan had to consider the possibility of remarriage. Had the choice been hers, she was clear in her desire to marry her cousin Gerald Fitzgerald, heir to the earldom of Desmond. Yet, he was just sixteen years old in 1546, and Joan was almost twice his age. Added to that, the Dublin Council feared such a union would 'destabilize relations between the two families'.⁷⁷ Against her own wishes and appeasing the crown, either on or before 28 August 1548, Joan Fitzgerald dowager countess of Ormond, married the royal courtier, Sir Francis Bryan in London.⁷⁸

Bryan was also known by the sobriquet 'Vicar of hell', a derisory title originally assigned to him by Thomas Cromwell, on account of his notorious impiety and subsequently used by Henry VIII and later Elizabeth I in reference to Bryan.⁷⁹ In England, the Catholic recusant Nicholas Sander wrote how the king mockingly referred to him by this unflattering name. According to Sander, 'this man was once asked by the king to tell him what sort of a sin it was to ruin the mother and then the child. Bryan replied that it was a sin like that of eating a hen first and its chicken afterwards. The king burst forth into loud laughter, and said to

⁷⁶ Ward, *English noblewomen in the later middle ages*, p. 49.

⁷⁷ McCormack, 'Sleeping with the enemy', p. 472.

⁷⁸ HMC, *Salisbury MSS*, 1306-1571, no. 78.

⁷⁹ Sir Thomas Cromwell, to Stephen Gardiner, Bishop of Winchester and Sir John Wallop, 14 May 1536 (BM, Add. MS. 25,114, f.160).

Bryan, “Well, you certainly are my vicar of hell”⁸⁰ Apart from being a royal courtier and writer, he was also Henry’s master of the henchmen, and arranged the education of the royal wards. Leading figures of the coming political generation were brought up in his household, and it was Bryan who personally informed the king of his excommunication in 1533.⁸¹

Shortly after their wedding Joan’s husband was appointed Lord Marshall of Ireland, and by late 1549 was promoted to the position of Lord Justice of Ireland. Both his close friendship with the king, and his marriage to the dowager countess of Ormond, contributed to his new appointment in Ireland. He now had the rule of Ormond, and the lord deputy had two-third of the Ormond income, leaving Joan the balance. Some insight into Joan’s thoughts concerning her remarriage were documented by Lord Chancellor Alen who in 1550 wrote,

Upon the late Erle of Ormond’s dethe it was suspected as thing wolde happed indeed, that the Countess of Ormonde intended to marry therle of Desmonds sonne and heir, whereby therle of Ormond being not in age he sholde be able to serve the king as his ancestors had done: but also, the same sholde be a mean to make all his rule incyvill and yrishe: for avoiding she was sent for into Inglande and bestowed as she was.⁸²

Alen and the Dublin Council clearly feared that if Joan married the heir to the earldom of Desmond, he would attempt to acquire the earldom of Ormond for himself. The marriage between the dowager countess and Bryan, demonstrates the control of the crown over such

⁸⁰ Cited in Nicholas Sander, *Rise and growth of the Anglican schism* (London, 1877), p. 24.

⁸¹ Susan Brigden, ‘Bryan, Sir Francis (d.1550)’ in *ODNB*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, Jan. 2008 [www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/3788 [12 Nov. 2016]].

⁸² Lord Chancellor Sir John Alen, Feb. 1550 (TNA, SP 61/2/50).

marriage alliances, and moreover, how women such as Joan Fitzgerald understood the real politik of political marriages. Joan's new husband initially opened avenues for future access to the English court. Bryan's mother, Lady Margaret Bouchier, had been governess to all three surviving children of Henry VIII, and Francis was a cousin of Anne Boleyn and Jane Seymour.⁸³ It was Sir Francis's second marriage and by 1548 he was in his late sixties, while Joan was in her mid-thirties. As Bryan and Joan settled into their new life in Kilkenny, tensions soon flared between the countess and Lord Deputy Sir Edward Bellingham. The latter sought to carry out a survey of the occupants of the Ormond castles along its borders and frontiers, and concluded that the crown was displeased with several constables who occupied these strongholds. The findings of the lord deputy enraged Joan. In London, such was her success at maintaining the earldom during her son's wardship that it was rumoured her son Thomas may have been sent to Ireland before he came of age.⁸⁴ These may have been rumours, but they are nonetheless significant in revealing the esteem in which Joan was held at the highest levels politically in England. Bellingham, in his attempt to prevent the early return of Thomas Butler to Ireland, complained of 'misliking my lorde of Ormond coming over in this his yongage'.⁸⁵ The lord deputy argued that Thomas's learning and manners would be enhanced by his remaining at court, so that when he eventually returned to his earldom, he would be an obedient servant of the king and his ministers. Bellingham, however, refrained from mentioning that as administrator of the young earl's lands in Ireland, he profited; while Thomas remained in England. With the lord deputy's attempts to establish control of the lands of the heir to the earldom of Ormond, Joan was swift to administer certain of her son's holding herself. In doing so, she arranged for the collection of back rents

⁸³ Brigden, 'Bryan, Sir Francis'.

⁸⁴ Lord Deputy Edward Bellingham to Privy Council, 1548 (TNA, SP 61/1/140).

⁸⁵ Ibid.

due to her son, increased his land holdings, and extended the defensive capabilities of the earldom.

One significant development within the Butler dynasty was that Countess Margaret Fitzgerald's former advisor and confidante, Walter Cowley, was proving to be no supporter of her successor, Joan Fitzgerald. So much so, that after he became the surveyor general of Ireland in 1549, and discovering that Joan and her second husband sought to have vested in them the wardship of her son and the remainder of the Ormond inheritance, recently held by the lord deputy,⁸⁶ Cowley encouraged Bellingham to retain the king's share of the inheritance and commented how frustrating it was for Joan to have to obtain Bellingham's approval before leasing any Ormond property. Cowley clearly disliked Joan Fitzgerald and rejected her interference in his own affairs.⁸⁷

However, Joan had no intention of continuing to have to seek Bellingham's permission for any land transactions which involved her son's inheritance. To that end, on 28 June 1549 she wrote to Cowley explaining that Bellingham would soon have no authority over those lands, for 'within these three daies' she would have confirmation from England that 'her sone therll and my lord marshal shall have all the king's two parts [Thomas's inheritance] to be disposed at their pleasure'.⁸⁸ This autonomous agency on behalf of Joan demonstrates her independence, as she set about wresting control of her son's inheritance from the lord deputy. In 1549, Joan and Sir Francis Bryan, acquired almost five thousand acres of land in the

⁸⁶ Edwards, *The Ormond lordship*, p. 95.

⁸⁷ Joan Fitzgerald countess of Ormond Ossory to Walter Cowley, June 1549 (TNA, SP 61/2/47).

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

barony of Galmoy in Kilkenny, on behalf of Thomas Butler, from Elinor Freney an impoverished gentlewoman.⁸⁹

Faced with new-found obstacles and restrictions since her second marriage, in 1549 Joan complained to Brian Jones, Constable of Carlow that ‘while I was widow and had not married an Englishman, I defended and kept my own, or at the least, no man went about to defeat me of my right. Well is the woman unmarried; I am bade to hold my peace, and that my husband shall have answer made unto him’.⁹⁰ On that occasion, as during her visit to Sir Thomas Smith in London in 1547, glimpses of Joan’s personality emerge. Constable Jones observed how as she declared her feelings to him concerning marriage, she was standing close to several artichokes. Subsequently, the countess proceeded to ‘throw all the artichokes’ at him with great intent amid an outburst of frustration at the position in which she found herself, since being remarried. Almost immediately, she retreated to her horse and once mounted, declared ‘O Mr Jones, I know not what to say or do, except I should fight for it’.⁹¹ Her encounter with Jones exposes in even greater detail than her London experience at Smith’s house, a sense of her personality and outlook, her sense of frustration at injustice, her struggles with the restriction of being a woman, and her limitations despite operating at the highest levels of the public political arena. Jones replied to the countess, ‘madam you have too pretty a face to be a bloody warrior’.⁹² Again, Jones advised her, albeit humorously, ‘marry, madam, you have little skill in fighting’,⁹³ referring to her ability or lack of, at throwing the artichokes at him in her rage. Quick to respond and accepting his rebuke of her

⁸⁹ *Cal. Ormond deeds*, ed. Curtis, v (1547–84), nos 14 (1), 15.

⁹⁰ ‘The constable of Carlow’s words of such things as my Lady of Ormond spake unto him’ (1549) in *Cal. Salisbury MSS*, 1306-1571, no. 78.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ *Ibid.*

physical fighting ability she explained ‘though I cannot [fight], I have a thousand and more that can, but God forbid that should come to that point, as I will never attempt it, but give over all, and go among my friends and live upon my own’.⁹⁴ Her response pointed to her desire for a different life, in which she were answerable to no one, and, as during her time as a widow, a woman of (virtually) independent means. Pleased to assure the constable that he too was counted among her friends and thanking him graciously for easing her heart, she confided further in him ‘I have disclosed my heart to my friend’,⁹⁵ the countess departed and continued her journey, travelling from Maynooth, her destination was not noted. As Kirwan suggests, ‘the Lady it would appear was then finding her second marriage combined as it was, with a duty to her first husband’s estate, burdensome’.⁹⁶

Much of the vexation endured by the countess of Ormond was owing to her deteriorating relations with Lord Deputy Bellingham. Any restrictions or limitations imposed on her came directly from Bellingham, and she was acutely aware of this, declaring also to Jones, ‘for any wrong doing they do me, they do as they be commanded’.⁹⁷ As Joan vented her frustration to the Carlow constable, her husband remained quiet ‘and spoke nothing but that which sounded to Bellingham’s honour, and gave his wife sweet words’⁹⁸ observed Jones. This brief reference to Sir Francis Bryan, exposes Joan’s unhappiness during her second marriage. Having married for the benefit of the earldom and the crown, her husband fully supported the lord deputy, and at the same time appeared to praise his wife. Bryan, a one-eyed drunkard,

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Kirwan, ‘Lady Joan Fitzgerald’, p. 297.

⁹⁷ ‘The constable of Carlow’s words’, p. 78.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

was also published poet, and courtier since 1515.⁹⁹ Within a matter of months of his marriage to the countess of Ormond, the couple had separated.

A near contemporary of Joan's who complained of her marital dilemma was the Countess of Tyrone, Catherine Magennis (*fl.*1580s) fourth wife of Hugh O'Neil, earl of Tyrone (*c.*1540). She protested that if she had sufficient cash to purchase one hundred cows she would leave him, however, in contrast with Joan, Catherine's crisis reveals her lack of personal finance or independent means.¹⁰⁰ Joan Fitzgerald tired of her husband's support of Bellingham and she laid full blame with him for supporting the lord deputy in his interfering with her running of the Ormond estate.¹⁰¹ As Harris contends, 'the practical, energetic activity [of widows] demonstrates how effectively the experience, knowledge and relationships they had accumulated during their marriages prepared them to meet even the severest challenges of widowhood'.¹⁰²

By February 1550, Bryan was dead. His reputation as a drunkard led to his demise and he died 'sitting at [a] table leaning on his elbow'.¹⁰³ For Joan, her fortunes turned and by the following year, the once muted possibility of her son being sent back to Ireland came to fruition, when the new King Edward VI's (1537–53) government, agreed on 27 October 1551 to send young Thomas Butler, to Ireland. For this to legally happen, Thomas, tenth earl of

⁹⁹ David Starkey, *The English court, from the Wars of the Roses to the Civil War* (London and New York, 1987), p. 79.

¹⁰⁰ See O'Dowd, *A history of women in Ireland*, pp 21-22.

¹⁰¹ 'The constable of Carlow's words', p. 78.

¹⁰² Harris, *English aristocratic women*, p. 143.

¹⁰³ 'The letters of Richard Scudamore to Sir Philip Hoby, September 1549–55', ed. S. Brigden in *Camden Miscellany* xxx (London, Camden Soc., 1990), pp 121-2.

Ormond, received ‘a very unusual crown grant, which permitted him full livery of his estates one year earlier than the usual age of twenty-one.’¹⁰⁴

III

As Kenny has argued ‘widows could become quite powerful especially those who possessed the winning combinations of either a few dead and wealthy husbands, or a dead and rich husband and an independent fortune’.¹⁰⁵ This was true of Joan Fitzgerald. Having established her authority as a powerful individual in the earldom of Ormond, the countess frustrated Bellingham’s attempts to undermine her. In 1548, he asked for explicit clarification from lord protector Somerset, of his position with regard to the Bryans. Holland observed that ‘any cordial feelings which may have existed between Joan and Bellingham had disappeared several years earlier, even before Bellingham became lord deputy and Joan travelled to England’.¹⁰⁶ From his arrival in Ireland in 1548 Bellingham had been allowed considerable power to impose a ‘soldier’s solution’¹⁰⁷ in the Irish midlands. Almost immediately he had argued with Joan and ‘for a moment shared the state’s fear that she might give rise to a dynasty more dangerous than that of the Fitzgeralds of Kildare by marrying the heir of the earl of Desmond’.¹⁰⁸ However, although Joan had returned to Ireland with an English husband, the lord deputy remained apprehensive. Undoubtedly, Bryan's marriage to Joan and their residing in Kilkenny, would impact the lord deputy’s ability to govern independently. One of Bellingham’s main gripes with Joan was the private army of galloglass that she and Sir Francis maintained at Kilkenny. In a letter dated 24 November 1548 to John Issam,

¹⁰⁴ NAI, Lodge MSS, Wardships, i, 55; *Fiants Ireland, Edward VI*, no. 956.

¹⁰⁵ Kenny, ‘The women of County Louth’, pp 579-94.

¹⁰⁶ Holland, ‘Joan Desmond, Ormond & Ossory’, pp 146-47.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁸ G.A. Hayes-McCoy, ‘Conciliation, coercion, and the Protestant Reformation, 1547–71’ in F.J. Byrne, F.X. Martin & T.W. Moody (eds), *A new history of Ireland, iii, early modern Ireland, 1534-1691* (Oxford, 1976), p. 71.

seneschal of County Wexford, and who was in London with Somerset and his Council, Bellingham stated that he had been informed that ‘my Lady seke to have galloglasse in holding in the countie of Kylkenney and by strong hande seketh to redresse ther pryvate causes which (if yt be so) I am nothing pryvie thereof’.¹⁰⁹ Clearly he wished the Privy Council to know that if the Ormond forces were employed in ‘pryvate causes’ it is unreservedly ‘without my comandment, knowledge, consent or yett any kinde of auctoryte’.¹¹⁰ Bellingham viewed the government’s use of military intervention in the Bryan’s ‘pryvate causes’ as an effective way to ‘limit them there auctoryte’.¹¹¹ Despite Cowley’s disapproval of her, in Ireland it was acknowledged that Bellingham would be frustrated in his attempts to subdue her. Shortly before her second husband died in 1550, Bellingham was recalled to London.

Joan Fitzgerald’s exercise of independent agency in the political arena within a colonial, patriarchal society, both as wife and widow, reveals some of the dilemmas faced by aristocratic women in general who were in positions of authority. She was not unique as an aristocratic woman who acted independently of her husband. For example, Lady Eleanor Fitzgerald, who in 1535 married Manus O’Donnell,¹¹² for pragmatic reasons was swift to divorce him when she discovered he was a threat to her nephew Gerald Fitzgerald’s life, the future earl of Kildare. Eleanor, a contemporary of Joan Fitzgerald, not only negotiated her own marriage contract with O’Donnell, and divorced him just as quickly, she roused much concern in the Dublin government who considered her ‘in a good quarrel rather stoute than stiffe’,¹¹³ she also saved her nephew’s life. According to Karen A. Holland, Joan’s influence

¹⁰⁹ Lord Deputy Bellingham to John Issam, 24 Nov. 1548 (TNA, SP 61/1/140).

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Stanihurst, ‘*The Historie of Irelande*’, p. 286

¹¹³ Ibid.

and authority within the earldom of Ormond were ‘recognized both by those who feared her and those who appealed to her for aid’.¹¹⁴ In comparison with Katherine Butler, any sense of fear both she and Joan wielded in their exercise of power, added to the multiple dimensions of these Ormond women. Referring to Joan during her second marriage Holland argues that the countess ‘was a woman out of place in sixteenth century society, a married woman, yet her husband did not appear to be in control’.¹¹⁵ While by no means unique, Joan’s experiences of marriage, remarriage and widowhood saw her emerge from a woman’s accepted position in the ‘private domestic sphere into the public domain’.¹¹⁶ This was also true for her mother-in-law Margaret Fitzgerald.

In Ireland, some including the O’ Byrnes and Kavanaghs on the borders of the earldom of Ormond saw Joan as a powerful ally. Walter Cowley, and several English men including Lord Chancellor Alen, Lord deputy Bellingham, William Cantwell, and Robert St. Leger, at various times feared and accused Joan of wielding her power against the government’s interests when it suited her. They noted how she continued to maintain a personal army in Kilkenny, prevented desirable tenants from occupying lands including James White at Clonmel in 1549¹¹⁷ and in March 1563, took military action against those whom she believed moved against her including Lords Barry and Roche and the MacCarthys of Cork.¹¹⁸ By 1549 Joan had developed a considerable reputation in southern Ireland. The social attitudes of the sixteenth-century considered women who participated in the public sphere to be somehow dangerous.¹¹⁹ Various correspondence addressed to the lord deputy by members of the Old

¹¹⁴ Holland, ‘Joan Desmond, Ormond & Ossory’, p. 183.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid*, p. 262.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid*.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid*.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid*.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid*, p. 159.

English community in Ireland including Nicholas Herron and Edward Fitzsimons,¹²⁰ referred to actions not taken ‘for fear of the Lady of Ormond’. In late medieval and early modern Europe, Holland argues that ‘females were rarely in a position which inspired fear’.¹²¹ In Ireland as well as on the continent, women who conformed to traditional roles within the private world of the household posed no threat to society. However, it was not unusual for women such as Margaret Fitzgerald, Katherine Butler and Joan Fitzgerald, women who acquired and wielded power, to be doubted and feared. ‘Women gained this power when they were able to transcend their domestic limits and enter the man's world’¹²² when for example they set about pursuing their own and their family’s interests.

For example, one of the letters which refers to Joan as a woman to fear was written by Oliver Sutton Sheriff of County Kildare to Lord Deputy Bellingham. In his letter of December 1548, Sutton explained how he had spoken with a Mr. Rowland. Their conversation concerned one Edmund O’ Leyn and the ‘company that are taken with him’¹²³ and whether Rowland was aware of any misdemeanours committed by the particular men. Referring to Joan, Rowland stated ‘that if p’clamacon be made in the County of Kilkenny and in the County of Catherloghe [Carlow] that ther wil be many that will make part or joynst him [Purcell] if they durst for the Lady of Ormond’.¹²⁴ Sutton also included that the kerne garrisoned in the area

¹²⁰ Nicholas Heron was constable of the garrison at Leighlin (1558-68) and sheriff of Carlow (1559-65). He was one of several supporters of the earl of Sussex who were brought over from England. Edward Fitzsimons, whose personal history is rather obscure, received the office of justice of the liberty of Wexford at the same time: see Jon G. Crawford, *Anglicizing the government of Ireland: the Irish Privy Council and the expansion of Tudor rule, 1556–1578* (Dublin, 1993), p. 279.

¹²¹ Holland, ‘Joan Desmond, Ormond & Ossory’, p. 159.

¹²² Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere (eds.), *Woman, culture, and society* (Stanford, 1974), p. 41.

¹²³ Oliver Sutton to Lord Deputy Bellingham, 19 Dec. 1548 (TNA, SP 61/1/169).

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

had nothing ‘to live upon but by theft and robbery’.¹²⁵ However, he was keen to emphasise that ‘Mr. Roland desire your lordship to kepe this letter secretly for fear of my Lady of Ormond's displeasure’.¹²⁶ With such direct reference to the countess although without actually mentioning which revelations would provoke her anger, it is clear that she had a reputation of expressing her anger in a manner which men like Sutton and Rowland did not wish to experience. The fact that the letter was written by the Sheriff of Kildare, proves that Joan’s reputation reached further afield than the borders of the earldom of Ormond, ‘Sutton provided galling proof of Joan’s power by asking that his communications with Bellingham be kept secret’.¹²⁷

While some openly feared or resented Joan’s authority, others hoped to use her position and influence to their own benefit. The Ryans from Idrone in County Carlow are an example of one family who visited Joan at Callan in County Kilkenny in spring 1549 and ‘there wolde have made estate of some land to her ladyship and her children’.¹²⁸ Although the Ryans’ actions were not without an ulterior motive, they, clearly accepted Joan as their landlord. As noted by MacCurtain and O’Dowd, it was women such as Joan Fitzgerald and Katherine Butler ‘who challenged the Tudor program who received note – not those who went along’.¹²⁹ Joan’s independence to operate free from the constraints of male authority, of the Crown, of the council and her family, can also be seen in her decision that her next husband would be the man of her own choosing, and not that of the monarch or Dublin Council. Following the death of Joan’s second husband neither the Dublin nor London government

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Holland, ‘Joan Desmond, Ormond & Ossory’, p. 162.

¹²⁸ Cowley’s device, 14 Mar. 1549 (TNA, SP 61/2/25).

¹²⁹ Margaret MacCurtain & Mary O’Dowd ‘Introduction’ in MacCurtain & O’Dowd (eds), *Women in early modern Ireland*, pp. 1-17.

immediately intervened. When she became a widow for the second time, she continued to be recognized as the countess of Ormond, while her heir, Thomas, was still resident at court. Interestingly, although in her earlier account to Brian Jones the constable of Carlow Joan observed that ‘well is the woman unmarried’, she was not a widow for long following Bryan’s death, when she was in her mid-thirties and still of child-bearing age. Apart from the lord protector and lord deputy having responsibility for Thomas’ inheritance after the death of Henry VIII in 1547, Joan also had some authority over the administration of the wardship. The maintenance and protection of ‘her eldest son’s inheritance until he could assume control was one of the primary concerns of a widow’.¹³⁰ Both Katherine Butler and her mother Margaret Fitzgerald, each protected their son’s inheritance. As has been highlighted, Katherine became widely unpopular with her tenants as she asserted full authority of her son’s territory in his minority and absence, and Margaret before her, took steps to ensure the earldom was entailed in tail male for the benefit of her son and future generations. Likewise, Eleanor Fitzgerald placed the welfare of her nephew and the future of her birth family dynasty before her own marriage to her second husband Manus O’Donnell. This coterie of Butler and Fitzgerald women were typical of married and widowed women who negotiated the minority and future of their respective heirs, sons and nephews. Also, in 1573, Margaret Cusacke of Thomond, daughter of Sir Thomas Cusacke, fought a lengthy but successful struggle to preserve her son’s inheritance after the death of her husband’.¹³¹

The government in London and the Dublin Council, once again feared Joan would now surely marry Gerald Fitzgerald, heir to the earldom of Desmond. The potential consequences of such a union was not favoured by either administration. If that marriage took place, it would have resulted in Joan adding her one third dower interest in the Ormond lands to

¹³⁰ Kalas, ‘The noble widow’s place’, p. 519.

¹³¹ *Annals of the Four Masters*, 1597, 1598 [www.ucccelt.ie].

Desmond's holdings, thereby once he succeeded as earl, Gerald would control much of southern Ireland. Moreover, Thomas Butler, heir to the remaining Ormond lands, was still a young man and as argued by Holland, if he were to become exposed to the Desmonds through his mother, it would have been 'detriment to his development as a loyal subject'¹³² given that the Fitzgeralds of Desmond were viewed as the most Gaelicized of the king's subjects in Ireland.¹³³ John Alen complained that

therle of Ormonde being not in age sholde not oonly be so hindred, that when he came to age he sholde not be able to serve the king as his auncesters had doone; but also the same sholde be a mean to make all his rule incyvill and Yrishe.¹³⁴

Alen, (who during Joan's first widowhood voiced concerns about her possibly marrying the future earl of Desmond) expressed his fears again during her second widowhood, this time with greater fervour. In February 1550, he confided to his brother Thomas, a member of the king's privy council that 'she is again at libertie, and as far as I p'ceyve, as moche bent to marye that waye when she was before, which if it should take place it were only a playne undoeing of therle of Ormond'.¹³⁵ So concerned was Alen, he interceded with the countess not to marry immediately and as a consequence, he claimed 'she promised me upon hir honor that she wolde lyve sole for oone yeare'¹³⁶ and remain unmarried. However, wary of the

¹³² Holland, 'Joan Desmond, Ormond & Ossory', p. 134.

¹³³ Not only had the Desmond Fitzgeralds persisted in the use of Irish customs, they continued to intermarry with the Gaelic Irish population. Being at some remove from the city of Dublin, they generally governed of their own accord. Any attempt on the part of the English Crown to reverse this trend toward disobedience, by having Gerald reared at court, was ignored by his father, James, fourteenth earl. In this light, the Fitzgerald Desmonds were not accepted as appropriate models for the young future earl of Ormond.

¹³⁴ Lord Chancellor Sir John Alen to his brother Thomas Alen, Feb. 1550 (TNA, SP 61/2/50).

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

sincerity of Joan's pledge Alen warned the Privy Council not to trust 'a woman's p'mise any furde then in soche a case it is to be trusted',¹³⁷ and pressed the lords that 'if they take her marriage of any moment, the soner they p'vent hir [from marrying] the better'.¹³⁸ The concern which Joan's widowhood caused various individuals was neither unusual nor unique. Other noble women in similar circumstances were closely watched by government officials once they became widows, and may have considered re-marriage. For instance, in England, during the 1530s Lady Margaret Audley was pressured by Thomas Cromwell to marry George Aylesbury, one of the king's servants.¹³⁹ Likewise, Lady Anne Berkeley and Lady Cecily Dudley were closely observed when they became widows and similarly strongly encouraged by Cromwell and others into unions which they were unwilling to consent to.¹⁴⁰ Responding firmly to any suggestion of remarriage, Lady Audley exclaimed 'and if it shall chance me hereafter to have any such fantasy of mind, which I pray God I may not have, I do assure your good lordship, it is not he [Aylesbury] that I can find in my heart to take my husband of all creatures alive'.¹⁴¹ In her reply to Cromwell regarding a proposed marriage to Edward Sutton, Lady Berkeley bluntly expressed that 'my stomach cannot lean there, neither as yet to any marriage'.¹⁴² In Ireland, similar apprehension surrounded the potential marriage alliance between Lady Mary Burke daughter of Richard Burke, second earl of Clanricarde (d.1582), and Sir John Fitzgerald brother of Joan's husband the earl of Desmond. Lord deputy Henry Sidney feared that the Fitzgeralds conspired with the Burkes to ignite rebellion in Connaught and the marriage would serve to unite some of the principal rebels of Connaught and Munster. One case when the crown and Dublin Council were successful in

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ *Letters of royal and illustrious ladies of Great Britain*, ed. M.A.E. Green (3 vols, London, 1846), ii, 269-70.

¹⁴⁰ See Harris, *English aristocratic women*, p. 161.

¹⁴¹ *Letters of royal & illustrious ladies*, ed. Green, ii, 269-70.

¹⁴² Lady Anne Berkeley to Sir Thomas Cromwell, Jan. 1538 (TNA, SP/128, f.47).

securing a marriage alliance of their approval, was arranged by Sir William Cecil about the year 1584. He successfully concluded a marriage between Maeve O'Connor Sligo (*fl.* 1570-1590) and Tibbott-Ne-Long (1567-1629), youngest son of Grace O'Malley (1530-1603) the prominent chieftain of the Burkes of County Mayo. It was a marriage which was intended to reduce O'Malley's rebel son to crown adherence. Therefore, official apprehension regarding Joan's potential remarriage plans, while not unusual, served to reinforce the political importance of marriage, and crucially, places women in exceptionally prominent, if at times short lived, positions of importance not only in the dynasty itself, but in the wider political orbit including rivals, government administration and the Crown. Alen's wariness proved well founded. Having previously conformed to family and government demands in respect of her marriage to Bryan, on this occasion Joan chose her partner. By 15 May, less than four months after her pledge to Alen, Joan and Gerald Fitzgerald were married.¹⁴³

As discussed in the previous chapter, Joan's sister-in-law, Katherine Butler, earned a reputation as an authoritarian and unpopular aristocratic woman. At the funeral of Joan's second husband, Sir Francis Bryan, in Waterford in early 1550 'a displeasure between my lady of Ormond and my lady of Desmond'¹⁴⁴ erupted, and was observed by John Alen who intervened in the altercation and later related the fracas to his brother, Thomas. However, as Alen does not provide further details of the nature of this 'displeasure' it is not clear whether this was the sole issue at the heart of the matter. Katherine Butler married Joan's father-in-law James Fitzgerald as her second husband *c*1549. By that marriage, Katherine became countess of Desmond, and, significantly, step-mother of Gerald Fitzgerald, Joan's new

¹⁴³ 'Unpublished Geraldine documents', ed. Hayman, Graves & Fitzgibbon, 1:109; see also *R.S.A.I. Jn.*, 3rd ser., i (1868-69), p. 505.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

husband.¹⁴⁵ This encounter between two prominent Ormond women, one a Butler now in the house of Desmond and the other a Fitzgerald established in the house of Ormond, not only reveals an animosity between both women, but also demonstrates the new countess of Desmond's rejection of the notion that her sister-in-law might marry back into her birth family of Desmond Fitzgeralds. Katherine countess of Desmond did not acknowledge Joan Fitzgerald's loyalty to the Ormond dynasty exhibited in Joan's protection of her children's interests following the death of the ninth earl in 1546, or her protection of the future earl of Ormond's inheritance. Joan, who unfailingly protected her son Thomas' inheritance against the attempted intrusions on the Ormond patrimony by lord deputy Bellingham and St. Leger, was not about to compromise his position. Marrying the future heir to the earldom of Desmond may also have been a move by the countess as a form of protection for her young son, and herself. In a further show of her domineering approach, Katherine countess of Desmond, was determined to prevent the marriage of her step-son and her sister-in-law. Alen understood that had Joan been free to marry her chosen partner, she would readily have married Gareth Fitzgerald 'during her first widowhood'.¹⁴⁶ Following her marriage to Gerald, her second cousin, Joan left County Kilkenny and returned to Askeaton castle, her family home in the earldom of Desmond. She had married the man she wished to marry since the death of her first husband in 1546, and was confident that she could 'go live upon mine own inheritance under my Lord of Desmond and I know he will defend me'.¹⁴⁷ Joan's departure from Kilkenny following her third and final marriage was undoubtedly costly for the Ormond dynasty as she had become a woman of substantial wealth after two widowhoods and her marriages to two powerful men. Her Ormond jointure as outlined in James Butler's will in 1546 was already greater than the legal third, and had been significantly added to in 1550,

¹⁴⁵ Cockayne *et al.* (eds.), *The complete peerage*, iv, 252.

¹⁴⁶ Lord Chancellor Sir John Alen to his brother Thomas Alen, Feb. 1550 (TNA, SP 61/2/50).

¹⁴⁷ 'The constable of Carlow's words', p. 78.

whereupon Joan (as Bryan's widow) received a third of his wealth after his death. With Bryan, she jointly held crown leases in England in counties Norwich and Norfolk.¹⁴⁸

Alen's expressed disapproval aside, no account exists of any official government objection to the marriage, despite the fact that it took place without any license from the king and within four months of the dowager countess having 'sworn before the council not to marry without their license'.¹⁴⁹ Kirwan has suggested that the council refrained from objecting owing to a desire not to 'alienate Desmond at that juncture'¹⁵⁰ and because the marriage would not in fact, have been to the detriment of Thomas, tenth earl of Ormond, as Alen had claimed. In contrast to Joan's experience, in 1526 Alison Fitzwilliam widow of a Dublin merchant, Christopher Ussher, was helpless as the entirety of her deceased husband's estate was confiscated by the king following her remarriage without his license.¹⁵¹

Joan entered another period of her life that was to set her amidst the din of domestic and Crown politics as the next fifteen years saw her play a central role as advocate for peace between the houses of Ormond and Desmond, namely her son, Thomas Butler earl of Ormond and her husband, subsequently fifteenth earl of Desmond. Joan's obvious affection for her young husband and her decision to marry a partner of her own choosing, matched Gerald's eagerness as a young future heir to marry a wealthy woman who offered the prospect of 'some leverage over the Butlers'¹⁵² and who would place loyalty to him, ahead of loyalty to her son. Given his youth (he was about sixteen when they married), Gerald could be judged to have placed his dynasty at risk. His wife had a reputation as an adept political

¹⁴⁸ *Cal. patent rolls, Edw. VI, 1547-49*, pp 67-8.

¹⁴⁹ Instructions from Lord Chancellor Sir John Alen to his brother, Thomas Alen, post-2 Feb. 1550 (TNA, SP 61/2/50).

¹⁵⁰ Kirwan, 'Lady Joan Fitzgerald', p. 293.

¹⁵¹ *Cal. Inquisitions*, ed. Griffith, p. 15.

¹⁵² McCormack, 'Sleeping with the enemy', p. 473.

figure with an impressive track record in defending and protecting her affinal family, one who was respected – at times feared – by prominent figures in the Dublin administration and at the English court. Of course Joan's wealth and position were obvious attractions. The social, political and economic advantages of the marriage were also to Gerald's benefit and marriages between younger aristocratic men and older widows were not unusual. For instance, in England in 1555, Frances, duchess of Suffolk, scandalized Queen Elizabeth when she chose to marry her second husband, Adrian Stokes, who was the duchess's secretary and groom of her chambers. He was fifteen years younger than the duchess and from yeoman stock.¹⁵³ In Ireland, Catherine Fenton (b. 1587) was the second wife of Richard Boyle, first earl of Cork (1566-1643). She was barely sixteen when she married Boyle in 1603 who was twenty-one years her senior, a wider age gap than that between Joan and her husband Gerald.

But what about the future of the earldom of Desmond? In October 1558 Gerald succeeded as fifteenth earl and undoubtedly hoped that he and Joan would have a legitimate heir to carry on his line. Having produced no children from her marriage to Bryan, and seven sons from her first marriage, Joan's remaining child-bearing years were diminishing at the time of her third marriage. In light of the background to her marriage to the ninth earl of Ormond, when Thomas, twelfth earl of Desmond did all he could to ensure the future succession of the earldom of Desmond, this marriage between two Fitzgeralds could have been childless, leaving Gerald without a legitimate heir. Yet, the marriage went ahead. Having honed her very considerable diplomacy and political skills during her previous two marriages and widowhoods, her role as peacemaker began to emerge during her third marriage.

Undoubtedly, apart from any desire or affection she held for her new husband, she also was aware of the potential for her marriage to repair fractures between each earldom within which

¹⁵³ Cockayne *et al.* (eds.), *The complete peerage*, iv, 421-22 (1554-57).

she held a unique position. In this regard, Joan was quite exceptional. According to Kirwan ‘there can only have been a mere handful of women, in both the Gaelic and Old-English worlds of the time, who were so well placed and who as a consequence of their birth and marriages attained so much influence and power’.¹⁵⁴

In his account of sixteenth-century Ireland, historian Richard Berleth describes the marriage of Joan and Gerald Fitzgerald as a passionate and mutually affectionate union. Although regrettably Berleth fails to cite the relevant sources, he asserts that Joan ‘pursued him [Gerald] shamelessly while her second husband lived, and married him despite being twenty years his elder’.¹⁵⁵ Berleth conveys a sense of the countess as a determined and youthful woman. Given the earlier references to Sir Francis Bryan as a one-eyed drunkard, and a man whom she had no desire to marry, Berleth’s contention that she ‘went hunting with Gerald along the bounds of Leinster, visited Askeaton, and accompanied her lover to fairs and festivals’¹⁵⁶ is not implausible. Joan’s actions portray her as a woman who clearly preferred marriage to widowhood, despite her earlier outburst regarding the restrictions of marriage to Jones, the constable of Carlow. As Berleth argued ‘by birth [Joan] was among the noblest women of the realm, and by inheritance one of the richest’.¹⁵⁷

Although the marriage did not produce an heir, Joan and Gerald lived in apparent contentment for at least the next decade and Joan’s name appears in several Desmond land deeds next to her husband’s. Kirwan has assumed that the marriage remained childless

¹⁵⁴ Kirwan, ‘Lady Joan Fitzgerald’, p. 300.

¹⁵⁵ Richard Berleth, *The twilight lords* (New York, 1978), p. 80. While Berleth provides much insight into the countess of Ormond, he does not provide an account of his original sources.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 81.

owing to issues concerning Joan's childbearing ability which he says 'must have been in doubt'.¹⁵⁸ However, Kirwan failed to acknowledge that during her marriage to James Butler, she had borne ten children, of whom seven sons survived. As Joan was in her mid-thirties, she was still of child-bearing age. Yet in an entirely implausible suggestion, Kirwan contends that Joan was unlikely to bear any further children as her marriage to Bryan had also been without issue, thus he contends that 'Joan's personal attractions must have been considerable to overcome this defect'.¹⁵⁹

Arranged marriages, contracted to advance various dynastic interests, at times resulted in unusual and challenging domestic arrangements for those involved. Having been the lady of the household at both Kilkenny and Askeaton castles, Joan was in a domestically challenging position as daughter-in-law of James earl of Desmond. She was living in the same castle as her former sister-in-law Katherine Butler with whom she quarrelled at Bryan's funeral regarding her marriage to Gerald. Near contemporaries in age, both women had experienced widowhood, and were more than capable of exercising their individual authority. However, living in the same household was likely challenging. Such domestic arrangements were not uncommon, for example in England, Harris noted that 'the majority of young aristocratic wives lived with their husband's parents, it often ended only when both fathers-and mothers-in-law died or their widowed mothers-in-law remarried'.¹⁶⁰ Also in England, Margaret Donnington Countess of Bath (d.1561) who outlived three husbands, had nine children from her first two marriages and two with her third husband Sir John Bouchier, Earl of Bath (d.1561). Bouchier also had nine children from his previous marriages, and together with

¹⁵⁸ Kirwan, 'Lady Joan Fitzgerald', p. 301.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Harris, *English aristocratic women*, p. 192.

their large families he and the countess lived at Hengrave Castle in Suffolk.¹⁶¹ In Ireland, Nuala O'Donnell, daughter of Sir Hugh O'Donnell, lord of Tyrconnell (d.1600), having divorced her first husband Niall Garve O'Donnell (1569-1626) moved firstly into the household of her brother Hugh Roe (1572-1602) and secondly to live with his heir, Rory O'Donnell (1575-1608), subsequently earl of Tyrconnell. On both occasions, she brought her children with her and lived within the households of her brother and nephew and their respective wives and families.

The real politik of arranged marriages for political or dynastic gain did not consider the potential awkwardness or challenges faced by women whose personal discomfort was neither considered nor catered for in the arrangement of political marriages in the interests of advancing or preserving dynastic interests. As discussed in a previous chapter, Margaret Butler, daughter of Piers Butler married Barnaby Fitzpatrick who had been implicated in the murder of her brother Thomas. Given that 'most of the political power of the earldom of Desmond was concentrated in the hands of the Fitzgerald males',¹⁶² it was a matter of time before conflict erupted between these two women as they supported and influenced their respective husband's albeit within the same dynasty. Even before her marriage to Gerald in 1550, as dowager countess of Ormond and wife then of Sir Francis Bryan, Joan had tried to support Katherine's husband in 1549. Although her attempts were thwarted by Katherine, Joan's intervention stirred Katherine's anger towards her.¹⁶³

¹⁶¹ Margaret Kitson, countess of Bath, purchase of sons's wardship, 1540 (CUL, Hengrave Hall, MS. 90, no. 40) cited in *ibid*, pp 70-71.

¹⁶² Holland, 'Joan Desmond, Ormond & Ossory', p. 196.

¹⁶³ Katherine was countess of Desmond from 1547 until her death in Askeaton in 1553.

In autumn 1554 Joan's son Thomas Butler, tenth earl of Ormond, finally arrived in Ireland and 'took charge of an inheritance that was larger than that left him by his father'.¹⁶⁴ Joan was acutely aware that her son's return was set to change the dynamics of politics between the earldoms of Desmond and Ormond. Even though for most of their lives, mother and son had been apart from each other, she nonetheless remained loyal to him. Following his return, tensions began to build between the new earl and his step-father, Gerald Fitzgerald, and ignited in July 1557, when Thomas Butler was granted the title to the manors and lands of Clonmel, Kilfeakle and Kilsheelan.¹⁶⁵ Gerald, earl of Desmond, claimed that as he was now Joan's husband, these manors rightly reverted to him. The protracted dispute was heard in London with Queen Elizabeth I finding in Butler's favour five years later in July 1562. She ordered that 'Butler enjoy full possession of the manors without hindrance from Gerald'.¹⁶⁶ 'Black Tom' and the queen had a cordial relationship, being cousins through their common ancestor, Thomas Butler, seventh earl of Ormond. As noted by historian Wallace MacCaffrey, Black Tom was 'the one Irish nobleman at home in the court'.¹⁶⁷ Joan Fitzgerald corresponded with the queen, much to the frustration of her husband who 'was outraged that she [his wife] had the temerity to treat independently with his adversary'.¹⁶⁸ The mutually supportive relationship between his wife and the queen, and between her son the earl Ormond and the queen, were too much for Gerald to tolerate.

¹⁶⁴ Edwards, *The Ormond lordship*, p. 98.

¹⁶⁵ Letters patent to James, earl of Ormond, 11 Mar. 1557 in *Cal. Ormond deeds*, ed. Curtis, v (1547–84), no. 68; NAI, R.C. 1/3, 3&4 Philip and Mary, no. 4, pp 519-24. As discussed earlier, these specific lands formed part of Joan's dowry for her first marriage, to the ninth earl of Ormond, through which means they became part of the Butler estates, and were formally quitclaimed to James by James fourteenth earl of Desmond.

¹⁶⁶ Order by the queen, 6 July 1562 (TNA, SP 63/6/46); *Cal. Ormond deeds*, ed. Curtis, v (1547–84), no. 111.

¹⁶⁷ W.T. MacCaffrey, *Elizabeth I* (London, 1993), p. 241.

¹⁶⁸ Berleth, *The twilight lords*, p. 81.

Joan had become countess of Desmond following the death of the fourteenth earl, James Fitzgerald in November 1558.¹⁶⁹ Following the old earl's death, and to receive the homage of the new fifteenth earl of Desmond, Lord Deputy Sussex went on a progress to Waterford the same month, during which time he knighted Gerald Fitzgerald.¹⁷⁰

According to Hayman, Greaves and Fitzgibbon, in addition to his own earldom, Gerald inherited the fierce family feud with his Anglo-Norman neighbour, Thomas, tenth earl of Ormonde. An

effort had been made, from which success might have been fairly hoped, to appease these ruinous contentions; a marriage had been effected between the young earl of Desmond and the Dowager Countess of Ormonde, but ancestral rivalry and hatred were too virulent to be healed by so intimate an alliance. The usual quarrels speedily broke out afresh, their Irish neighbours, as usual, took part and Munster returned to its normal condition of party warfare, contempt of English law, and disregard of the queen's authority.¹⁷¹

In July 1559, in advance of instructions for the government of Ireland being delivered to the lord deputy, Queen Elizabeth and her Privy Council received several requests on behalf of her Irish subjects, among these, the Earls of Clanricard, Ormond and Desmond, bishops, mayors, and numerous private citizens, including Joan, countess of Desmond and Ormond.

While the specific details of Joan's petition are not known, she desired the queen to grant the

¹⁶⁹ Edwards, *The Ormond lordship*, p. 178.

¹⁷⁰ Ellis, *Tudor Ireland*, p. 237.

¹⁷¹ 'Unpublished Geraldine documents', ed. Hayman, Graves & Fitzgibbon, 1:109; see also *R.S.A.I. Jn.*, 3rd ser., i (1868-69), p. 505.

proposals which Andrew Skyddy (Desmond's attorney) requested. Joan was successful in her request as it concluded with a note confirming the new lord deputy's support for her suit 'the earle Sussex to her majesty on the behalf of the same Countesse'.¹⁷² That same year tensions continued to deteriorate between Joan's husband and son when an attempt was made to arbitrate the 'longtime variance' between Desmond and Ormond concerning the prise wines within the towns of Youghal and Kinsale.¹⁷³ Both earls were 'bound to abide by the order made in great sums of money'.¹⁷⁴ This order issued by the queen on 4 July 1559, reiterated how the title of the earl of Ormond 'was and is more plain and effectual than that of the earl of Desmond'¹⁷⁵ and clearly stated that

Thomas, earl of Ormond and his heirs' male, ought from henceforth peaceably and quietly to have and to hold all said prise wines of Youghal and Kinsale, giving commandment to said earl of Desmond and his heirs that except there may be found further and that, better matter to maintain his claim, he and they shall in no wise contend or move any further suit herein.¹⁷⁶

Despite the queen's order, Gerald insisted on Elizabeth hearing his attorney concerning the 'controversies as are betwene him and thearle of Ormonde for the pris wines of Youghall and Kynsale'.¹⁷⁷ By 1560 the situation had become so fraught that not even the best efforts of the countess could dissuade her husband from avoiding conflict with her son. As the dispute over the disputed manors was being held in London, tensions between the two earls reached

¹⁷² Sir Henry Radcliffe, Earl of Sussex to Queen Elizabeth July 1558 (TNA, SP 63/1/49).

¹⁷³ Holland, 'Joan Desmond, Ormond & Ossory', p. 215.

¹⁷⁴ *Cal. Ormond deeds*, ed. Curtis, v (1547–1584), no. 110.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁷ Sir Henry Radcliffe, Earl of Sussex to Queen Elizabeth, July 1558 (TNA, SP 63/1/49).

climax in November 1561 following a skirmish between both earls when Ormond attacked Desmond as he returned from the queen's service. While Desmond gathered his forces as he travelled throughout his earldom, Ormond likewise amassed his men, so that several thousand forces representing both sides had converged on the townland of Bohermore in County Tipperary.

The ensuing events saw Joan as wife mother and countess attempt to keep the peace when,

at bohermore, just betweene the countyes of Limerick and Tipperary where both those Earles mett together with a choice number of gallant and well provided followers, those strong competitors for the space of fourteene dayes, confronted one another in open field and yet came not to bataille, contrary to both theyr desires, but were by the discretion and mediation of certayne greate lords, then in both the armyes and especially by the intercession and procurement of the Countess of Desmond, who was also mother to Ormond, reconciled and made friends as the tyme.¹⁷⁸

One near contemporary account of the proposed battle explained that 'Desmond (as my father told mee, who was then present serveing under him) brought unto the field at that tyme 4000 foote and 750 hourse... and the Earle of Ormond came also thither with no lesse preparations' (a considerable supply of great guns).¹⁷⁹

This account of the day's events, compiled by the son of a Desmond retainer, is one of the first accounts of Joan described as peacemaker between both protagonists. According to

¹⁷⁸ 'Unpublished Geraldine documents', ed. Samuel Hayman in *Journal of the Historical and Archaeological Association of Ireland*, i, pt. ii (1868-9), p. 375.

¹⁷⁹Ibid.

Holland, 'it seems certain that Joan's part in the negotiations and settlement was significant, for if credit for maintaining the peace could have been given to one of the lords there present, instead of to a woman, it certainly would have been'.¹⁸⁰ Further accounts of the subsequent events of that day provide a vivid description of the influence of the countess over both parties as she rode between both camps. The Annals of the Four Masters noted that when

these great hosts came front to front and face to face, the great God sent the angel of peace to them, so that concord was established between the hosts, for, having reflected concerning the battle, they parted without coming to any engagement on that occasion.¹⁸¹

This flattering reference to Joan Fitzgerald as 'angel of peace' is in direct contrast to the 'vicar of hell' reference ascribed to her second husband, Sir Francis Bryan. That peace was restored between the rival dynasties largely due to the personal intervention of the countess, accounts for her praiseworthy sobriquet, 'soe likewise it happened with these Earles whilst the Contesse lived she wrought meanes to keepe them from doeing one another mischief'.¹⁸² In England, in comparison, the countess of Westmoreland in 1537 prevented a second Pilgrimage of Grace, according to Sir Thomas Tempest who noted that she 'rather played the part of a knight than a lady'.¹⁸³ Similarly, in 1538 the countess of Salisbury, when interrogated following an accusation of committing treason, was described by the earl of Southampton 'we may call her rather a strong constant man than a woman, for in all her

¹⁸⁰ Holland, 'Joan Desmond, Ormond & Ossory', p. 213.

¹⁸¹ *Annals of the Four Masters*, 1560 [www.uccelt.ie].

¹⁸² *Ibid.*

¹⁸³ Sir Thomas Tempest to Sir Thomas Howard Duke of Norfolk, 1537 (TNA, SP/115, f.197).

behaviour, however we have used her, she hath showed herself so earnest, vehement and precise that more could not be'.¹⁸⁴

Following the Bohermore incident, both earls were summoned to London in January 1562 but Desmond who did not reply to the royal summons, did not travel until four months later.

When he finally arrived at court in May, he was detained at the house of the Lord Treasurer.

The following month, the queen wrote to Joan in a friendly tone, assuring the countess that her husband, the earl, was healthy, and explained that his detention was intended as a reprimand to him.¹⁸⁵

The Dublin Council also wrote to Joan 'in brief what hathe passed concerning therle her husbände',¹⁸⁶ and requested her to maintain the peace in the earldom of Desmond during her husband's incarceration. While Joan administered the Desmond estates and presided over the court, 'she was, in all things but name, lord of the earldom itself'.¹⁸⁷ The council also 'ernestly requyred her in the quenes majesties name to endeavour herself with all polycy and discreascon in thabsence of therle her husband to accomplyshe the contents of your honorable letters Cor the good quyetness and stay of those countreys under hir government'.¹⁸⁸

On 7 June 1562 Joan wrote to the queen requesting 'the causes for which the earl of Desmond had been sequestered from his liberty, to the house of the lord treasurer of England'

¹⁸⁴ William Fitzwilliam and Thomas Goodrich to Sir Thomas Cromwell, 16 Nov. 1538 (BL, Cotton MS., f.79).

¹⁸⁵ Queen Elizabeth to Joan countess of Desmond, 29 June 1562 (TNA, SP, 63/7/19).

¹⁸⁶ Irish Council to Joan Fitzgerald, countess of Ormond and Ossory, June 1562 (TNA, SP 63/6/27).

¹⁸⁷ Joan Kelly-Gadol, 'Did women have a Renaissance?' in Renate Bridenthal, Claudia Koonz and Susan Stuard (eds.), *Becoming visible: women in European history* (Boston, 1987), p. 182.

¹⁸⁸ Irish Council to Joan Fitzgerald, countess of Ormond and Ossory, June 1562 (TNA, SP 63/6/27).

and sought the queen's 'favourable intentions towards him'.¹⁸⁹ In her detailed response, Elizabeth addresses Joan as her 'right deare and wel beloved cosin' and expressed her regret for having 'no better ocasion to wryt unto you at this tyme of any other matter then that which we thynk you shall myslike'.¹⁹⁰ The queen informed Joan that Gerald was entirely responsible for his own detainment. If the earl of Desmond had appeared before the queen when initially summoned, and had the dispute with her son been resolved, both earls would have long since returned to Ireland. Elizabeth continued, 'but your husbände Desmond...hath ben so evill not only in manyfest breking of our lawes in that Realme and in contempning our authority as weel by refusing to come'.¹⁹¹ In the earl's absence and recognising Joan as peace keeper, the queen acknowledged the countess's role in the governance of the earldom and expressed to Joan how she desired the 'quiet of the country' under Joan's control. Elizabeth offered assistance to Joan should she require any in the absence of the earl 'considering we understand that you have the charge and rule of his country and lands during his absence, to see peace kept in the country and if you shall therin have nede of the help of our Justice nor of our lieutenant as soon as he shall arrive'.¹⁹²

In Gerald's absence, Joan continued to attend to her husband's political duties. Together with his brother John Fitzgerald and their supporters, Joan committed 'great hurts' on 'the Lord Roche, Lord Barry, Sir Maurice of Desmond, Teig M'Cormac and others' who launched an incursion into the earldom in the earl's absence.¹⁹³ In March 1563 Elizabeth was informed by Lord Deputy Sussex that 'Nicolas Heron and Edward Fitzsymon have delivered a perfect

¹⁸⁹ Joan countess of Ormond, Ossory and Desmond, to Queen Elizabeth, 7 June 1562 in *Cal. S.P. Ire., 1509–73*, p. 196).

¹⁹⁰ Queen Elizabeth to Joan, countess of Desmond, June 1562 (TNA, SP 63/7/19).

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁹² *Ibid.*

¹⁹³ Lord Deputy Henry Sydney to Queen Elizabeth, Mar. 1563 (TNA, SP 63/8/24).

book of the hurts committed by the countess of Desmond and John the earl's brother and their men'.¹⁹⁴ Clearly she did not always subscribe to the characteristics of an angel of peace, and exercised her authority in a similar manner as she had done during her first widowhood after the death of James Butler in 1546.

Writing from Youghal on 22 December 1563 to Sir William Cecil Joan outright discounted and denied any suggestion by 'evil tongues'¹⁹⁵ that she was somehow the cause of her husband being detained in London through her correspondence and friendship with the queen and in her son's favour. She explicitly implored Cecil to end any such rumours that she was the earl's 'chief stayer in England'.¹⁹⁶ Referring to her son, she once again expressed her desire for peace, elaborating that 'before God I never thought ne meant any suche thing against my said lord butt always wysshing them bothe to be perfect frinds as to whome I love as myself'.¹⁹⁷ In allegiance to her husband she concludes her letter with a plea that 'the earl of Desmond may be despatched in favour'.¹⁹⁸ Gerald was held in London at the queen's orders for almost two years and finally released in 1564. Following his return to Ireland, Joan's ability to influence the maintenance of peace between the two earldoms with which she was inextricably linked continued to be tested. While she managed to forestall bloodshed at Bohermore, her husband had continued to press his claim to the disputed territories, including in May 1563 when he claimed that he could show full title to the manors, and one year after

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁹⁵ Joan countess of Ormond Ossory and Desmond to Sir William Cecil, 22 Dec. 1563 (TNA, SP 63/8/56).

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

his return to Ireland, he yet again sought the return of the same territories. On each occasion, he failed to persuade the queen to acquiesce.¹⁹⁹

As Carol O'Connor has argued, whereas Joan's mother-in-law Margaret Fitzgerald firmly embraced her 'husband's family at the expense of her biological kin, Joan aimed to unite both her families and her loyalties rather than choose a sole allegiance'.²⁰⁰ This is borne out by the peace that held between her husband and her son until barely within one month of Joan's death on 2 January 1565,²⁰¹ when she was about fifty years old. Her role in maintaining the peace between the earls is obvious, as within weeks of her death Gerald and Thomas met in open warfare at Affane in County Waterford. The peace she had brokered between her son and her husband years earlier at Bohermore, had finally collapsed.

With Joan's death, there 'was no one of sufficient stature to perform a mediating role'²⁰² and in the aftermath of the battle, both men were summoned to London once again, where each was rebuked by the queen. Neither protagonist emerged in a positive light, Black Tom, albeit temporarily, lost favour at court despite his friendship with his cousin Elizabeth. In 1561, Joan's influence had prevented open conflict between each earl.

The effectiveness of Joan Fitzgerald's role as mediator and peacekeeper, as well as her influence and authority, was borne out by the matter of weeks between her death, and the outbreak of conflict at Affane. However, she was not unique in her role as an influential

¹⁹⁹ Conference between Lord Deputy Henry Sydney and Gerald, earl of Desmond, 3 May 1563 (TNA, SP 63/8/41); see also, Desmond's request to Queen Elizabeth, 13 Dec. 1565 (TNA, SP 63/15/64).

²⁰⁰ O'Connor, 'The Kildare women', p. 52.

²⁰¹ Gerald Fitzgerald, Earl of Desmond to Thomas Butler, Earl of Ormond, 10 Oct. 1579 (TNA, SP 63/69/50).

²⁰² McCormack, 'Sleeping with the enemy', p. 473.

noblewoman in this period. Her husband's second wife Eleanor Butler (c.1545–1638), daughter of Edmund Lord Dunboyne, over the course of their marriage of eighteen years on several occasions represented the earl not only in Dublin but also in London, and like Joan Fitzgerald, Eleanor corresponded personally with Queen Elizabeth. Such was Eleanor's ability as her husband's representative and spokesperson that the Dublin government occasionally refused her permission to travel to London to meet with the queen. By the time of her second marriage in 1596, Eleanor Butler's influence not only stood to the benefit of her husband Donnough O'Connor Sligo, with the Dublin government and with the queen, but also into the early years of the Stuart regime.²⁰³ Through their marriages and subsequent actions within their affinal families, noblewomen frequently contributed to the decades of peace that did exist between the houses of Ormond and Desmond. In doing so, not only did the respective dynasties benefit from such influence, so too did Irish political affairs.²⁰⁴ In 1579, fourteen years after her death, Sir Nicholas Malby (1530–84) Lord President of Connacht, ordered his royal troops to destroy the tomb of Joan Fitzgerald at Askeaton.²⁰⁵ This action had come about following Malby's antagonism of Joan's widower the earl of Desmond during the Desmond rebellion.

Conclusion

Joan Fitzgerald, countess of Ormond Ossory and Desmond, played an important role in the the survival and prosperity of the Ormond dynasty, in particular through her negotiation and successful maintenance of her heir's wardship, and her role as negotiator between her son and her husband. Through her succession of marriages, she amassed considerable authority

²⁰³ Anne Chambers, *Eleanor, countess of Desmond, c.1548–1638* (Dublin, 1986); Brady, 'Political women and reform in Tudor Ireland' pp 79-81.

²⁰⁴ McCormack, 'Sleeping with the enemy', pp 466-75.

²⁰⁵ Gerald Fitzgerald, Earl of Desmond to Thomas Butler, Earl of Ormond, 10 Oct. 1579 (TNA, SP 63/69/50); Kirwan, 'Lady Joan Fitzgerald', pp 301-2.

wealth and power. She outmanoeuvred men both within and outside her family, notably her second husband Sir Francis Bryan, the lord deputies Bellingham and St. Leger and her detractor Walter Cowley. Most notably, her intervention between her third husband the earl of Desmond and her son the earl of Ormond surpassed both men's ability to keep the peace without her intervention. Some of her most useful assets were her connections at court, including with the Queen and the practical knowledge she gained through three successive marriages to three powerful men. As historian Christine Klapisch-Zuber has argued 'in Renaissance Florence, aristocratic women were far more than passing guests in their natal and affinal families'.²⁰⁶ Joan Fitzgerald's was a case in point. Her life demonstrates that the amount of power and authority a woman possessed could change considerably throughout the course of her life, reflecting her own changing circumstances. As an aristocratic woman, she did not exert as much control in her first marriage within the Butler dynasty, as she did in her second and third marriages.

Historian Sue Walker questions why any woman would consider exchanging the independent status of widowhood for the legal confinement of marriage, since un-married women could hold property, sue and be sued, and borrow or lend money.²⁰⁷ Once remarried, however, the law viewed husband and wife as one person, namely the husband. Walker contends that remarriages must therefore be seen in the light of free choice.²⁰⁸ Although Joan Fitzgerald fitted into the cohort of women who could financially support both herself and her children, she nevertheless chose remarriage twice. However, on closer examination Joan's choice may not have been entirely voluntary. Her visit to London between July 1547 and November 1548 provided the English government with the opportunity to persuade her to accept a partner she would not otherwise have considered. However, the English Privy Council were swift to

²⁰⁶ Klapisch-Zubler, *Women, family & ritual*, p. 118.

²⁰⁷ Sheridan Walker, *Wife & widow*, pp 3-5.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

intervene and prevented Joan pursuing her choice of husband. That they intervened, is evidence of her considerable position and ‘the importance of the Ormond earldom to the royal government, the English government's intervention reflected its realization that certain women were of central political importance’.²⁰⁹

In her evaluation of such hasty remarriages as Joan’s third and final marriage, historian Joel Rosenthal concluded that ‘some intervals were so short that they argue for a martially-oriented personality, if not an eye cocked toward eligible candidates at the previous husband's funeral (or before)’,²¹⁰ in Joan’s case, Rosenthal’s hypothesis may be considered. Joan’s life illustrated the myriad of roles open to noblewomen in sixteenth-century Ireland. The *Annals of the Four Masters* recorded her death in a restrained obituary, noting that ‘Joan, the daughter of James, son of Maurice, son of Maurice, died’. Her death was recorded among the ‘sorrowful news of Leath-Mhogha, on account of her charity and humanity’.²¹¹

²⁰⁹ Holland, ‘Joan Desmond, Ormond & Ossory’, p. 259.

²¹⁰ Joel T. Rosenthal, ‘Aristocratic widows in fifteenth-century England’ in Barbara Harris and J.K. McNamara (eds.), *Women and the structure of society* (Durham, 1984), p. 39.

²¹¹ *Annals of the Four Masters*, 1565 [www.uccelt.ie].

Chapter 7

Black Tom's women; unions, succession and decline

Many of the Ormond women featured in this study exercised significant influence as individuals beyond their private domestic spheres, and gained recognition and respect both publicly and politically, independent of their fathers, husbands, or sons. Several also exercised considerable agency in choosing husbands or protecting their son's wardships during widowhood. This chapter explores the degree to which the lives of six Ormond women were shaped by arguably the most formidable head of the dynasty in the sixteenth century, Thomas Butler tenth earl of Ormond (1531-1614), eldest son of Joan, countess of Ormond, Ossory and Desmond (d. 1565) and her husband James Butler, ninth earl (d. 1546). The women in question are his three countesses, Elizabeth Berkeley (d.1582), Elizabeth Sheffield (d. 1600), and Helen Barry (d. 1642), his sole daughter and heiress Elizabeth Butler (d. 1628), his cousin Ellen Butler (d. 1631) wife of Walter Butler eleventh earl (d. 1652) and lastly Thomas's granddaughter Elizabeth Preston (d. 1684). This thesis concludes with the elevation of Elizabeth Preston and her husband and cousin James Butler, twelfth earl (d. 1688) to the dukedom of Ormond by Charles II following his restoration to the monarchy in 1660. Given that during this sixty-year period (1554-1614) Thomas was pivotal in shaping the fortunes of the earldom and exerted significant influence over his three wives, and his daughter, it is necessary at the outset to explore in brief, his career, his standing at court and in Ireland, his relationships with the crown, the Dublin administration, his extended family, and his stewardship of the earldom before focussing on the lives of these women and specifically their relationships with him.

According to David Edwards, Thomas Butler's term as tenth earl of Ormond from 1554 when the earl returned from London where he had spent his youth until his death in Kilkenny in 1614, was the 'Golden Age' of the earldom.¹ As earl, he became the most powerful figure in Elizabethan Ireland and one of the leading aristocrats in the Tudor and Stuart dominions² holding more political offices than any preceding earl of Ormond.³ Because during Elizabeth's reign Ormond was, according to historian Wallace MacCaffrey, 'the one Irish nobleman at home in the court'⁴ and an especially ardent personal supporter of the queen, he was often obstructive in dealing with successive chief governors charged with pursuing official crown policy aimed at reducing the power of overmighty regional magnates. Much to the annoyance of her officials in Ireland, as Elizabeth increased the wealth and status of her cousin, Ormond 'went over the heads of the Irish chief governors...appealing directly to the queen in London'.⁵ Down to her death on 1603, his longstanding personal relationship with the queen bolstered the earl's dominance, her warm regard for him clearly evident from her letter in 1593 assuring him that 'you have been too long acquainted with the disposition of the writer to expect any spark of ingratitude'.⁶

During Thomas's term, the Ormond estates flourished. By the turn of the century, the Ormond patrimony comprised almost one-third of the land in County Kilkenny alone, together with former monastic land granted to Thomas across fourteen counties from the east to the west of Ireland, including the Aran Islands.⁷ The estates were also clearly well run: in

¹ Edwards, *The Ormond lordship*, p. 98.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Fiants, Ireland, Eliz. I*, nos 133, 6166.

⁴ MacCaffrey, *Elizabeth I*, p. 421.

⁵ Edwards, *The Ormond lordship*, p. 98.

⁶ Irish rebellion papers, 1590s (CUL, MS. Kk. I.15, f.48).

⁷ Edwards, *The Ormond lordship*, p. 98.

1574 his rent returns amounted to just under STG£2,000, and by 1610 these had increased to STG£3,000.⁸

But while his patrimony may have prospered and escaped many of the severest atrocities of Elizabethan warfare, on occasion his subjects in Counties Kilkenny and Tipperary suffered for their support of the cavalier Ormond, most notably under the lord deputyship of Sir Henry Sydney (1565-71 and 1575-8), and during the presidency of Sir William Drury of Munster (1576-8).⁹ Furthermore, arising from his absences at court, there were ongoing contests for dominance between various branches of the extended Butler family who connived to undermine the earl's authority. With Elizabeth I's support, Ormond managed to overcome these challenges, but the extent of his reliance on her was immediately exposed when following her death in 1603, Ormond, whom Edwards termed 'a giant in the small world of Irish politics', lost his political dominance and the earldom quickly fell into crisis and decline. The earl's death in 1614 exposed another significant fault line in the Ormond dynasty and in Thomas's provision for his succession when the prospect of his only daughter Elizabeth Butler inheriting the earldom, precipitated a succession crisis reminiscent of that involving Piers Butler and the seventh earl's two daughters one hundred years before.

Thomas Butler, tenth earl: politician at court and in Ormond

Owing to his reputed dark complexion, the earl was known by the sobriquet Thomas Dubh or Black Tom.¹⁰ In 1544, aged almost thirteen years old, he left Kilkenny to be raised and educated at court with Henry VIII's son, Prince Edward. In 1554 Ormond received Queen

⁸ For a thorough breakdown of the Ormond rental see *ibid*, pp 100-01: Edwards contends that Ormond may have been worth as much as £4000, by the reign of James I.

⁹ Edwards, *The Ormond lordship*, p.100.

¹⁰ Edwards, 'Thomas, tenth earl of Ormond'.

Mary's gratitude for his involvement in her protection against the Protestant rebel Sir Thomas Wyatt.¹¹ In autumn that same year, Thomas returned to 'great rejoicing throughout the greater part of Leath-Mhoga [southern Ireland]'.¹² One reason for his rapturous welcome was because a rumour was circulating throughout the midlands that he had been killed the previous year. Once back in Ireland, the queen forbade his return to court, believing his presence in Ireland to be a stabilising influence. Ormond complied, remaining in Ireland until Mary's death in 1558. During the years 1556-8 he supported the policies of colonization and military subjugation pursued by his friend Thomas Radcliffe, earl of Sussex. At the same time, he extended his sphere of influence through the annexation of large tracts of land in the midlands and the south east granted to him by the queen; that self-aggrandisement contributed to his isolation from several rival siblings and kinsmen.

From the beginning of her reign, the queen awarded Ormond leases of church property in southern Ireland among other generous favours, and she continued to lean heavily in his favour in the ongoing Ormond-Desmond feud.

Thomas was her chief male companion at official state ceremonies in the 1570s and 1580s; she referred to him as 'old lucas' and her 'black husband'.¹³ As Edwards has commented, successive chief governors of Ireland were 'uncomfortably aware that the earl could cut the ground from under them',¹⁴ 'making him an alternative focus of power to the central administration'.¹⁵ Within the earldom, his absenteeism was also problematic. Thomas' absence between 1544 and 1554 suited his three brothers who were not only 'anti-

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² *Annals of the Four Masters*, ed. O'Donovan, v, 1531.

¹³ R. Strong, *The cult of Elizabeth* (London, 1987), pp 207-8; Edwards, 'Thomas, tenth earl of Ormond'.

¹⁴ Edwards, *The Ormond lordship*, p. 103.

¹⁵ Ibid.

government' but also 'anti-Ormond'.¹⁶ Six years after his return, in 1560, Edmund, Edward and Piers, protested when they discovered that Thomas had consented to the abolition of coign and livery (which they practised) in the earldom, during the lord lieutenancy of Sir Thomas Radclyffe, third Earl of Sussex (1560-4). They also criticised Ormond's failure to prevent the take-over of Edmund's lands. By the late 1550s, Thomas's brothers had become the chief protagonists in the wider factions within the wider Butler family as a situation reminiscent of the late 1490s emerged. Back then, the earl's absence created a vacuum that resulted in various members of the extended family laying claim to the title. Almost five decades later, following the death of the ninth earl in London in 1546, the authority of the earl was again being challenged. Significantly, for a short time, it was Thomas's mother the dowager Countess Joan, who provided vital continuity and stability in the earldom in her capacity as co-governor of her husband's estate alongside his brother Richard Butler during Thomas's minority.¹⁷ However, the situation deteriorated after three years when Joan returned to her Desmond patrimony in 1549 following her third marriage to Garret Fitzgerald, future earl of Desmond.¹⁸ Thus during the absence of the young future tenth earl in the years 1544-54, as rival branches wrestled for control of their individual territories, 'it became customary for them to reject the larger dynastic interest and follow an independent line aimed at self-aggrandisement'.¹⁹ Once Thomas Butler returned to Ireland and began asserting his authority as earl, backed by the queen, conflict with his hostile brothers was inevitable. Both disputes ultimately ended in the collapse of the earl's relationship with his brothers and nephews in January 1567 when two of his brothers began a new war in Munster. Two years later, in summer 1569, while Thomas was absent (at court) yet again, his brothers laid waste

¹⁶ Edwards, 'Thomas, tenth earl of Ormond'.

¹⁷ Born in 1531, Thomas was not twenty-one until 1552. He only returned to Ireland in 1554.

¹⁸ See Chapter three.

¹⁹ David Edwards, 'The Butler revolt of 1569' in *IHS*, xxviii, no. 111 (May 1993), pp 235-7.

to much of his lordship, attacked many of his servants, tenants, and burgesses, and besieged the town of Kilkenny, along with his many castles including Kilkenny castle, his residence and family seat.²⁰ Throughout, he had the queen's support. By early July she permitted him to return to his disturbed lordship where he attempted to quell unrest. Notifying Sidney of the earl's return, Elizabeth commended him as 'a dutiful and noble personage....in whom we have ever found trust and fealty towards us and our crown'.²¹

Almost immediately, Ormond began his retaliation against his upstart brothers. Backed by the Kilkenny gentry and many of his burgesses, he subordinated his brothers' armies throughout Counties Kilkenny, Tipperary and Carlow. But whereas the queen supported Ormond throughout his campaign, Sidney persistently attempted to undermine him. So strong were Thomas's complaints about how Sidney had 'over-pressed' the earl's family to the point of causing rebellion that by 1571 Sidney's term of office in Ireland was ended by the queen who agreed with Ormond.²² Edwards contends that Ormond's ability as a commander of royal forces, his skill at peaceful negotiation and his use of force 'meant that she preferred him to return to Ireland'.²³ Finally, four years later in 1575, Thomas was instrumental in abolishing coign and livery throughout most of his territories in Kilkenny, Tipperary and Carlow.²⁴ Throughout the 1580s Thomas grappled with further internecine revolt from his siblings and from the Desmond Geraldines, his mother's natal family, including the Munster revolt, during which Sir Nicholas Malby, President of Connacht (d. 1584) ordered the destruction of the tomb of Ormond's mother Joan at her resting place in Askeaton where she was buried in

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ *Sidney state papers, 1565–1570*, ed. T. Ó Laidhin (Dublin, 1962), no. 29.

²² *Henry Sidney, a viceroy's vindication? Sir Henry Sidney's memoir of service in Ireland, 1556–1578*, ed. Ciaran Brady (Cork, 2002), p. 119.

²³ Edwards, 'Thomas, tenth earl of Ormond'.

²⁴ Edwards, *The Ormond lordship*, p. 210.

1565.²⁵ He also strove to contain the threat of sporadic Catholic uprisings and in particular the ‘Fitzgerald plans to link the Munster and Leinster rebellions’.²⁶

When England and Spain went to war in 1585, Ormond’s closeness to Queen Elizabeth came into even sharper focus. During the Spanish Armada campaign the earl, despite having recently been appointed lord admiral of Ireland, remained at court with the queen and assisted in setting up an army camp at Tilbury in Essex. For his services, Ormond was created a Knight of the garter in May 1588 and two years later, the queen appointed him earl marshal of England, ‘one of the highest honours ever bestowed on an Irish peer’.²⁷ However, he served as marshal for only two years fearing that ‘he should be tied to continual attendance in England and thereby to be made a stranger to his own country, which he could not endure’.²⁸ ‘Held in great and extraordinary estimation’²⁹ according to the queen, in 1592 Ormond left England for the last time and returned to Ireland, where he remained for the rest of his life until he died twenty-two years later, aged almost eighty-two. His return to Ireland was necessary and timely, given that his only son and heir had died some years earlier, creating further pressure on the earl and generating tensions throughout the extended family as ‘excited by the prospect of dynastic advancement, senior elements of the Butler lineage decided to rebel’.³⁰ To trace the origins of this looming dynastic succession crisis, it is necessary to examine Ormond’s marriages and the contexts in which each was contracted.

²⁵ Gerald Fitzgerald, Earl of Desmond to Thomas Butler, Earl of Ormond, 10 Oct. 1579 (TNA, SP 63/69/50).

²⁶ Edwards, *The Ormond lordship*, p. 233.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Robert Rothe’s register or pedigree of the House of Ormond, 1616 (TCD, MS. 842, f. 160v.).

²⁹ Irish rebellion papers, 1590s (CUL, MS. Kk.i.15, f.48r.).

³⁰ Edwards, *The Ormond lordship*, p. 248.

The beginnings of dynastic instability

Not surprisingly, Elizabeth I was instrumental in arranging Thomas' first marriage. After her succession, she dismissed many of her predecessor's privy councillors, replacing them with several of her Boleyn and Howard relations; she did the same within her immediate household.³¹ Prominent figures within her extended family circle which was dominated by her cousin Thomas Howard, fourth duke of Norfolk and the most powerful magnate in England,³² included Thomas, earl of Ormond and Sir Thomas Radcliffe, third earl of Sussex and chief governor of Ireland (1556-63). Within a year of Elizabeth's accession, Ormond significantly strengthened his connection with her and his standing at court by marrying Elizabeth Berkeley whose brother Henry was married to the duke of Norfolk's sister.³³ Elizabeth Berkeley (1532-82), the only daughter of Lord Thomas Berkeley, sixth Baron Berkeley and his wife Anne Savage (d. 1564), married Ormond at court in London in 1559.³⁴ The union signalled recognition of the earl's standing within the highest ranks of Tudor aristocracy and the high regard in which he was held by both queen and ascendant political faction at court. The new countess of Ormond, reputedly one of Queen Elizabeth's ladies-in-waiting, was said by the Berkeley family chronicler John Smyth to have been 'the fairest that lived in the courts of Edward VI and [his successor] Queen Mary, and soe noted in those days'.³⁵ Elizabeth's mother had been a lady of the court of Henry VIII briefly during the 1530s, and attended Queen Anne Boleyn at her wedding to the king.³⁶ She was reputedly 'noted [at court] to be the most tender hearted to her children; and to them so over and above

³¹ See Anna Whitelock, *Elizabeth's bedfellows* (London, 2013); John Guy, *The reign of Elizabeth I: court and culture in the last decade* (Cambridge, 1995); Sarah Gristwood, *Elizabeth and Leicester: power, passion and politics* (London, 2007).

³² John Smyth, *The lives of the Berkeleys, 1066–1618*, ed. Sir John McLean (2 vols, Gloucester, 1881), ii, 252-5.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp 254-5.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*

reason indulgent, as not contentedly she admitted them out of her sight'.³⁷ However, she was also said to be neglectful of their education as a result of which they 'often complained of that want of learning which a juster [sic.] education should have afforded their estates and parentage'.³⁸ That criticism aside, she was clearly recognised as a capable custodian of her estate. In 1537, by which time she was widowed, Henry personally appointed her to a commission of inquiry into attacks on her property livestock and mills by intruders (including her brother-in-law Sir Nicholas Poyntz)³⁹ and she personally impanelled a jury, sat on the bench, heard evidence presented, convicted and fined the defendants.⁴⁰ The daughter of a noble Tudor lord, and of an energetic, politically-minded and powerful noble woman, (both long-standing members of court) Elizabeth Berkeley was, therefore, a very suitable match for the young earl of Ormond, keen to capitalise on his favour with the queen. Significantly, this, his first marriage, also granted Ormond admission to the powerful Howard/Radcliffe circle of conservative nobles at court, Elizabeth being a kinswoman of Thomas Howard, fourth Duke of Norfolk. Within months of their wedding Ormond returned to Ireland on 14 August to deal with the revolt led by his aggrieved brothers.⁴¹ The following year, Elizabeth 'followed [her husband] into Ireland, accompanied by her mother and brother [Henry] from London to Yate, thence to Bristol, where shee tooke shipping for Ireland'.⁴² The countess of Ormond's only brother 'gave her one hundred pounds by the yeare for many years together, both before and after her marriage'.⁴³

³⁷ Ibid, p. 253.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid, p. 270; *Original letters illustrative of English history*, ed. Henry Ellis, 3rd ser. (London, 1846), pp 142–44.

⁴¹ Edwards, 'The Butler revolt of 1569', pp 235-7.

⁴² Smyth, *The lives of the Berkeleys*, ed. McLean, ii, 252-5.

⁴³ Ibid.

Disappointment followed when Elizabeth apparently received little or nothing from her father's will: after she married into the Butler dynasty, her jointure consisted only of lands in Ireland. Five years into the childless marriage, in early 1564, other serious problems emerged. Elizabeth's allegedly inappropriate behaviour outside of her marriage became a cause of embarrassment for the earl and the Butler family. Immediately, Ormond sought to divorce his wife. Within a matter of weeks, by spring 1564 the earl and countess separated acrimoniously, 'divorced from bed and board'.⁴⁴

However, before official recognition of the couple's separation was granted, Elizabeth's brother-in-law Thomas Howard, Duke of Norfolk and Thomas Radcliffe Earl of Sussex, acted as mediators with the countess's brother, Henry,⁴⁵ after it was alleged by Nicholas White, a client of Ormond, that the countess had been exchanging love letters with three men named Morgan, Moore and Mansfield.⁴⁶ While it is not known whether the allegations were proven, the earl resolved to divorce Elizabeth and re-marry. As befitted an aristocratic of her standing, Elizabeth, however, put up a strong fight, and personally enlisted the support of several English privy councillors. Just one year later, in early 1565, Ormond obtained an Irish divorce approved by Adam Walsh, an official of Ossory and commissary to Patrick Walsh, bishop of Waterford and Lismore.⁴⁷ On 11 May the English council responded to the countess's appeal and appointed a commission headed by Matthew Parker, archbishop of Canterbury, to handle Elizabeth's request, 'notwithstanding [the] statutes, decrees, orders and constitutions of Ireland'.⁴⁸ The commission which took four years to reach its conclusion,

⁴⁴ Nicholas White to Sir Thomas Wrothe, 20 July 1564, (TNA, SP 63/11/39).

⁴⁵ The countess of Ormond's only brother, Henry Berkeley, was married to Katherine Howard, sister of Thomas Howard, fourth duke of Norfolk.

⁴⁶ Nicholas White to Sir Thomas Wrothe, 20 July 1564, Whitehall (TNA, SP 63/11/39).

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Appeal of Joan Fitzgerald countess of Ormond to the archbishop of Canterbury and others, 11 May 1565 in *Cal. patent rolls, 1563–1566, Elizabeth I*, iii, no. 1240.

initially ordered Ormond to abandon his request for a divorce. However, in 1569 the divorce was finally officially recognised and he settled with the divorce commission. He undertook to pay Elizabeth a mere £90 per annum from his lands to cover the cost of her alimony and maintenance, for the remainder of her life. He did so until her death in Bristol on 1 September 1582.⁴⁹ Following her death and in a clear sign that neither her reputation nor her support at court had been diminished by the alleged scandal and divorce from Ormond, Elizabeth was buried at Westminster Abbey.⁵⁰

On 9 November 1582, just over two months after her death, Thomas Butler then aged fifty, was granted a license to marry a second time.⁵¹ In a move to advance his standing in the English peerage, Ormond negotiated another propitious marriage, this time with Elizabeth Sheffield, only daughter of the wealthy peer Lord John Sheffield, second Baron Sheffield of Butterwick and his wife, Lady Douglas Howard.⁵² Through her maternal Howard relatives, Elizabeth Sheffield was a cousin of the queen. Born sometime between 1560 and 1568,⁵³ she was half-sister of the explorer Sir Robert Dudley, born as a result of their mother's affair with Sir Robert Dudley, first earl of Leicester.⁵⁴ Writing from Windsor exactly one week prior to the marriage, Roger Manners, fifth earl of Rutland (d.1612) noted how it was widely

⁴⁹ Smyth, *The lives of the Berkeleys*, ed. McLean, ii, 5.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Allegations for marriage licenses issued by the bishop of London, 1520–1610*, ed. G. Armitage (London, Harleian Society, 1877), p. 112; *Memoirs of the reign of Queen Elizabeth* ed. Thomas Birch (2 vols, London, 1754), i, 27.

⁵² *Ibid.*; Christopher Highley, *Shakespeare, Spenser and the crisis in Ireland* (Cambridge, 1997), p. 24. A cousin of the queen, Lady Howard's unusual surname may have been intended to honour her godmother Lady Margaret Douglas, Countess of Lennox and another of Queen Elizabeth's confidantes: see Tracy Borman, *Elizabeth's women: the hidden story of the Virgin Queen* (London, 2009), p. 299.

⁵³ This time frame for her birth is possible owing to her parents having married in 1560 – when her mother was aged seventeen – and her father's death in 1568: Simon Adams, 'Sheffield, Douglas, Lady Sheffield (1542/3–1608)' in *ODNB*, online edn. 2008 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/69742>] [25 Aug. 2017].

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

acknowledged at court that ‘my Lord Ormond will marry M[istress]s Sheffield’.⁵⁵ The earl and his new countess who, like her predecessor Elizabeth Berkeley was one of the queen’s ladies-in-waiting, were married at court sometime between 9 November and the end of December 1582.⁵⁶ The following January, Thomas and his new bride returned to Kilkenny.

While the unions with Elizabeth Berkeley and Elizabeth Sheffield both enhanced the earl’s standing and influence at court, his close relationship with the queen already guaranteed him an exceptionally privileged position. The fact that his second wife, also from one of the highest-ranking families at court, was considerably younger than the earl - she was aged between fourteen and twenty-two at the time of their marriage - undoubtedly determined his choice. Given his previous failed and childless marriage, and in a context of tensions and rivalries within the wider Butler family, Ormond needed to produce an heir to secure the succession and affirm his authority. The following September, Elizabeth gave birth to their first child and only son, James, Lord Thurles.

Writing from Kilkenny on 15 November 1583, the earl thanked Lord Burghley for his good wishes following the birth of their only son and informed him while Elizabeth had been ‘suffering under a hot ague, the most danger is past; and she sleepeth, and taketh rest’.⁵⁷ In 1585 the countess gave birth to their second child, Elizabeth. All seemed to augur well for a smooth succession to the earldom. In 1585 the countess gave birth to their second child, Elizabeth.

⁵⁵ Roger Manners to the earl of Rutland, 2 Nov. 1582 in *Manuscripts of the duke of Rutland preserved at Belvoir Castle, vol i, 1440–1641*, HMC, *Twelfth report*, Appendix iv, p. 144.

⁵⁶ *Memoirs of the reign of Queen Elizabeth*, ed. Birch, i, 27.

⁵⁷ Thomas, earl of Ormond to Lord Burghley, Nov. 1583 in *Cal. S.P. Ire., 1574–1585*, p. 489.

A somewhat puzzling account of the relationship between Elizabeth Sheffield and the earl appears in the writings of the poet Edmund Spenser (1552-99). He suggests that following Ormond's separation from his first wife, the earl and his future second wife co-habited at Kilkenny castle for an unspecified period before their marriage in 1582. Interestingly, when referencing Elizabeth Sheffield in the intervening years, Spenser alluded to her as 'countess' even though there is no evidence of a marriage ceremony having taken place, and Ormond's first wife was still alive. Indeed Spenser does not appear to have been alone among contemporary observers in believing that they were married. James Carney, in his *Poems of the Butlers*, makes a brief but regrettably unreferenced remark that Elizabeth Sheffield married Thomas Butler before 1575⁵⁸: this would appear to substantiate Spenser's reference to Elizabeth as countess in 1580 and 1581. However, in the absence of any other evidence, the marriage appears to have taken place in 1582 as noted by the earl of Rutland and the marriage license issued to the earl and countess in 1582.⁵⁹

What is clear is that Elizabeth Sheffield was resident in Kilkenny Castle playing the role of countess by October 1580 when Spenser and Lord deputy Sir Arthur Grey de Wilton (d. 1593) for whom he was secretary, stayed at Kilkenny castle whilst en route to Limerick in October 1580.⁶⁰ (They did so again exactly one year later in October 1581.⁶¹) Spenser recalls how on the first of these visits Ormond, who was absent again, had instructed Elizabeth 'to make good cheer for the lord deputy' and to ensure that 'he may be supplied on his way' (to Limerick).⁶² Following Spenser's experience of the hospitality and 'good cheer' at the castle,

⁵⁸ *Poems of the Butlers of Ormond, Cahir, and Dunboyne, AD 1400–1650*, ed. James Carney (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1945), p. 140.

⁵⁹ See notes 51 and 55 above.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ Highley, *Shakespeare, Spenser & the crisis in Ireland*, p. 26.

⁶² Thomas Butler, earl of Ormond to Elizabeth Sheffield, 8 Oct. 1580, 'Slewlogher' cited in Raymond Jenkins, 'Spenser with Lord Grey in Ireland' in *PMLA*, lii (1937), pp 342-3.

he penned a sonnet in which he allegorised Elizabeth Sheffield; ‘for of the famous Shure the nymph she is’.⁶³

He commended her for being ‘the branch of true nobile, below’d of high and low with faithfull harts’ through one of his characters in *The Faerie Queene*.⁶⁴ Appended to this work – first published in 1590 and dedicated to Queen Elizabeth – are seventeen sonnets to many of the queen’s highest-ranking nobles including Thomas, earl of Ormond. Elizabeth Sheffield, together with her contemporary and maternal aunt, Frances Howard Countess of Kildare, were Spenser’s patronesses in Ireland.⁶⁵ According to historian Christopher Highley, that ‘active role taken by the wives of Gaelic and Old English lords in the patronage system, dovetails with Spenser’s practice of dedicating many of his poems to noble English women’.⁶⁶ It is highly likely that given Ormond’s close relationship with the queen, he decided to co-habit with Elizabeth Sheffield before their marriage and to apply for license to re-marry immediately after the death of his first wife, confident that he would obtain the queen’s approval. But one must also be circumspect in interpreting Spenser’s text and his understanding of the couple’s relationship given his reliance upon their patronage and hospitality and his consequent deference regardless of whether he was aware of their marital status.

⁶³ The reference to the river Suir relates to the earl’s property in Carrick-on-Suir. Edmund Spenser, *Colin Clouts Come Home Again* (London, 1595), line 526, cited in Highley, *Shakespeare, Spenser & the crisis in Ireland*, p. 28. Spenser’s sonnet number 7, appended to the faerie queen, was dedicated to ‘The Right Honourable The Earle of Ormond and Ossory’.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, line 530.

⁶⁵ Albert Charles Hamilton, *The Spenser encyclopaedia* (Toronto, 1990), p. 535.

⁶⁶ Highley, *Shakespeare, Spenser & the crisis in Ireland*, p. 26.

Spenser was not Elizabeth Sheffield's only admirer: she was also the subject of considerable praise by an anonymous poet in the Irish poem *Toghaim Tomas Rogha*, a panegyric on her husband Thomas.⁶⁷ Composed sometime in the late 1580s, the final three stanzas are entirely devoted to hailing her as a 'very hearty and brave subject' who was 'truly womanly, mild, amiable, mournful and musical in speech'. Elizabeth was, he declared, an 'excellent wife of an excellent man'. But as one might expect in a panegyric on the earl, the poet was also very clear that it was Elizabeth who gained from the marriage, declaring that she had been both rewarded for her generosity and surpassed her contemporaries at court.⁶⁸

In 1590 Elizabeth and the earl lost their son James, the future eleventh earl of Ormond, aged only six years old in London.⁶⁹ In a demonstration of her esteem for Thomas and his wife, Queen Elizabeth granted permission for their child to be buried at Westminster Abbey.⁷⁰ Aside from being a personal tragedy for the couple, the death of Thomas' sole male heir had grave implications for dynastic stability and succession. Thomas in particular, had to respond swiftly to contain the fallout from their male heir's premature death as cadet branches of the Butler family began positioning themselves to stake their claims to the Ormond inheritance. By right, the earldom should have passed to Thomas's nearest brother, Sir Edmund Butler, of Cloghrenan, who had three sons, Piers James and Theobald Butler.⁷¹ But whereas this might appear to be straightforward and far clearer cut than the arrangement that gave rise to the

⁶⁷ *Poems on the Butlers*, ed. Carney, pp 81-3. My thanks to Anne Harrington for her translation of *Toghaim Tomas Rogha*.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ *Dingeley's History from marble*, ed. J.G. Nichols (2 vols, London, Camden Society, 1867–8), ii, no. 141.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ *Cal. Ormond deeds*, ed. Curtis, iv (1509–47), nos 85, 101.

1515 succession crisis, in fact it led to a similar crisis that dragged on for years: once again Ormond women would be at the heart of this.

Critically, following an internal Butler revolt in 1569 in which several of Thomas's brothers challenged his position, the next in line to the earldom, Sir Edmund, was attainted in 1570 for his role in the uprising, and declared a traitor.⁷² The revolt had three main motives – Thomas's brothers' and nephews' refusal to abandon coign and livery, their rejection of his close affinity with the queen and her court, and their intention to sabotage Lord deputy Henry Sidney's administration in Ireland. Thomas and his brothers were worlds apart, with little in common apart from their parentage. His brothers' revolt forced him to relinquish any prospects of 'greatness in England' and so he resigned himself to the fact that if he was to retain the earldom, he must become an Irish lord and adapt to his native land in a manner he had thus far avoided'.⁷³

From that point onwards, he had to balance his role as earl of Ormond remaining in the queen's favour and confidence. To compound the earl's worries, despite the queen's reassurances that Sir Edmund's attainder would be lifted at the next sitting of parliament, this did not happen: that in turn only served to fuel growing ambiguity and uncertainty for the future of the earldom. Thomas then moved to appoint Theobald Butler, youngest son of the attainted Edmund Butler, as his heir designate. (It was possible to do so because Theobald was not included in his family's treason since he was a child at the time of the 1569 family revolt).

⁷² For a thorough analysis and excellent coverage of the Butler revolt in 1569 see Edwards, *The Ormond lordship*, pp 188–200.

⁷³ *Ibid*, p. 200.

At the time of his son's death in 1590, the earl was sixty-years old, and his second countess was in her early thirties. As well as suffering ill health, particularly following the birth of her two children, along with bereavement, in 1600 the countess and her only surviving child, fifteen-year-old Elizabeth suffered considerable personal distress arising from the unstable state of affairs within the Ormond lordship which resulted in the kidnapping of her husband on 9 April of that year.⁷⁴ The earl was abducted because of the stance he was assuming against the confederate Catholic forces led by Hugh O'Neil (d.1616), six years into the Nine Years War (1594-1603). Aged almost seventy, the earl was tricked into attending a parley with the County Laois rebel, Owney MacRory O' More (d.1600).⁷⁵ As soon as he arrived he was surrounded by O'Moore's troops, dragged off his horse and led into captivity.⁷⁶ The entire earldom was in a vulnerable and exposed state following the earl's kidnap. So too were the countess and her daughter, the sole heiress of the tenth earl - the only 'block' in the way of her uncles and cousins keen to snatch her legitimate inheritance. Thus, arising from a series of chance occurrences in which they had no part, the countess and her daughter unexpectedly became the objects of the attention of Queen Elizabeth and her senior-ranking officials in Ireland on the one hand and Hugh O'Neil earl of Tyrone on the other. In this charged milieu at the height of the Nine Years War, the countess assumed the role of intermediary for her husband and she and her daughter were singled out for protection. Anxious for their safety, Sir Geoffrey Fenton, principal secretary of state in Ireland, wrote to the queen's secretary Sir Robert Cecil in the days following the tenth earl's kidnap and reported that;

⁷⁴ James Graves, 'The taking of the earl of Ormond, 1600' in *Kilkenny & S.E. Ire. Arch. Soc. Jn.*, 2nd ser., iii-v (1860-1), p. 392.

⁷⁵ *Ibid*, pp 388-432.

⁷⁶ *Ibid*, p. 391.

the countess either thorow weakness in body or for sorrow of her husband's misery, or in a worldly care, not to leave Kilkenny, where resteth her wealth and substaunce, may forbear to come hether, yet I wish her daughter upon whome do depend many interests for her majestie, were either with the state or sent for into England owt of hand, a matter which I humbly wish were deliberated there and her majesties wish sent hether withall possible speed.⁷⁷

The response from Lord Deputy Charles Blount was swift: within three days of the earl's capture, he sent troops to Kilkenny 'to give succour and comforte to the sorrowfull Lady'⁷⁸ and to prevent any potential disturbances during the earl's enforced absence. The Dublin government took particular care to ensure the safety of mother and daughter at Kilkenny castle. Sir George Bouchier, one of the earl's English relatives, was charged with taking command of royal troops throughout the earldom and its environs. Furthermore, he was to be responsible for ensuring the protection of the couple's daughters. Fearful that Elizabeth might be used in negotiations to secure the earl's release or to the advantage of any members of the Butler family, he was to

have a special care over the yonge Lady to stop all practices that might be made; either directly by the parent's consent to procure the Earles liberty, or indirectly by anie of the Butlers or anie other of this contrey birth, to get her into ther hands for any purposse whatsoever.⁷⁹

Immediately, the stance assumed by the Dublin administration was protective - protective of the lives of the countess and more particularly her daughter, protective of her daughter's

⁷⁷ Sir Geoffery Fenton to Sir Robert Cecil, 12 Apr. 1600 cited in Graves, 'The taking of the earl of Ormond, 1600', p. 391.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Irish Council to Privy Council, 17 Apr. 1600 cited in Graves, 'The taking of the earl of Ormond, 1600'.

reputation and future prospects, protective of the Ormond family succession and inheritance. Dublin castle faced a dilemma as to the best course of action for their welfare as acknowledged by Mountjoy in a letter to Cecil. In the second week of April, he considered removing young Elizabeth from the castle, but decided not to do so as it would add to her mother's already considerable distress. His other option was to 'sende for my ladye [the countess] to come hither [Dublin] for her safetie with her dawtre, [but] they say shee is nott able to travel'.⁸⁰ By the following week, it was decided to keep the young Elizabeth with 'the afflicted lady her mother, who in this heavy case of hers, is her cheefest comferte'.⁸¹ However, this was to be a temporary measure until such time as the queen agreed to receive the young Elizabeth at court: there she would 'be kept about her majesty, whereby many daungerus sequels may be prevented, and all just caws of discontentment in the parents taken away'.⁸² As the only surviving legitimate child and heiress of the queen's Irish favourite, it was acknowledged that any harm that might come to the young Elizabeth 'cannot but be hurtfull to her majesties affairs'. Furthermore, neither the queen nor the English or Irish council was willing to tolerate having their authority undermined through the capture of the earl by Catholic rebels suspected of attempting to convert him. Both councils shared a fear that in the event of her being captured, the young Elizabeth could be forced into marriage with an Irish man declaring:

how daungerous yt might be, yf in this broken tyme, she shold be imbeazoled or drawn into the hands of anie of the Irish, or, by any contract of the father to redeem his liberty to be promised in marriage to any of this contrey birth, such as the sate

⁸⁰ Mountjoy to Sir Robert Cecil, 12 Apr. 1600 cited in Graves, 'The taking of the earl of Ormond, 1600'.

⁸¹ Irish Council to Privy Council, 17 Apr. 1600 cited in Graves, 'The taking of the earl of Ormond, 1600'.

⁸² Ibid.

should not like of, she being a person, upon whose ground in the case might be wrought manie daungerous alterations.⁸³

As the weeks passed in April, Sir George Carew, President of Munster (d.1629), increased defences around Kilkenny castle. The Countess was fearful for her life and that of her daughter, mistrustful of some among her followers, and greatly distressed at her husband's abduction and the general uncertainty surrounding the future of the earldom. Carew was, however, confident that his presence

dyd assure the Lady of Ormond and her daughter which otherwyse had bene subjecte to many daungers. So sorrowful a Lady in our lyffs we have not seene, and do beleve that if it had not pleased God we at that tyme had not bene there, she would hardely have undergone those griefes that dyd oppresse her. For besydes the losse of her husband (in beingge prysoner with those rogues) she beheld the apparant ruyne of herselff and her daughter and no lesse daunger of bothe their lyves, the guard wherof she cornytted unto us, not beinge assured of those that serve her. For ther ar dyvers that pretende to be the Erles heires by sondry tytles.⁸⁴

On 5 June, her husband still in captivity, the countess received a letter from Hugh O' Neill, Earl of Tyrone. He requested that she act as intermediary on his behalf with her husband, and that she assure him who his friends and loyal allies were. Tyrone initially supported the earl's abduction, but when he discovered that the venture was unsuccessful, he grew concerned that

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Sir George Carew to the Privy Council, 18 Apr. 1600, cited in Graves, 'The taking of the earl of Ormond, 1600'.

were Ormond to die in captivity, he could become a martyr for the crown.⁸⁵ This was not the first occasion Tyrone had personally written to Elizabeth, his earlier letters having been written in Irish. He explained:

Madam, I have written to your Ladishippe before, for want of oportunitie, in myne owne natural language, which I thinke you did not so well understand, as you might conceive my full meaninge; therefore I thought necessaric by his letter to give you to understand that I am not unmyndfull of such good turnes as I received at my Lords hands.⁸⁶

That his earlier letters were written in Irish when undoubtedly he knew Elizabeth was unable to read and understand the language suggests that O'Neill may have hoped a member of her household would read and interpret the letters for her. He may also have done so to guard against the contents of the letters being discovered by government officials or his enemies. In any event, in this English language correspondence, Tyrone quickly stated his intention; he agreed to Ormond's release on certain conditions - including the return of Leix and Offaly to the Gaelic Irish, and Ormond's promise of protection for the rebels during a period of at least six weeks after his release.⁸⁷ In a statement that suggests there were grounds for government officials' fears about the prospect of the young Elizabeth being forced to marry an Irish man, Tyrone assured the countess that he did not intend seeking Lady Elizabeth's hand in marriage for his son. (Evidently, he was conscious that O' Moore was set to include this in the terms of release to be presented to Ormond.) O'Neill informed the countess that

⁸⁵ Edwards, *The Ormond lordship*, pp 188–200.

⁸⁶ Hugh O'Neill, earl of Tyrone, to Elizabeth, countess of Ormond, 5 June 1600 cited in Graves, 'The taking of the earl of Ormond, 1600', pp 425-6.

⁸⁷ O'wney O'Moore to Thomas Butler, earl of Ormond, 30 Apr. 1600 cited in Graves, 'The taking of the earl of Ormond, 1600', p. 415.

albeit it is comonlie reported that my Lord is onely pledge is my Lady mistres, yet in regard that men would thincke, that I should seeke her under colour of a pledge for my sonne, I will in noe sorte demaund her, cheslie being a thinge which might tend to my Lords great prejudice, and howsoever the world wil be, I hope to get such a matche for my sonne as shall seme to his state convenient, and assuredlie I had rather to matche him with one farre inferior to him, then to desire eny matche, that might be to my Lord or to your Ladyship hurtfull, so I have written that in noe sorte the yonge Lady shold be demaunded, leaving in their owne election to choose other good pledges for my Lord's inlardgment I end assuring you that I am ready to take the best course I can for his honorable libertie.⁸⁸

In the end, although Ormond signed his name to his captor's terms of release under duress in mid-June, neither Tyrone nor O' Moore secured his support for the rebels.⁸⁹ Within two weeks of the countess' receiving Tyrone's letter and possibly thanks to the assistance of a spy, on 16 June Ormond was released from captivity and returned to Kilkenny castle.

Edwards has emphasised how 'in the excitement surrounding his release, his capacity to unite different ethnic and social groups behind the royal banner in Ireland was loudly advertised'.⁹⁰

During the earl's incarceration, his wife and daughter were in the eye of the storm, being at once protected by the crown and courted by the rebels. Despite having suffered great distress and poor health suffered during the ordeal, the countess did nothing to antagonise her husband's kidnappers but was compliant with government measures to ensure the safety of herself and her daughter.⁹¹

⁸⁸ Hugh O'Neill, earl of Tyrone, to Elizabeth, countess of Ormond, 5 June 1600 cited in Graves, 'The taking of the earl of Ormond, 1600', pp 425-6.

⁸⁹ See HMC, *Shrewsbury and Talbot papers* (2 vols, London, 1966-71), ii, 221.

⁹⁰ Edwards, *The Ormond lordship*, p. 261.

⁹¹ Graves, 'The taking of the earl of Ormond, 1600'.

Elizabeth's handling of the crisis was in direct contrast to that of Eleanor Butler, countess of Desmond (c.1545-1638). During the Desmond rebellions (1579-83) when her husband Garret Fitzgerald, fifteenth earl of Desmond, was being pursued by Crown forces through the southern countryside, Eleanor also 'faced the wrath and vengeance of the crown as she strove to intercede and negotiate on her husband's behalf'.⁹² When she met with Lord Deputy Arthur Grey de Wilton (1580-82) in Maryborough on 15 June 1582, he had her brought 'to the house of an honest merchant in Dublin there to remaine in estate of a prisoner until we might be directed how to dispose of her further'.⁹³ In Dublin, Eleanor remained in semi-captivity awaiting her fate. She failed in her attempts to encourage her husband the earl to peacefully negotiate with the lord deputy and his council, who consented to 'meet therle 20 myles from Dublin if she by any persuasion may drawe her husband thither'.⁹⁴ Significantly, her requests for an extension to her protection in Dublin and that her three daughters be taken to Cork city for safekeeping were granted by Grey. Exactly one year later in June 1583, as Thomas earl of Ormond pursued the earl of Desmond on behalf of the Crown, Countess Eleanor, exhausted from successive failed attempts to persuade her husband to negotiate peacefully, personally submitted to Ormond. The latter's report on the countess to the queen noted that 'this poer lady lamenteth greatlye the follye and lewdness of her husband whome reason could never rule'.⁹⁵ Lord Burghley, who received the letter on the queen's behalf, had two years earlier received a letter from Sir Warham St Leger who referred to the countess as a troublesome and vindictive woman;

I know her to bee as wicked a woman as ever was bred in Ireland and one that hath been the chief instrument of her husband's rebellion. And if she bee licensed to go out,

⁹² Chambers, *Eleanor countess of Desmond*, p. 164.

⁹³ Lord Deputy Grey to Privy Council, 22 June 1582 (TNA, SP 63/93/45).

⁹⁴ Captain Norris to Lords Justices Loftus and Wallop, 24 Sept. 1582 (TNA, SP 63/96/3i).

⁹⁵ Thomas Butler Earl of Ormond, to Lord Burghley, 18 June 1583 (TNA, SP 63/102/88).

your lordship shall doo as good an act as ever you did in your life to this realme to cause hir hed to be stroken off.⁹⁶

The ‘protection’ afforded Elizabeth, countess of Ormond and her daughter Elizabeth in 1600 was by no means unusual, therefore. Crises such as those experienced by the Ormond women in 1600 and the countess of Desmond during the uprising in her husband’s lordship, reveal insights into how, at vital junctures in their dynasties’ histories, various contemporaries perceived, valued and treated women, whether it be as protectors of the line of succession, negotiators, advocates, or, in the case of Eleanor of Desmond, troublemakers.

A pressing concern for the earl and countess of Ormond following his release was the matter of succession, which seemed temporarily settled by summer 1600. With the queen’s approval, Thomas arranged for the inheritance to pass to his nephew Theobald Butler, who (as already mentioned) was unaffected by his father and older brother’s attainder. Initially, it appeared that no further threat or challenge would be mounted against the succession, largely due to the death in late 1602 of the earl’s brother (and Theobald’s father) Sir Edmund Butler, and his namesake cousin, Edmund Butler, second Viscount Mountgarret.⁹⁷ The way seemed clear for the earl to confirm his successor.

Aged no more than forty, within eight months of the kidnapping ordeal, Countess Elizabeth died in November 1600 (see Fig. 6). In keeping with Ormond family tradition since the time of Margaret Fitzgerald and Piers Butler, and in an indication of her having settled in Ireland, she was buried at St Canice’s cathedral Kilkenny city on 21 April the following year.⁹⁸

⁹⁶ Sir Warham St Leger to Lord Burghley, 15 May 1581 (TNA, SP 63/83/25).

⁹⁷ HMC, *Salisbury MSS*, 1602, p. 507.

⁹⁸ Obituary of Elizabeth Sheffield, countess of Ormond and Ossory, Nov. 1600 (NLI, GO, MS. 64, ff31-4). Since the death of Piers Butler and Margaret Fitzgerald in 1539 and 1542 respectively, St Canice’s was the burial place of several members of the Ormond dynasty,

According to historian Clodagh Tait, this extended period was not unusual among the nobility, where ‘weeks or even months elapsed between the death and funeral of an individual’.⁹⁹ Such protracted time lapses usually occurred owing to the intensive preparation involved in elaborate heraldic funerals (see Fig. 6.1). Since the death of Piers Butler and Margaret Fitzgerald in 1539 and 1542 respectively, St Canice’s had become the burial place of several members of the Ormond dynasty, including their son James, ninth earl of Ormond. While his wife Joan was buried in Askeaton County Limerick, this was undoubtedly due to her return to her natal family territory and her subsequent remarriage into the Desmond dynasty.

The elaborate obsequies of her funeral survive, revealing a rare and detailed glimpse of the day’s proceedings, the lavish expense of such ceremonies, and, most important of all, the status of the countess and of the Ormond dynasty towards the end of Elizabeth I’s reign¹⁰⁰ (See Fig. 6.2) According to Tait, such carefully orchestrated and expensive funerals for high status females enabled ‘their families to reap the benefits of the propaganda of the funeral display from a stronger position than would have been the case had the death been that of a family head or heir’.¹⁰¹ Furthermore, such funerals effectively said ‘more about the living than the dead’.¹⁰² In the Countess Elizabeth’s case, meticulously specific instructions for the conduct of her funeral proceedings were set down. The coffin was placed under a large crest-

including their son James, ninth earl of Ormond. While his wife Joan was buried in Askeaton County Limerick, this was undoubtedly due to her return to her natal family territory following her second widowhood (see Chapter six) and her subsequent remarriage into the Desmond dynasty. Not surprisingly, following the failure of her marriage to the tenth earl and her return to England, Elizabeth Berkeley was interred there.

⁹⁹ Tait, *Death, burial & commemoration*, p. 39.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰² Jane Ohlmeyer, *Making Ireland English: the Irish aristocracy in the seventeenth century* (London, 2012), p. 458.

adorned canopy before the altar and was surrounded by assistants, ministers and ladies. On one side of the altar stood gentlemen in black, while ladies, also dressed in black, were positioned on the opposite side. The protocol surrounding each mourner's position within the cathedral, presented 'an extraordinary public display of nobleness'¹⁰³ not unlike such elaborate ceremonial occasions as the state opening of parliament. Among the numerous shields of arms were 'ye great banner' and the countess' coronet was borne on a cushion by Kathleen Butler Fitzedmond. The chief mourners, Thomas and their young daughter Lady Elizabeth were accompanied by numerous members of the extended Butler family, including the Mountgarret, Dunboyne and Fitzjames and Fitzjohns branches. Tables and seating for 'esquires, gentlemen and strangers' were positioned to the left of the large seating area for several ladies and knights, while on the right of the coffin, a further table accommodated 'gentlewomen and others if ye place prmite'.¹⁰⁴ In 1600 Countess Elizabeth Sheffield's funeral, exceptional in its extravagance and scale, was a public display of the position her husband the earl, Ireland's most powerful magnate, held in late Elizabethan Ireland.

At the time of her mother's death, Lady Elizabeth was fifteen years old. Since his kidnapping, the earl had been permitted by the queen to retreat from public life as his health declined.¹⁰⁵ Less than three years later, the death of Elizabeth I came as a further severe blow to the elderly Ormond's position. Deprived of his protector and erstwhile supporter, and having to contend with a new Stuart King James VI and I, Ormond abruptly experienced significant curtailment of his exceptional autonomy and unprecedented encroachment of central government within his patrimony. As historian Kenneth Nichols succinctly described, with the dawn of the Stuart monarchy and its government: 'once centralised administration

¹⁰³ Ibid, p. 460.

¹⁰⁴ Obituary of Elizabeth Sheffield, countess of Ormond & Ossory.

¹⁰⁵ Edwards, *The Ormond lordship*, p. 262.

from Dublin became feasible'¹⁰⁶ generations of loyalist dynasties, upholders of successive crown authority in medieval Ireland, swiftly became 'merely instruments to be discarded'.¹⁰⁷ Ormond would be no exception.

Black Tom's third countess: the beginning of the second succession dispute

Having been twice married to English born aristocratic women, after his second wife's death in 1600 the tenth earl married for a third and last time. On this occasion, his bride Helen Barry (1570-1642) was born in Ireland and the couple married sometime between 2 and 24 June 1601.¹⁰⁸ Helen was the second oldest of five daughters of David FitzJames Barry,¹⁰⁹ fifth Viscount Buttevant of County Cork (d. 1617), and his first wife, Ellen Roche daughter of Viscount Fermoy.¹¹⁰ The Barrys – like the Roches, Powers, Geraldines, Barrats and Burkes – were one of 'the great lineages of Anglo-Norman Ireland first arising in Munster and Connacht, and first expanded from significant land bases in these provinces'.¹¹¹

Sometime before 1459 Thomas Fitzgerald, seventh earl of Desmond (d. 1468) married Ellice

¹⁰⁶ Kenneth Nicholls, 'Celtic contrasts: Ireland and Scotland' in *History Ireland*, vii, no. 3 (Autumn 1999), p. 26. As Edwards has argued, the new monarch James I/VI viewed the earl of Ormond as 'an exemplar for other Irish nobles, praising him for his faith service, valour, wisdom and provident circumspection to the late queen and himself'. Once the earl was dead, reduction of his earldom and authority would begin: see Edwards, *The Ormond lordship*, p. 264.

¹⁰⁷ Nicholls, 'Celtic contrasts', p. 26.

¹⁰⁸ Mosley (ed.), *Burke's peerage and baronetage*, i, 221.

¹⁰⁹ In 1588, the year of the Spanish Armada, Helen's father-in-law Richard Power, had been granted lands worth £50 per annum by Queen Elizabeth, see Turtle Bunbury, 'De la Poer Beresford of Curraghmore, Co. Waterford'

[www.turtlebunbury.com/history/history_family/hist_family_delapoer [1 Sept. 2017]].

¹¹⁰ 'Records of the Barrys of County Cork from the earliest to the present time with pedigree', ed. E. Barry, reprinted in *Cork Hist. & Arch. Soc. Jn.*, viii (1902), p. 119. (Barry incorrectly refers to Thomas, earl of Desmond, as Helen's second husband, but corrects this on p. 120.)

¹¹¹ Sparky Booker 'The Geraldines and the Irish: intermarriage, ecclesiastical patronage and status' in Peter Crooks and Seán Duffy (eds.), *The Geraldines in medieval Ireland: the making of a myth* (Dublin, 2016), p. 171.

Barry, daughter of Lord James Barry of Buttevant.¹¹² This was Helen's second marriage; her first husband was John Power, son of Richard, fourth baron of Corroghmore, County Waterford with whom she had four children.¹¹³ This was the same Waterford family into which Thomas Butler's aunt Katherine had married in the early sixteenth century (see chapter five). The Barrys and the Powers had intermarried previously, as Helen's mother-in-law was also her cousin Katherine Barry, daughter and sole heiress of James Fitzjohn, Lord Barry, third Viscount Buttevant.¹¹⁴

Aged about thirty-one and almost forty years the earl's junior when the couple married, Helen came from a politically active family who supported the Desmonds during the two rebellions of the 1560s and 1580s. However, by the time she married Ormond, her father had switched allegiance and supported the new president of Munster, Sir George Carew. Having been granted a pardon in 1600 for having supported the Desmonds¹¹⁵, Helen's father became a firm supporter of the Crown. Helen's marriage to Ormond was one demonstration of that support, closely followed by her father's service at the siege of Kinsale, and his active participation in the subsequent Crown campaigns to expel the northern armies (including those of Hugh O'Neil) and reduce Munster to submission.¹¹⁶ But the Butler-Barry union did more than copperfasten Barry's support for the Crown and, send strong messages to the

¹¹² David Beresford, 'James Fitzgerald Fitzgerald seventh earl of Desmond' in James McGuire and James Quinn (eds), *Dictionary of Irish Biography* (Cambridge, 2009) [www.did.cambridge.org.proxy.nuim.ie/vuewreadPage.do?articleId=a3155 [1 Sept. 2017]]; Booker, 'The Geraldines & the Irish', p. 300.

¹¹³ Cockayne *et al.* (eds.), *The complete peerage*, ii, 467. The living arrangements for Helen's three daughters and one son are unknown by the time of her marriage to Ormond.

¹¹⁴ 'Records of the Barrys of County Cork', ed. Barry, p. 58.

¹¹⁵ Judy Barry, 'Barry, David FitzJames, third Viscount Buttevant' in James McGuire and James Quinn (eds), *Dictionary of Irish Biography* (Cambridge, 2009) [www.dib.cambridge.org.jproxy.nuim.ie/viewReadPage.do?articleId=a0437 [1 July 2017]].

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

Desmonds and their allies whom Helen's father had once supported; it also held the prospect of providing Ormond with a male heir. The couple, however, had no children.

We know virtually nothing about Helen during her time as countess of Ormond until after the death of Earl Thomas in 1614, but on the basis of the affectionate tone and generous terms of his will, the couple appear to have had a cordial relationship, at least in their later years.

He referred to her as 'my loving wife Ellen Countess of Ormond and Ossory'¹¹⁷ and bequeathed her, as was her due, 'a third part of all my plate, silver dishes, silver candlesticks, pewter and linen in three parts to be divided'.¹¹⁸ Thomas left instructions that she

shall have a third part of all my plate, silver dishes, silver candlesticks, pewter and linen in three parts to be divided. My wife shall have my household stuff the crimson sating [satin] bed with my arms embroidered, five curtains of taffeta sarsnet, a quilt of taffeta, a chair of crimson velvet, four stools, two long cushions of the same, a bed of white damask, a quilt laid on with gold lace, five curtains of damask, a quilt of white taffeta, a purple canopy of velvet laid on with gold lace and gold buttons upon the train with a long cushion and one stool suitable to the same, a canopy of white network with tassels of gold with two little curtains for a looking glass, a cushion of cloth of turkey, a basin and a ewer of indy earth, four small turkey carpets, ten feather beds, four flock beds and a pair of brazen andyirons a pair of iron andyirons tipped with brass, four dower [down] pillows, one standard with a lock, four stools of merry velvet embroidered and hangings of tapestries for two chambers viz; twelve pieces.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁷ Will of Thomas Butler, tenth earl of Ormond, 16 Jan. 1613 or 14 Sept. 1614 (the large parchment had been creased and folded along the date, making the handwriting, already faded, difficult to decipher) (NLI, Ormond deeds, D 3580).

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

The other two thirds were to be divided between his daughter from his second marriage, Elizabeth (by then, Lady Viscountess Tulleophelim), and his nephew and heir Walter Butler, future eleventh earl. This was the earl's second will, and it provided his daughter with additional items to those he had bequeathed her a decade earlier. The first was drafted in 1604, most likely following the marriage of his daughter Elizabeth the previous year. In it, he bequeathed half to his wife Countess Helen and the other half to his daughter Elizabeth and her husband. However, in 1613 the earl's son-in-law Theobald Butler (Lord Tully) died, and Thomas altered the original will, dividing his property in three parts. Clearly in 1604 Ormond was providing for his wife (with whom he undoubtedly hoped to have children) in her widowhood, as well as for his daughter and her husband in 1604. However, by 1614, following his daughter's widowhood, and his childless marriage to Countess Helen, he divided his property in three: again, the countess was appropriately provided for. The 1604 draft provides a revealing insight into the wealth of interior furnishings within the couple's castles at Pottlerath, Kilkenny and Grannagh which included

two basins and two ewers of white plate, two pairs of potte of plate, five tonnes of plate, to the said potte, a small salt of silver to the potte, a double beel salt of silver, a dozen silver spoons, a nest of silver bolls [bowls]. A gilt basin and ewer, which my Lord of Arundel gave. Seven feather beds with their bolsters, whereof one is at Pottlerath castle, a black velvet bed, which is in my bedchamber at Kilkenny [castle], with the chairs stools and other furniture belonging to the same laid on with black silk and gold lace with the quilt thereof. A bed of white damask, and a bed of green and black caffra, with the bedstead, with chairs and stooles, and other furniture belonging to them. Three pairs of Holland sheets, a pire of 'pyllobers' and a paire of pillows, eight pairs of Normandy damas[k] sheets, two hundred English sheep, cows stud mares etc, sixteen

dozen pewter dishes, sixteen dozen pewter dishes, six brooches, one pair of racks, twelve dozen Irish cloth napkins, two long diaper clothes, six dozen diaper napkins, four diaper towels, eight pewter potts, a dozen new pewter candlesticks; and also such jewels, apparel, plate, horses, stud and other cattle as are now in the occupation off my said wife and that are named or repute to be hers for her own peculiar use and spending. A purple velvet canopy with gold lace that sometimes hanged over the Queens armes on St. Georges tyde, with a quilt and other furniture belonging to the same. Three pairs of copper andirons ‘second best pann of brasse’, a green bed with the furniture which is at Pottlerath [castle], all my bords, cuppords, stools and other furniture which are now at Pottlerath and the Grenagh [Granagh] and ten beds, a white cup of asay silver, a cover of silver to the said nest of bolles.¹²⁰

One must however, be circumspect in interpreting Ormond’s use of affectionate language in his will. That he may have used formulaic terminology is suggested by his also referring to his ‘loving’ daughter Elizabeth; yet after she became a widow in December 1613, he had no qualms about undermining her, and sabotaged her as she sought acknowledgement and recognition as her father’s heiress. Following her father’s death, Elizabeth received land worth £800 per annum. As in the case of the dowager countess Helen, rather than receiving half of the earl’s bequests, both women received one third. That was the norm for widows both in Ireland and England, whereas for daughters, the bequest was entirely reliant upon a father’s discretion. As Edwards has argued, the old earl, always a pragmatist, was not prepared to place his daughter’s interests above that of his designated heir, Walter Butler. Yet

¹²⁰ Will of Thomas Butler, Earl of Ormond, 18 Dec. 1604 (NLI, Ormond deeds, D 3354).

once the tenth earl died, his daughter contrived to ‘disinherit Walter by advancing her claims as her father’s heiress to the entire Ormond estate, lock stock and barrel’.¹²¹

Like earlier Ormond women including Margaret and Ann Butler, Margaret Fitzgerald, and her successor Joan Fitzgerald, Helen Barry demonstrated a significant capacity for skilfully negotiating legal matters. Her case is interesting since, in contrast with most of these other women who involved themselves in legal proceedings concerning the Ormond family, Helen invested her energies in advancing her own filial family interests. Through her experience we gain an insight into the very actively influential role that some women such as Helen, despite being married several times, continued to play in the affairs of their filial families in Ireland during this period. Soon after her marriage to Ormond, the Barry family had to contend with their own succession issues following the death in 1604 of her only brother David junior, her father’s heir. Fortunately, his son in turn, also David, was born posthumously, but suitable provision for supervision of the boy’s wardship was necessary. Helen and her father entrusted responsibility for the wardship of the heir to the family estates and titles, firstly to John Chichester of County Cork on 14 April 1611, and secondly, on 18 February 1612 to Edmond Fitzjohn Barry and Gregory Lombard of Buttevant.¹²² However, by 20 July 1618 David Barry’s wardship had been granted by London government officials to the dowager countess of Ormond Helen Barry then resident in England, and her third husband Sir Thomas Somerset.¹²³ In a revealing insight into the impact that such a hiatus in a family’s succession had on female members, the court of Star Chamber in London,

¹²¹ Edwards, *The Ormond lordship*, p. 111.

¹²² ‘Records of the Barrys of County Cork’, ed. Barry, p. 120. It is impossible to conclude with any certainty that there is any correlation in the timing of the earl of Ormond’s will drafted in 1604 being influenced by the change in the Barry family circumstances which gave rise to the countess of Ormond’s role in her nephew’s wardship.

¹²³ *Ibid*, p. 120.

authorised 'the use and preferment in marriage of such of the Lord Barry's daughters [Helen's sisters] as should be unmarried at the time of his death, to be disposed of as the said Lord Barry and the countess in their discretion or the survivor of them both shall meet'.¹²⁴ However, the trust placed in Fitzjohn Barry and Lombard regarding their care for young David Barry did not meet with the Barry's' expectations. As a result, in July 1618 the countess and her husband as guardians of her nephew (her father had died on 10 April 1617) informed the Star Chamber that she wished to see her nephew released immediately from the wardship and all rights of wardship as previously granted, surrendered by Fitzjohn and Lombard. Fitzjohn refused to comply with the countess's demand and was swiftly summoned to London to appear before Star Chamber; Lombard consented immediately. That she waited until her father had died to take action against her nephew's guardians provides insights into Helen Barry as an independent agent on her nephew's behalf. Notwithstanding significant changes in her personal circumstances (in 1614 Ormond died and by August 1616 she had re-married, her third husband being Sir Thomas Somerset first Viscount Somerset of Cashel County Tipperary, third son of Edward, fourth earl of Worcester),¹²⁵ Helen continued to defend her nephew's interests, insisting that Fitzjohn relinquish his role in David Barry's wardship. But she had another, more personal reason, to pursue her action against Fitzjohn. Although after he eventually appeared in London Fitzjohn consented to the countess's demand (to surrender his rights in respect of the wardship), he was not content to go quietly. Instead, during a subsequent appearance in the Court of Wards and Liveries in Dublin, he

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Somerset was a member of Parliament for Monmouthshire, and a knight of the bath: see W.R. Williams, *The parliamentary history of the principality of Wales, 1541–1895* (Brecknock, 1895), p. 122; The dowager countess of Ormond married Sir Thomas without a license to do so, as, over sixteen years later, on 23 June 1632 in the reign of Charles I, she received a royal pardon for having married without royal permission. See *Cal. patent & close rolls of chancery in Ireland Charles I (1625–33)*, no. 9, p. 598; Mosley (ed.), *Burke's peerage*, i, 221.

‘cast some aspersions upon the countess [Helen] touching her honour’.¹²⁶ However he was quickly taken to task for his attempts to impugn her honour. He was ordered to appear once again the following June at the Court of Wards in Dublin to ‘disclaim and utterly disavow the same’¹²⁷ and ‘forthwith under his hand subscribe his disavowal thereof with a like submission unto the countess answerable thereunto’.¹²⁸ There, ‘where the scandalous answers remain on record’ he was to ‘make the like submission and disclaimer under his hand’.¹²⁹ Two months later, on 20 July, the Court of Star Chamber ruled in the countess’s favour stating that the right of wardship for her nephew now lay with her and her husband since Fitzjohn Barry had ‘surrendered his pretended interest to the Countess of Ormond’.¹³⁰ The court also instructed the commissioners for wards in Ireland to ensure that its (the Court of Star Chamber’s) ruling ‘be presently settled and continued in the possession thereof according to the right which is both agreeable to justice and equity’.¹³¹ David Barry remained the ward of his aunt and her third husband until 1631. In February 1628 aged twenty-three, he was created first Earl of Barrymore by privy seal at Westminster.¹³² Three years later, he achieved further significant social advancement through his marriage to Lady Alice Boyle, eldest daughter and heiress of the extraordinarily wealthy Richard Boyle, first earl of Cork thereby becoming brother-in-law to George, sixteenth earl of Kildare.¹³³ Clearly his aunt’s supervision of his upbringing served him well. Whilst being married to Ormond and later, to Somerset, Helen was instrumental in effectively steering her filial family through a delicate transition period during David’s

¹²⁶ Court of Star Chamber, 6 May 1618 in *Cal. Carew MSS*, 1603–24, 364–5. No account of his accusations survives.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*

¹³⁰ Star Chamber to the Lord Deputy and Commissioners for the Wards in Ireland, 20 July 1618, vol 613, p. 82, in *Cal. Carew MSS, 1515–1624*, vol 613, p. 82.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*

¹³² ‘Barrymore’, records of the Barrys’, ed. Edmund Barry in *Cork hist. & Arch. Society Jn.*, vi, no. 48 (1900), pp 193–209.

¹³³ *Ibid.*; ‘Records of the Barrys of County Cork’, ed. Barry, p. 120.

minority and promoting their position and influence in the next generation. Since she and Ormond had no children and after his death she re-married and left Ireland, Helen extricated herself from the succession crisis that erupted in the Ormond family in 1614. She died in 1642, aged seventy-two, and was buried with her third husband Sir Thomas Somerset, in Raglan, Monmouthshire in Wales.¹³⁴ For Helen, the marriage to Somerset came as yet another union with a powerful political family. Somerset was one of the party of men who travelled to Scotland to inform King James VI and I of the death of Queen Elizabeth in London in 1603, and ‘had performed many acceptable services both to the king himself, his father, and mother, especially as a faithful counsellor of his father and as master of the horse’.¹³⁵ As countess of Ormond, she was married to the most powerful man in Elizabethan and early Jacobean Ireland. Having elevated her status following on from her first marriage to John Power of Waterford, Helen’s union with the earl of Ormond was undoubtedly advantageous in positioning her for this high status marriage.

Elizabeth Butler, Lady Dingwall, countess of Desmond: the second succession crisis

While Helen Barry had been directly involved in a brief succession crisis within her own family and the guardianship of her nephew, another Ormond woman, her step-daughter Elizabeth Butler, was about to become the focus of a protracted inheritance crisis within which the dowager countess Helen, took no active part. As Edwards argued, ‘difficulties with the Ormond succession lay right at the heart of County Kilkenny’s history during later medieval and early modern times’.¹³⁶ Before exploring the life of Ellen Butler, the next countess and wife of Walter Butler, eleventh earl of Ormond, it is necessary to examine the

¹³⁴ Cockayne *et al.* (eds.), *The complete peerage*, x, 144-46.

¹³⁵ John Nichols (ed.), *The progresses, processions and magnificent festivities of King James I, his royal consort, family and court* (4 vols, London, 1828), i, 478.

¹³⁶ Edwards, *The Ormond lordship*, p. 79.

live of Elizabeth Butler, only surviving child of Elizabeth Sheffield Countess of Ormond and Thomas Butler. As mentioned above, the earl's only son died in 1590, leaving his daughter Elizabeth as his only surviving child and heir, and, uncertainty surrounding the succession after Thomas's death. Following the death of the earl's son, the line of succession ought to have been taken up by his next brother, Edmund Butler of Cloghrenan, County Kilkenny. However, following the dispute between the earl and his brothers in 1569, the Cloghrenan Butlers (with the exception of Edmund's youngest son Theobald who was not born at the time) became enemies of the Crown and were no longer entitled to inherit property 'in the queen's dominions'.¹³⁷ In this context of uncertainty surrounding the future of the earldom and to avoid further factional revolt, in 1596 the earl nominated the youngest of the Cloghrenan Butlers, his nephew Theobald, as his 'heir designate'.¹³⁸ Three years later at the earl's request, Theobald was taken into custody and held in Dublin castle for his own safety until the queen would recognise him as the heir apparent.¹³⁹ In 1596 aged only eleven, Elizabeth Butler became embroiled in the unfolding succession crisis when her father decided that she should marry Theobald notwithstanding their close sanguinity as first cousins 'for 'the continuance of my ancient house in true succession, the securing of my only daughter to her estate, [and] the quieting of my country and of my kinsmen and followers'.¹⁴⁰ This signalled Thomas' acknowledgement that the end of his line was imminent since the marriage would rule out any prospect of his only surviving child being able to successfully assert her claim as heiress through marriage to a member of the English aristocracy.¹⁴¹

¹³⁷ Ibid, p. 104.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ HMC, *Haliday MSS*, appendix, 293.

¹⁴⁰ Thomas Butler, Earl of Ormond, to Queen Elizabeth, 1596 in *Cal. S.P. Ire., 1601–03*, p. 435.

¹⁴¹ Edwards, *The Ormond lordship*, p. 105.

Following the death of her mother the countess in 1600, when the young Elizabeth was fifteen she was sent to England where she spent much time at the house of the wealthiest nobleman in Elizabethan England, Gilbert Talbot, seventh earl of Shrewsbury.¹⁴² Elizabeth visited Shrewsbury and his family on several occasions¹⁴³ and was carefully prepared for her visit to court.¹⁴⁴ After almost two years in England, in November 1602 her father wrote to the queen expressing his contentment that he had

heard from the principal secretary to your majesty that you are pleased, for the continuance of my house, that my daughter and my nephew Theobald Butler shall be matched, and that your sacred majesty in regard thereof and of your highness's desire of your immortal fame to continue ancient houses is pleased to enable him both in blood and honour to succeed me.¹⁴⁵

The following month at Christmas, Elizabeth Butler's maternal grandmother the dowager Lady Douglas Sheffield (d.1608) summoned her to court. To the satisfaction of all concerned, especially the earl of Ormond, her appearance at court was favourably received. Shrewsbury remarked how 'the Lady Elizabeth "hath the queen and all the great ladies and lords in court on her part"'¹⁴⁶ with Elizabeth recognised as 'a courtier naturally, even if it was by birth'.¹⁴⁷ Back in Ireland, by the end of January 1603 Theobald Butler was released from Dublin castle and en route to London where he was to be 'interviewed' by the queen. By 22 January she

¹⁴² HMC, *Haliday MSS*, Appendix, 293.

¹⁴³ While in London, Elizabeth stayed with her maternal grandmother, the dowager Lady Sheffield.

¹⁴⁴ Cited in Edwards, *The Ormond lordship*, p. 105.

¹⁴⁵ Thomas Butler, Earl of Ormond to Queen Elizabeth, Nov. 1602 in *Cal. S.P. Ire., 1601–03*, p. 520.

¹⁴⁶ Cited in Edwards, *The Ormond lordship*, p. 105.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

had consented to the marriage, much to the relief and satisfaction of the seventy-two-year-old earl.¹⁴⁸

After their marriage, the couple became Lord and Lady Tulleophelim (or Lord and Lady Tully).¹⁴⁹ Despite the earl's careful planning and strategic political manoeuvres to secure the succession, he greatly distrusted his nephew and sought to curtail his independence and influence. He even insisted that the couple live with him at his castle in Carrick-on-suir, in order to prevent them from establishing their own household. Ormond also obtained official confirmation of his power to disinherit Theobald if the need arose.¹⁵⁰ Not surprisingly, Lady Tully's relationship with her husband and father deteriorated. In August 1613 King James VI and I was compelled to intervene when Ormond expelled Tully from Carrick Castle.¹⁵¹

Ormond's expectation that the couple should live on a meagre £500 per annum was a further source of serious tension.¹⁵² By the end of that year, Lady Tully was thrust into the centre of the second succession crisis in the earldom in ninety-nine years, when her husband died after a brief illness during Christmas week 1613.¹⁵³ Then aged twenty-eight, she was left childless, at her father's mercy and, in a state of great uncertainty.

Following her husband's death Elizabeth was in a vulnerable position. She was immediately denied the Ormond title, as her cousin Sir Walter Butler of Kilcash, the nearest male relative, stood not only to inherit the entire earldom of Ormond, but also the Tully lands.¹⁵⁴ She also inherited heavy financial burdens since although her father had settled a fixed amount of

¹⁴⁸ Ibid, p. 106.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ It is not known whether Elizabeth stay at Carrick, or left with her husband when he was expelled.

¹⁵² Miscellaneous Ormond letters, 1613 (NLI, MS. 2487: 247).

¹⁵³ 'The Chichester letter-book, 1612-14', R. Dudley Edwards (ed.) in *Analecta Hibernica*, viii (1938), p. 152.

¹⁵⁴ Edwards, *The Ormond lordship*, p. 108.

money for her annually, she could not access this until after his death. To compound her problems, her husband left her burdened with substantial debt, with a result that her one-third widow's portion of the Tully estate was virtually worthless. To add to Elizabeth's woes, Thomas Butler, the illegitimate brother of her husband, saw her vulnerability as a potential opportunity for him to make a strike against 'the injustice of his illegitimacy'.¹⁵⁵ In an effort to defend her property, Elizabeth entreated with her elderly mother-in-law, Lady Eustace, to help her by taking care of Cloghrenan castle while she fled to Carrick castle to plead with her own father for help. (Elizabeth left particular instructions with Lady Eustace to place watchmen on the castle walls day and night and warned her to be especially vigilant of nocturnal visitors).¹⁵⁶ However, the efforts of both women were futile as in a matter of weeks, Elizabeth's brother-in-law, Thomas Butler, had occupied the two principal manors set aside for Elizabeth during her widowhood, Tulleophelim and Cloghrenan.¹⁵⁷ Furthermore, Elizabeth's fraught visit to her father confirmed her worst fears when the old earl ordered his daughter to hand over to Walter Butler, her cousin and future heir, the 'Red book [of Ormond] and all other writings which concern me and my house'.¹⁵⁸ Having done so within a matter of days, Elizabeth was once again summoned by her father to his residence at Carrick so that he might inform her about the final settlement of the Ormond patrimony. No further grants of lands or security were provided for his widowed daughter. The meeting between father and daughter resulted in Ormond revisiting his will on 16 January 1614. Lord Tully was barely a fortnight dead.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid, p. 109.

¹⁵⁶ Edwards, *The Ormond lordship*, p. 109.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ Cited in *ibid*, p. 9.

The elderly and infirm earl showed far greater concern for his dynasty's preservation than for his only daughter, who was now widowed and about to be usurped. Having had no choice but to marry Tully at her father's orders in his attempt to preserve the earldom. Elizabeth, despite being his sole surviving legitimate child, was cast aside by the tenth earl. When Ormond revisited his will on 16 January, he confirmed his nephew Walter Butler as his successor, and gave him 'a deciding voice in the management of Ormond family affairs'.¹⁵⁹ In addition to having to contend with her father's indifference, Elizabeth was now also at the mercy of another of his successors-in-waiting. In this will, the earl included a codicil to his 1604 will, instructing that his daughter would receive 'one third of his silver plate and household utensils when he died' yet she received no new grants of land.¹⁶⁰ Although she received a one-third share of her father's silver and plate, it was largely an insult when compared to one third of his lands and estates. Furthermore, whereas in 1604 her father had divided his property between Countess Helen and the remaining half to his daughter and her then husband, in 1614 Elizabeth's portion was reduced to a third. Clearly, Ormond's focus was firmly on his designated male heir, Walter Butler and the future of the patrimony, and the additional bequests to his daughter were merely a conscience-easing exercise on her father's behalf. In reality, that counted for little, given that she was (as already mentioned) burdened by her husband's debt.¹⁶¹ Walter Butler, showed similar hard headedness in his dealings with his uncle, insisting that Elizabeth consent to a cut in her annual allowance, in order to clear the outstanding debt accrued by her deceased husband. Elizabeth resolved to look further afield for support in resisting such harsh treatment at the hands of her father: in doing so, she changed their relationship irrevocably.

¹⁵⁹ Edwards, *The Ormond lordship*, p. 109.

¹⁶⁰ Will of Thomas Butler, tenth earl of Ormond, 1614 (NLI, Ormond MS. D 3580).

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*

Despite multiple obstacles and restrictions placed in her path, she set about asserting her rights as a widow and availed of the relative independence that widowhood afforded her when considering re-marriage. Acutely aware of her status as the daughter of 'Ireland's leading peer'¹⁶² she took full advantage of the access to both Dublin and London officials that this gave her to assert her claim to her father's earldom. Elizabeth lost no time re-marrying. Sometime between 1 October and 24 November 1614, she married her second husband, Richard Preston, Lord Dingwall, a Scottish peer and gentleman of King James I's privy chamber.¹⁶³ The marriage which was arranged by the king, positioned Elizabeth perfectly for advancing her suit since as Edwards has argued, 'in Jacobean Ireland, to gain the ear of the king was to possess a priceless advantage over your rivals'.¹⁶⁴ Following their marriage the couple lived in London and in 1615, Elizabeth, Lady Preston, gave birth to their only child Elizabeth.

Although aristocratic women in the Jacobean period continued to serve 'the political as well as the dynastic and economic ambitions of their families through marriage',¹⁶⁵ according to O'Dowd, the position of the family and its institutions had changed by that time. Established family connections were no longer the sole criterion for choosing a marriage partner, while ethnic origin and religion also emerged as important alternative factors in the selection'.¹⁶⁶ This was true of Elizabeth Butler who was the first Ormond woman to marry a Protestant

¹⁶² Edwards, *The Ormond lordship*, p. 110.

¹⁶³ Dingwall was raised to the peerage as Baron Dingwall before being sent to Venice as the king's envoy in 1609, see *Cal. S.P. Venetian, 1607–10*, nos 678, 728, 743-4; Paul Balfour, *Scots peerage* (9 vols, Edinburgh, 1904–14), iii, 121-2.

¹⁶⁴ Edwards, *The Ormond lordship*, p. 111.

¹⁶⁵ Helen Payne, 'Aristocratic women, power, patronage and family networks at the Jacobean court, 1603–1625' in Daybell (ed.), *Women & politics*, p. 164.

¹⁶⁶ O'Dowd, *A history of women in Ireland*, p. 16.

Scottish peer. Moreover, there were no previous family connections or alliances between the Irish Butler and the Scottish Preston families.

Unsurprisingly, Ormond was displeased with his daughter's choice of partner and did nothing to conceal his disapproval. In the weeks preceding her marriage he wrote from Carrick castle to Robert Carr, first earl of Somerset (d. 1647), stating that he had been privy to the motion propounded by Lord Dingwall (from his majesty) touching his daughter and expressed doubt that Somerset had been informed of this development. Ormond explained that he had 'commended her to his majesty's disposal, as in duty he is bound to do'.¹⁶⁷ He gave an assurance of his constant 'engagement to His majesty, from which he never proposes to digress'. He went on to distance himself from Elizabeth declaring that 'even if she shall prove wilfully disobedient, and shall neglect the duty of a child towards him, he hoped his majesty will not be displeased with him if he show that austerity towards her, which her behaviour shall merit'.¹⁶⁸ In a further indication of his hostility to his daughter, Ormond declared that 'he respects so much the honour and continuance of this house, that he will forget her to be his daughter, if she shall by any unfit match seek to ruin the same'.¹⁶⁹

Events finally took a turn in Elizabeth's favour when in November 1614 she secured the support of the king, not only for her claim to her inheritance but crucially for her re-marriage. In contrast with the time when Ormond enjoyed Elizabeth I's constant support, now he was being told by the king not to interfere with the match¹⁷⁰ in which James had a direct personal

¹⁶⁷ Thomas Butler, Earl of Ormond to Sir Robert Carr, Earl of Somerset, 15 Sept. 1614 in *Cal. S. P. Ire., 1611–1614*, p. 503. no. 18.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁰ King James I to Thomas Butler, Earl of Ormond, 27 Sept. 1614 in Bod. Lib. Carte papers, 30, no. 162.

input. On 1 October 1614 King James again wrote to Ormond ‘on behalf of Lady Elizabeth Butler, who has been restrained of her liberty’.¹⁷¹ The king’s request that she be freed and allowed to choose her own husband was duly granted. Despite operating within the constraints imposed by her father specifically and patriarchal society more generally, Elizabeth successfully procured her liberty, backed by supporters as influential as the king himself. She had much to gain from her well-connected second husband. Following her marriage, she was re-admitted to court circles where she skilfully cultivated support for her suit in opposition to her father and her cousin Walter. The marriage positioned Elizabeth well within court circles and gave her access to some of the highest political connections, all of which she needed to press her claim in Ireland. Her husband’s successes in the English foreign service (he was sent to Venice as the king’s envoy in 1609)¹⁷² his close relationship with King James VI and I, and his position as collector of crown debts, placed the couple well ahead of her rival cousin. For Lord Dingwall too, this was a propitious match since his wife, was, in spite of the succession dispute, the sole heiress to the most powerful peerage in Ireland and potentially to a vast fortune.

Just weeks after the marriage, on 22 November 1614, Thomas Butler tenth earl of Ormond died aged eighty-three.¹⁷³ Buoyed up by her re-marriage, crown support, and the removal of her father (the only individual in political circles who could block her from realising her aspirations), Elizabeth was now better positioned to challenge the earl’s arrangement with Walter Butler and lost little time before she took steps to lay claim to the entire earldom herself as her father’s heiress. Ninety-nine years earlier, her predecessors Anne and Margaret

¹⁷¹ King James I to Thomas Butler, Earl of Ormond, 1 Oct. 1614 in Bod. Lib. Carte papers, 30, no. 57.

¹⁷² Lawrence Stone, *The crisis of the aristocracy* (Oxford, 1965), chaps 2-3.

¹⁷³ ‘The Chichester letter-book, 1612–14’, ed. Dudley Edwards, p. 173.

Butler (see chapter three) faced similar challenges when they unsuccessfully endeavoured to assert their claim to the earldom. As happened in 1515, on this occasion, the Crown was closely involved with the protagonists at the heart of the crisis. In spring 1615, King James summoned Walter Butler, by then eleventh earl of Ormond, to court. In preparation for the meeting, he informed Ormond that ‘all questions likely to arise between her [Elizabeth] and his correspondent are to be submitted to arbitrators, who shall be chosen by the parties, and who shall meet in London to decide the controversies’.¹⁷⁴ At that time, Ormond was fifty-five.¹⁷⁵ A practicing Catholic, he earned the sobriquet ‘Water of the Beads and Rosary’,¹⁷⁶ and at the opening of parliament in 1613, when a Protestant was elected as speaker of the house, he reacted by attempting to place one of his clients, Sir John Everard (also a Catholic), in the speaker’s chair. From that point on, his prominence as a troublesome Catholic was the beginning of his downfall.¹⁷⁷ Such truculent behaviour played into the hands of Lady Dingwall in due course, as the government were only too happy to prevent the Catholic Butler from inheriting the largest estate in Ireland. When Ormond arrived in London in 1615 the challenge he faced from the Dingwalls was clear to him. Two years earlier, when Lord Tully died, Lord deputy Sir Arthur Chichester (1605-16) had intervened immediately, informing the king of his personal belief that Walter Butler may not have been next in line to succeed,¹⁷⁸ and as such should be disinherited. According to Edwards, in the eyes of Dublin Castle officials it was ‘better to aid the ambitions of a royal favourite than forward the cause

¹⁷⁴ Edwards, *The Ormond lordship*, p. 118.

¹⁷⁵ *Cal. Ormond deeds*, ed. Curtis, v (1547–84), no. 315.

¹⁷⁶ N. French, *The unkinde desertor of loyall men and true friends* (Louvain, 1676), reprinted in *The historical works of Nicholas French* (2 vols, Dublin 1846), ii, 26.

¹⁷⁷ Cited in Edwards, *The Ormond lordship*, p. 113.

¹⁷⁸ ‘The Chichester letter-book, 1612–14’, ed. Dudley Edwards, p. 153 (Walter succeeded as eleventh earl following the death of Black Tom in 1614).

of a proven recusant'¹⁷⁹ which was exactly what Chichester did as he made sure to keep the Dingwalls informed regarding Ormond's movements in Ireland.

Like Margaret Fitzgerald who went to great lengths to secure witnesses, irrespective of age and quality of memory, in an effort to demonstrate the legitimacy her husband Pier's Butler's claim to the earldom in 1515 (see chapter four), the Dingwalls in London secured a witness, one Sir Robert Napper, former chief baron of the Irish Exchequer, who had advised the tenth earl in 1603 on the settlement of the future of the earldom. Allegedly, out of that experience Napper suddenly recalled that the earl intended his daughter Elizabeth to inherit the entire patrimony. Despite the fact that Napper's recollection was recorded while he was on his death bed, its content suited the Dingwalls and the crown.¹⁸⁰ In a further positive development for Elizabeth, she and her husband became allied with the king's favourite Sir George Villiers Marquis of Buckingham (d. 1628). This friendship, coupled with Napper's recollections, boded well for Elizabeth in her claim to the Ormond inheritance. Her determination to stake her claim is borne out by a short letter located in the Talbot papers at Lambeth palace. As far back as 1608, some six years after her time spent with the Talbot family in England, and six years before her father's death, Elizabeth had written to the countess of Shrewsbury (on 15 July 1608 to be precise): she graciously thanked the countess for a present of 'knives' in response to which she dispatched 'a brace of her fairest greyhounds.' Interestingly, even at that point, and despite her father's third wife Helen Barry, Countess of Ormond being alive, Elizabeth referred to herself as 'countess of Ormond' and signed her letter as such.¹⁸¹ While this may be interpreted as evidence of tension between

¹⁷⁹ Edwards, *The Ormond lordship*, p. 114.

¹⁸⁰ Sir Robert Napper to Richard Preston, Aug. 1615 (NLI, MS. 11058 (i)).

¹⁸¹ Lady Elizabeth Butler to Mary Talbot, Countess of Shrewsbury, 15 July 1608 (Lambeth Palace, Talbot papers MSS 3192-3206, f.120).

step-mother and step-daughter, in the absence of any supporting evidence, it is impossible to draw this inference.

In early December 1615, the king summoned one Sir James Fullerton to advise him on how he (the king) might intervene to resolve the disputes that had arisen between Walter, eleventh earl of Ormond and his cousin Elizabeth Butler. On 8 December Fullerton informed him that Elizabeth's only reason for staying with Preston, was to please the king, stating that 'the lady hath no further jointure with her husband than the king's favour, as for that only respect she married him.'¹⁸²

Having drawn upon court connections, and with the backing of King James, Elizabeth seemed poised to see the bitter disputed inheritance finally resolved in her favour. Although several court cases failed to present sufficient reasons to disinherit Ormond,¹⁸³ the full force of the Dingwalls' alliance with the powerful Marquis of Buckingham who backed Elizabeth's claim came into effect in December 1617 when the king declared that all litigation was to cease forthwith and that each of the protagonists were to remain in England until he decided the outcome of the case.¹⁸⁴ Having deliberated for almost a full year, on 3 October 1618 James concluded the case entirely in Elizabeth's favour, granting her particularly generous terms. Despite such a positive outcome for Elizabeth, in a move indicative of the restrictions associated with female inheritance at this time, she only gained her monetary inheritance and not the title. Her holdings in Kilkenny increasing from 21,170 to 47,700 acres. Signalling his support for Elizabeth, to the four manors provided for in her father's meagre bequest, the

¹⁸² Sir James Fullerton to King James I, 8 Dec. 1615 in *Cal S.P. Ire., 1615–25*, p. 100.

¹⁸³ Edwards, *The Ormond lordship*, p. 123.

¹⁸⁴ Victor Treadwell, *Buckingham and Ireland, 1616-28: a study in Anglo-Irish politics* (Dublin, 1998), pp 123-4.

king added an extra ten, including Kilkenny castle itself.¹⁸⁵ She was also granted all of her father's former monastic estates in Kilkenny, as well as manors in counties Tipperary, Carlow and Wicklow.¹⁸⁶ Furthermore, James dismissed both the Ormond entail on the estate's succession and inheritance, and Earl Walter's legal rights. As historian Carol O'Connor has noted, Elizabeth's 'victory epitomises the position of the female politician, as one who could subversively establish and utilise personal relationships in order to undermine and challenge patriarchal legal structures'.¹⁸⁷ Quite clearly, the motives for the king's support of Elizabeth were manifold. Firstly, he was not about to see the succession fall into the hands of a devout Catholic, a potential threat to the state and a man whom the Crown disliked. Elizabeth, a Protestant with a Protestant husband, was a far more suitable candidate in the king's eyes, and thus the religious aspect of this succession crisis sets it apart and unique from the crisis of 1515. Secondly, elements of the disputed succession suited both the king and Elizabeth Butler, hence the reasonably favourable outcome for the daughter of Black Tom Butler. Elizabeth Butler's case presented James with a welcome opportunity to intervene in order to curtail the power of an overmighty dynasty whose head had been afforded exceptional power in the Elizabethan period, while for Elizabeth, James's coming to power and his close relationship with her husband Lord Dingwall and the Marquis of Buckingham were very promising auguries. Both the king and Elizabeth stood to gain from the inheritance crisis. Elizabeth clearly permitted herself to be 'used' in a contest between herself, the Crown and her family, to achieve her own ends, while the entire episode allowed James to bring the Ormonds more into line with the rest of the aristocracy throughout the Stuart realm.

¹⁸⁵ The Dingwalls soon discovered, however, that seven of these ten manors were beyond their reach owing to the earl having placed them in trust for his wife, Ellen Countess of Ormond: see NLI, Ormond deeds D 3669).

¹⁸⁶ Treadwell, *Buckingham & Ireland*, pp 123-4.

¹⁸⁷ O'Connor, 'The Kildare women', p. 149.

The fallout from the king's ruling could not have been worse for Walter Butler, eleventh earl of Ormond, who was left with only one manor at Gowran County Kilkenny. Believing that he had been double-crossed, the earl challenged the king, invoking common law as his defence.¹⁸⁸ However, he failed to acknowledge that the king's use of the arbitration process had no standing in common law, and his efforts were unsuccessful. Following a summons to appear before the Court of Star Chamber at Westminster, Ormond was charged with insolence, chastisement of the king and scandalous speeches, and was duly sentenced to imprisonment in Fleet prison in London on 11 June 1619.¹⁸⁹ There Ormond languished for a decade while the fortunes of the Prestons generally prospered, notwithstanding some financial difficulties.

Just as Henry VIII erected the new earldom of Ossory in 1528 creating Piers Butler and Margaret Fitzgerald earl and countess of Ossory, so James VI and I created the new earldom of Desmond in July 1619¹⁹⁰ making Elizabeth and her husband Richard, countess and earl of Desmond. The fact that Elizabeth was the granddaughter of Countess Joan Fitzgerald of Ormond Ossory and Desmond, and, mother of a future heiress (the Prestons only child Elizabeth) may have been considerations in James's decision to re-create the earldom of Desmond (in abeyance since Elizabeth I's reign) and bestow it on Elizabeth Butler. Just as in 1528 when Henry created the earldom of Ossory, the re-creation of the earldom of Desmond in 1619 was done entirely at the Crown's discretion; in neither instance was this owing to the king's concern to see a female heiress' claim to the Ormond inheritance honoured.

¹⁸⁸ Edwards, *The Ormond lordship*, p. 117.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid*, p.119.

¹⁹⁰ Balfour, *Scots peerage*, iii, 122.

Almost a decade later, and shortly after Walter Butler's return to Ireland in 1628, Elizabeth countess of Desmond died suddenly in Wales on 10 October 1628, aged forty-three, while en route to Ireland from London. Significantly, exactly two weeks later, her husband the Earl of Desmond 'about the 28 day of the same month' drowned in the Irish Sea on his way to attend her funeral.¹⁹¹ As Edwards argues, 'their deaths marked the end of the [second] Ormond inheritance crisis'.¹⁹² Elizabeth was buried the following year on 17 March in St Paul's chapel, Westminster abbey. She was the second of the Ormond women featured in this chapter to have been buried in Westminster (the first being Elizabeth Berkeley, Black Tom's first wife). That Elizabeth Butler, Countess of Desmond was also buried there, is not only indicative of her status as the daughter of Thomas Butler, it signifies her high profile as a recognised woman of the house of Ormond, wife of Preston, the Earl of Desmond and close associate of the deceased King James I, and, her reputation at court in the eyes of James I, and his ministers. The record of her obituary noted that she was

The right honourable lady Elizabeth countess of Desmond, daughter and sole heir of Thomas Butler earl of Ormond and Ossory, viscount Thurles, Baron of Arklow, Lord of the Liberties and Royalties of the County Tipperary, lord butler and high treasurer of Ireland, and some time lord general of the armie and knight of the most noble order of the garter. This noble countess deceased in Wales on 10 October 1628. She was married to the Right Honourable Sir Richard Preston, Knight of the Bath, earl of Desmond, Baron of Dingwall and one of the privy council of Ireland, by whom she had issue, Lady Elizabeth, daughter and heire general.¹⁹³

¹⁹¹ Ibid; County of Liberty of Tipperary records (NLI, MS. 11,044 (86)).

¹⁹² Edwards, *The Ormond lordship*, p. 127.

¹⁹³ Cited in *Four papers relating to the claim of Francis Thomas de Grey Earl Cowper, on his claim to the dignities of Lord Dingwall in the peerage of Scotland and of Lord Butler of Moore park in the peerage of England* (London, 1870), p. 21.

In a wider contemporary context, Elizabeth's case was far from exceptional. Indeed, it was similar to the legal wrangling in which Lettice Fitzgerald, first Baroness Offaly (1580-1658) was embroiled during the period 1585-1620. When Gerald Fitzgerald (d. 1585), eleventh earl of Kildare failed to specifically state that the succession was to be in tail male, it enabled his granddaughter Lettice and her husband Sir Robert Digby of Colehill Warwickshire, to contest her claim against the twelfth earl, thereby positioning herself to be heir general to the Kildare dynasty. O'Connor argues that Lettice epitomised 'the pivotal position women could assume in public lawsuits, and their ability to stand up and defend their right of female inheritance and secure their own prosperity'¹⁹⁴ as she successfully challenged the traditional male succession to the earldom. In Lettice's case, the contest was even more complex as it involved also challenging her Grandmother Mabel Brown's inheritance. Neither was the Crown's intervention unique to the Ormond case. King James also interfered on more than one occasion in the Kildare case, passing judgement on 11 July 1619.¹⁹⁵ Although as in the Ormond case the king generously granted thousands of acres of land including manors and monastic lands to the female claimant (Lettice and also her husband), his handling of the Kildare succession case was different in that he did not recognise Lettice's claim to her grandfather's heir general. Like Elizabeth, Lettice was denied the sought-after title of heiress.¹⁹⁶

As in 1515, the Crown again significantly influenced the Ormond succession in 1618 (when James decided in Elizabeth Butler's favour), disregarding the cost involved. By having a Scottish Protestant marry Lady Elizabeth Butler, the task of wrestling the earldom of Ormond from the Catholic earl appeared to have been motivated by principle. However, unlike the

¹⁹⁴ O'Connor, 'The Kildare women', p. 123.

¹⁹⁵ Fitzgerald, *The earls of Kildare*, p. 227.

¹⁹⁶ Lettice did for a brief period, however, hold the title Baroness Offaly: see O'Connor, 'The Kildare women', pp 139-40.

crisis of 1515 which had no religious dimension, the real politik of religion, and especially James's distrust of the Catholic appointed heir, Walter Butler, was significant in prompting the king's intervention in early 1614 (as already mentioned) following the death of Elizabeth's first husband Lord Tully in December 1613. While it might appear that the crown sought to pursue justice with the recognition of the female heiresses on both occasions, far more importantly, was the fact that the dilemmas of the Ormond women protagonists, dovetailed with the Crown's plans to exert control over the earldom.

In the long-term history of aristocratic families in Ireland, such hiatuses in the male succession and the insistence by legitimate female heiresses on pursuing their claims to the earldom created significant ruptures in the families' fortunes and afforded the Crown opportunities to intervene, and, in the process reduce the autonomy and power of the respective dynasties. Moreover, the conduct of the virtually autonomous tenth earl, Thomas Butler during the reign of Elizabeth I, made the earldom ripe for significant pruning by her successor, the absolutist James VI and I.

Thomas, tenth earl of Ormond impacted his daughter's life in several significant ways. Firstly, his restrictive and controlling hold over her and her first husband, although hugely problematic for her during her marriage and immediately following her husband's death, ultimately strengthened her determination to pursue her claim to the earldom, fully cognisant of her legitimacy as his only surviving child, and, in the face of the earldom being entailed. Secondly, her determination to outwit her father and gain the ear of the king, propelled her to subsequently operate beyond the grip of his control – in particular through her second marriage – asserting her own autonomy, in which she achieved many of her aims. Thirdly, although a passive figure in the advancement of the Ormond earldom, Elizabeth was an

active agent who for her own advancement actively engaged with the king to achieve what she saw as her rightful inheritance and recognition.

The fallout of the succession crisis and Countess Ellen Butler

As developments in the 1620s and 30s would reveal, Thomas, the tenth earl of Ormond's attempt to engineer the succession in favour of a male relative, impacted more than his daughter and Walter Butler, eleventh earl. When King James VI & I created the new earldom of Desmond in July 1619, it opened up a new chapter in the Ormond dynasty's history.

Whereas Elizabeth and her husband clearly emerged victorious from the contest, her rival Walter Butler suffered a succession of setbacks that in turn directly impacted his wife and second cousin, Ellen Butler (d. 1631), daughter of Viscount Mountgarret. When Walter was imprisoned, he and Ellen had been married for thirty-five years and had three sons and nine daughters.¹⁹⁷

At the time of his imprisonment, four of Walter and Ellen's daughters were unmarried and still living with their mother. Whilst in prison, the earl arranged for some of his closest servants to visit him and instructed them to set aside a portion of his by then, very modest estate for each of his unmarried daughters' use.¹⁹⁸ However, Walter's troubles were compounded when the sudden death of his eldest son Thomas Butler Viscount Thurles in 1619 presented him with even greater financial strains, which undoubtedly moved the earl to not only make provision for his son's family, but also his own. His deceased son had not provided for his wife Elizabeth Poyntz, Lady Thurles or their children including three young daughters. Walter was now struggling to support his own four unmarried daughters, his three

¹⁹⁷ Walter and Elizabeth shared common great grandparents, the eighth earl Piers Butler and Countess Margaret Fitzgerald.

¹⁹⁸ Edwards, *The Ormond lordship*, p. 120.

granddaughters, his wife and daughter-in-law. Immediately he put in place a trust to support the three generations of Ormond females for whom he was responsible. Unlike the old tenth earl whose concern was almost exclusively the future of the earldom in tail male rather than his family in general, Walter Butler set aside a proportion of his meagre estate, together with financial loans, entirely for the Butler women dependent on him, and he appointed members of the extended Butler family as guardians of the trust. Albeit that this may have been a ploy on Walter's behalf to hold on to as much as he could for himself by investing lands in the hands of his female relatives, he nonetheless made significant attempts to provide for those female members of his family in his care.

Soon after the earl and countess of Desmond were given ten Ormond manors by the king when he found in their favour regarding the Ormond succession, they discovered that seven had already been placed in trust by Walter himself before 1619, for his wife, Countess Ellen.¹⁹⁹ These were some of the most valuable manorial lands of the Butlers on account of their high agricultural levies and their relative proximity to Kilkenny city.²⁰⁰ So long as Ellen, countess of Ormond was alive, these manors remained untouchable, despite the king's promises to Elizabeth Butler. However, in June 1621 James issued a decree abolishing the trusteeship in Ellen's name, and all seven manors which were legally hers were instead granted to the Desmonds.²⁰¹ The king did so to compensate the Desmonds who were desperate to get their hands on these properties, but James also had another more personal reason for circumventing the law. The earl of Desmond was heavily in debt to the Crown and by ensuring that the Desmonds obtained these contested manors, James was ensuring repayment to the Crown in the short term. To compound Ormond's difficulties, the king

¹⁹⁹ Ibid, p. 121.

²⁰⁰ Ibid, p. 74.

²⁰¹ Ibid, p. 124.

confiscated Walter's family home, the castle and manor of Kilcash in County Kilkenny and granted it to the Desmonds.²⁰² As has been emphasised, James's intervention was by no means unusual: as historian A. Kiralfy contends, the king frequently exercised his prerogative through chancery.²⁰³ He had instructed the Irish government to produce findings on Ormond that would justify his ongoing incarceration in London, and between 17 April and 5 May several indictments against Ormond as a 'usurper' in the liberty of Tipperary were collected.²⁰⁴ Through his use of royal prerogative, James circumvented the law to suit his own ends, impacting not only the earl of Ormond, but also Countess Ellen. The move in 1620 by Ormond to create a trusteeship for the Butler females in his care, gained greater significance after June 1621 as these Ormond women may have served to ring-fence the few remaining assets held by Walter. Arising from the king's intervention to halt Walter's attempts to tie up property in this way, Countess Ellen was left with no means should she be widowed. When several of the couple's supporters endeavoured to block the enactment of the royal decree against them, they were imprisoned in Dublin in November 1623.²⁰⁵

To be closer to her husband, Countess Ellen and her younger children moved to London in 1625, where she encountered more conflict and intrigue. Interestingly, on this occasion the attempt to discredit the countess of Ormond was based not on moral but on politico-religious grounds. In 1623, Ellen's private correspondence with a Catholic priest in London, fell into the hands of government officials, most likely according to Edwards, because she, like her Catholic husband, was suspected of harbouring traitorous pro-Spanish sentiments.²⁰⁶

²⁰² Ibid.

²⁰³ *Potter's historical introduction to the English Law*, ed. A.K.R. Kiralfy (London, 1962), pp 159-60.

²⁰⁴ *The Fortescue papers*, ed. S.R. Gardiner (London, Camden Society, 1871), p. 115.

²⁰⁵ Edwards, *The Ormond lordship*, p. 125.

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

The countess, her husband and the younger members of their family struggled financially as they waited in London for the royal injunction on the earl's estate to be lifted. During her sojourn there, some of Ellen's English neighbours wondered about how she could afford to have personal lady servants, speculating about their income. Writing to a priest named Edmund Channon in 1624, the countess was quick to silence that speculation about the character and reliability of her servants:

My woman Everard, your ghostly child, says some wonder how she comes by her clothes and lives so well. I can maintain her, without any sinister ways taken by her, but as my servants should not be suspected by you, I tell you that she has been with me ten years and is of honest carriage. I entertain no servant without allowing them what is fit for my service, whosoever censures her might spend his time more religiously. Pray show this letter the next time you hear her spoken of.²⁰⁷

Fortunately for Ellen and her husband their fortunes took a favourable turn following the death in 1625 of James VI & I and the succession of his son Charles I (1625-49) who was not as close to Preston the earl of Desmond as his father had been. Two years later, in March 1627, after almost eight years, Walter Butler was released from prison, and in spring 1628 he was preparing to return to Ireland. Just four months after he and Ellen returned to Ireland in July 1628, both the earl and countess of Desmond died within weeks of each other, and as Edwards has observed, 'by simple outliving the Desmonds, Earl Walter had won an unexpected and fortuitous victory'.²⁰⁸

²⁰⁷ Ellen Butler, countess of Ormond to Edmund Channon, July 1625 in *Cal. S. P. Dom. Eliz. I – James I, 1625-26*, no. 680.

²⁰⁸ Edwards, *The Ormond lordship*, p. 127.

With the countess Elizabeth, her husband and King James all dead, Walter was not about to be outdone again, this time, by Elizabeth's only daughter and heiress, Elizabeth Preston. Although still a child aged thirteen, Elizabeth Preston was poised to inherit all the lands Walter had lost at the hands of her parents. In a move that was both astute and arguably essential in enabling him to recoup all that he had lost, in December the following year (1629) Walter had his nineteen-year-old grandson and heir, James Butler Viscount Thurles, marry the young Elizabeth Preston Lady Dingwall in London.²⁰⁹ In this, he merely did what Thomas, tenth earl, had done following the death of his only son when he arranged the marriage of his daughter Elizabeth to his nephew (Lord and Lady Tully).

The marriage cost Walter dearly, however, as he had to persuade Elizabeth's guardian Sir Henry Rich, first earl of Holland in Kensington, to agree to the union. The sum of £15,000 was settled between the two earls as Ormond procured his granddaughter-in-law to facilitate the marriage with his heir.²¹⁰ Already burdened by substantial debts, Walter and Ellen also faced crippling demands by the dead earl of Desmond's creditors. By 1629 the earl and Countess Ellen, owed approximately £50,000 to numerous creditors including those since the days of Lord Tully, together with outstanding debts accrued by Richard Preston, earl of Desmond (inherited by Ormond owing to his arrangement of the marriage of Elizabeth Preston to his grandson James) and Earl Walter's his own debts from creditors who had supported him during his long imprisonment. During the next three years they set about re-establishing themselves in Kilkenny, secure in the knowledge that they had reunified the earldom through the propitious marriage of their grandson. The remainder of their lives together was short however, as Countess Ellen died at Kilkenny castle on 28 January 1631,

²⁰⁹ Ibid. Young James Butler spent many years in London as a royal ward in the household of the Calvinist archbishop of Canterbury, George Abbott.

²¹⁰ Ibid.

(see Fig. 5 and 5.1) while the earl died two years later, in February 1633. Both were interred in St Canice's cathedral County Kilkenny, where her death is listed among several members of the Ormond dynasty, and specifically as 'wife of the above', in reference to her husband. The great esteem in which Ellen was held by the wider Butler family and more importantly the couple's success in re-uniting the Butler's is evidenced by the presence at her funeral service of representatives from many lateral branches, including those traditionally associated with the earldom of Ormond, namely the Butlers of Mountgarret, Dunboyne, and Ikerin, Thurles, and Aran.²¹¹ Her chief mourner was Helen Barry, dowager countess of Ormond, whose train was borne by Ellen Butler of Upper Court. The pallbearers were James Butler of Ikerrin, Edmond Butler of Mount Garret, Sir George Hamilton and Lord Dunboyne. Present also were Mr John Butler Fitz. Edmond, Mr Edmond Butler Fitz Pierce, and Mr Richard Butler of Kilcash, Mr Butler of Poleston, Mr Butler of Mayaille, Mr Tobie Butler and Mrs James Fitz Edmond Butler of Crehanagh, Mr. Edmond Butler Fitz James, Mr. Pierce Butler, son of Sir Edward, Mr. Butler of Moinhere, Mr. Pierce Butler Fitz Edward and Mr. James of Darilouscan, Mr James Butler of Grantstown, Lady Ikerrin, old Lady Thurles, young Lady Thurles and Lady Katherine, Lady Ellen and Lady Jane, Lady Mary and Lady Elizabeth, Lady Eleanor and Lady Upper Ossory, Lady Ikerrin's daughter, and Lady Anne's daughter-in-law.²¹²

The relentless challenges posed against Ormond and his wife Ellen, by the Crown and the Desmonds undoubtedly impacted and greatly restricted their lives. However, as evidenced by Ellen's correspondence regarding her ability to afford and maintain servants, her protection of her four unmarried daughters during their father's absence, and her husband's overall

²¹¹ Funeral entry of Ellen Butler, countess of Ormond, Jan. 1631 (NLI GO, Funeral entries, MS. 64-79, v, p. 184).

²¹² Ibid.

acceptance of his fate during his lengthy imprisonment, they endured their struggles as a couple. By the time of the earl's death in 1633, Walter and Ellen had been married for forty-nine years. As earl and countess of Ormond, they struggled under enormous financial pressure, the majority of which was not of their own making. Despite their efforts to reduce the enormous debt in their final years, the management and working of the much-weakened earldom was profoundly impacted by their financial predicament. Despite being a victim of the Desmonds and the crown's harsh treatment of her and her family, as an active agent for the wellbeing and future of the earldom, Countess Ellen reared her large family and took her youngest four children to London in 1625 to be closer to the earl. She worked in tandem with her husband to manage their estate as best they possibly could,²¹³ despite their straightened circumstances while the Desmonds were alive, and later once the earl was freed from prison.

Countess Elizabeth Preston

Four years after Elizabeth Butler, countess of Desmond's thirteen-year-old heiress, Elizabeth Preston married her husband six years her senior in 1629, the young couple became the twelfth earl and countess of Ormond. They had eight sons, five of whom died as children, and two daughters; the family initially lived at her grandfather's home, Carrick castle in County Tipperary.²¹⁴ During the first twenty years of their marriage, the countess, her husband and their family had a peripatetic lifestyle, moving between England, Dublin and Kilkenny. As had been the case with the eleventh earl and countess, debt and mounting financial burdens weighed heavily on Elizabeth and her husband. By 1640 they were virtually bankrupt with the earl unable to meet all his financial commitments.²¹⁵ Interestingly, Edwards has observed that had it not been for the outbreak of rebellion in Ireland in 1641, 'it is hard to know how

²¹³ Edwards, *The Ormond lordship*, p. 130, for a breakdown of the Ormond household accounts 1630-1, including servants' expenses and clothing.

²¹⁴ *Ibid*, pp 290-302.

²¹⁵ *Ibid*, p. 139.

much of the enormous patrimony that had descended to him would have remained in his possession when the mid-century troubles ended'.²¹⁶ Following the outbreak of the rebellion, the countess Elizabeth and her family moved to the larger and more secure castle in Kilkenny city while the earl, as commander-in-chief of the king's forces in Ireland, left for Dublin to command the army tasked with surprising the uprising.²¹⁷ As the conflict spread, Protestants in Kilkenny flocked to the city, where many took refuge with the countess and her children in the castle.

By 23 December 1641, according to one Captain Warren who made a deposition to the commission gathering witness statements following the uprising, the countess was sheltering and trying to feed 'near 300 Protestants'.²¹⁸ Forty-three years after Elizabeth Sheffield, Countess of Ormond and her daughter were barricaded into Kilkenny castle during the tenth earl's kidnapping during this rebellion and her husband's absence in the early 1640s, this Countess' response to her predicament was altogether different. As a result of her initiative, independence, leadership and the protection she provided to her co-religionists, this countess acquired a reputation as protector and harbourer of many Protestant families, and as an agent in the maintenance of peace in Kilkenny.²¹⁹ Her efforts to safeguard the lives of English Protestants met with varying levels of success. Having procured a guarantee from her cousin Viscount Richard Mountgarret in the first week of January 1642²²⁰ for the safe exit and transit of 160 Protestants from Kilkenny castle to County Waterford, Elizabeth was then

²¹⁶ Ibid.

²¹⁷ Jane Fenlon, 'Episodes of magnificence: the material worlds of the dukes of Ormonde' in Jane Fenlon and Toby Barnard (eds.), *The dukes of Ormond, 1610–1745* (Woodbridge, 2000), p. 140.

²¹⁸ Deposition of Captain Abel Warren, 29 Jan. 1652 (TCD, MS. 812, f.27Ir.)

[www.1641.tcd.ie].

²¹⁹ Ibid.

²²⁰ Mountgarret was the grand-uncle of the twelfth earl, see Edwards, *The Ormond lordship*, p. 32.

confronted with further monetary demands from the Viscount's son Edward Butler, who did not honour his father's deal with the countess. The fugitive party were subjected to humiliation and threats whilst en route to Waterford city. Despite being robbed of all possessions including their clothes in the depths of winter, they managed to hold onto a letter from Elizabeth to the mayor and aldermen of Waterford requesting that they arrange for the party's safe escape by sea.²²¹ However, the countess' request was ignored, the city gates were closed to them and the group separated, some retreating to nearby Passage East, while the remainder waited in the hope of further assistance from Elizabeth. This assistance came when she secured Moungarret's consent for the remaining group – who waited outside the gates of Waterford city – to be dispatched temporarily to Carrick-on-Suir, under the protection of her brother-in-law Richard Butler.²²² Although it took three months to arrange transport from Waterford, for her continued intervention and protection, she drew great praise from several of those who made the journey, one of whom recounted how:

the said lady hired boatmen and two great boats at Carrick and loaded them (with other lesser boats) full of English men, women, and children with their goods which to my knowledge all had been plundered and put to the sword, were it not that the said countess of Ormond raised such of her servants, friends and neighbours, who guarded them on both sides of the River Sewer [Suir] till they left them safe with their goods in Waterford to be dispatched for England or any other place of refuge. Of all which I was an eye witness, and further say that there was not to my knowledge in all Ireland a better

²²¹ HMC, *Ormonde MSS*, 2nd ser., ii, 367-75.

²²² *Ibid.*

reliever of the English, to her power, than the said countess to preserve their lives and goods; and as occasion offereth, I can with a safe conscience depose the same.²²³

Also among those who travelled to Carrick-on-Suir was Thomas Roth of Glashare, from Kilkenny. On Christmas Eve 1652, he recalled how

In the beginning of the rebellion in Ireland, anno domini, 1641, and having no estate or substance left me for my maintenance, Elizabeth countess of Ormond did relieve and maintain me with clothes, money and all necessaries in Dublin and in other places in Ireland and in England for above two years, and to my knowledge the said lady did relieve and provide for many other English in the like condition.²²⁴

As the rebellion wore on, however, promises made and assurances given to Elizabeth to afford safe passage and protection to English Protestants in her care, including those from her wider kin, were not honoured. Although Elizabeth and her children remained at Kilkenny castle until 9 January, she grew increasingly fearful as Catholic rebels approached and reports of atrocities reached her. Left with no other choice but to follow the Protestant families whom she had recently tried to protect, and hoping to eventually join her husband the earl who was still in Dublin, the countess and her children left the castle and set out for Carrick-on-suir over the following days by boat. She did so, fearing that she might be taken hostage if she ventured instead by road. It proved a wise decision, as Colonel Florence Fitzpatrick, the leader of the rebels in the castle environs, had become aware of the countess's favours showed to Protestant families.²²⁵ Nevertheless, once she joined those who had originally set

²²³ Deposition of Comerford of Daingin More, County Kilkenny, 5 July 1643 (TCD, MS. 812, ff202r.-208v.) [www.1641.tcd.ie].

²²⁴ Deposition of Thomas Roth, Glashare, County Kilkenny, 24 Dec. 1652 (TCD, MS. 812, ff202r.-208v.) [www.1641.tcd.ie].

²²⁵ Edwards, *The Ormond lordship*, p. 321.

out from Kilkenny to Waterford (but were redirected to Carrick-On-Suir) Elizabeth continued to assist more ‘distressed Protestants’ as they made their way to join her and those along with herself and her family already waiting transport at Carrick-on-Suir, in an increasingly violent situation.²²⁶

Eventually, at the end of March an arrangement was reached with her cousin Edward Butler governor of Waterford, to permit the entire cohort of Protestants, including the countess and her family, to sail from Carrick-on-Suir to Waterford city after she personally intervened and entreated his help to escape.²²⁷ Their disembarkation in Waterford was conditional on the release of a rebel officer Captain Oliver Keating²²⁸ and within days, he was set free.

Meanwhile in Dublin, the earl of Ormond received news from the country that his wife and ‘the little ones’ were at last ‘out of the lion’s mouth’.²²⁹ Albeit that Ormond may have been reassured in Dublin, the countess and her charges were not entirely out of danger. Following further delays, on 31 March two ships were allowed set sail from Waterford harbour, destined for Dublin. Both ships (one of which was a Royal ship, *The Swann*) took five days to make the short journey.²³⁰ Upon arrival at their destination, another eyewitness who had travelled with the countess remarked how ‘when her ladyship and the said English were landed at Dublin, she did relieve the said English, distributing moneys amongst them, and afforded them other helps according to her ability after which they dispersed’.²³¹

²²⁶ Ibid.

²²⁷ Deposition of Peter Pinchon, Kilkenny, 16 Apr. 1642 (TCD, MS. 812, f.200) [www.1641.tcd.ie].

²²⁸ Edwards, *The Ormond lordship*, p. 318.

²²⁹ Fenlon, ‘Episodes of magnificence: the material worlds of the dukes of Ormonde’, p. 140.

²³⁰ HMC, *Ormonde MSS*, 2nd ser., ii, 372; see also ‘The ship’s journal of Captain Thomas Powell, 1642’, ed. David Edwards in *Analecta Hibernica*, xxxvii (1998), p. 264.

²³¹ Deposition of Thomas Davis, Kilkenny, 1 Jan. 1652 in HMC, *Ormonde MSS*, 2nd ser., ii, 372.

The 1641 rebellion from the establishment of the Catholic confederates which first sat in that city on 11 June 1642²³², brought an end to three hundred and thirteen years of Ormond dominance in Kilkenny. In a matter of weeks, the ancient seat of the Butler dynasty, Kilkenny castle, was occupied by the earl's grand-uncle Sir Richard Viscount Mountgarret. In a further blow 'the profits of the Ormond estate were sequestered to finance the war against the earl's Protestant army in Dublin'.²³³ In the years that followed, the Ormond household became divided and Elizabeth re-located to England and later to France. In 1647, when James earl of Ormond went to London, after surrendering Dublin to the English parliament, Elizabeth remained briefly in Ireland to act on her husband's behalf in handling outstanding debts.²³⁴ Her role as mother, wife, and countess continued to remain in particular focus in these years of uncertainty, surrounding the family's future and the future of the earldom.

In a matter of weeks, however, she too was in London, for another short sojourn, during which the couple lived at separate residences. While the earl was at Covent Garden, the countess and her children were with her husband's mother's family in Iron Acton, Gloucestershire.²³⁵ Despite having sustained substantial financial losses in Ireland, the Ormonds were not reduced to penury. The countess could, for example, still afford gold and silver lace for her children's coats, along with dozens of pairs of gloves and silk stockings for herself.²³⁶ When James decided to go into exile with the young King Charles II in 1651 following Cromwell's defeat of Ormond's army in Rathmines County Dublin, the countess, then aged thirty-six, together with still young children, were once again obliged to re-locate,

²³² Edwards, *The Ormond lordship*, p. 326.

²³³ *Ibid*, p. 327.

²³⁴ Jane Fenlon, 'Episodes of magnificence', p. 140.

²³⁵ *Ibid*.

²³⁶ Countess of Ormond in London, 1647–48 (Bod. Lib., Carte MS. 30, f.343).

this time to Caen in France, where Ormond briefly joined them. According to the countess, when her husband arrived in Caen, he brought with him no more £500, and seemed unconcerned about the future of his family.²³⁷ By August the following year, Elizabeth was struggling to cope financially. She therefore wrote to Edward Nicholas, Charles II's chief secretary, seeking the king's permission to travel to London in order to seek assistance.²³⁸ Her efforts were not in vain. Owing to her personal involvement with the Protestant refugees in Ireland during the Catholic uprising, the English parliament in 1653 issued an order granting her 'permission' to return to Ireland and reside in the long-held Butler manor house at Dunmore in Kilkenny.²³⁹ It appears that while permission was granted to her (as a woman), unlike her husband, she was not perceived as a threat to the commonwealth regime. Additionally, she was to receive a somewhat generous deal amounting to £2,000 per annum from her estate, providing she had no contact with her husband. Furthermore, she was forbidden from sending him any financial assistance.²⁴⁰ In the event, she received significantly less than the amount granted and she only returned to Ireland with her younger children in 1657.²⁴¹ It was five years since she had seen her husband, still in exile with the future king; it would be another three years before Ormond eventually returned to Ireland, in 1660.

As evidenced by the experience of Countess Elizabeth Preston, the impact of the Stuart king's exile on aristocratic families who followed him to France, was manifold. Not only were the financial strains striking, but the separation between husband, wife and children,

²³⁷ Letters of Sir Edward Nicholas, 1651 (BL, Egerton MS. 2534, ff17, 44, 57, 130).

²³⁸ Ibid.

²³⁹ Permission for Countess Elizabeth Preston to travel to Ireland, 1652 in HMC, *Ormonde MSS*, n.s., ii, 367-75.

²⁴⁰ Ibid.

²⁴¹ Ibid.

placed additional strain on the couple's relationship, including when parliament permitted the countess's return to Ireland, yet her husband was forbidden to do so.

Elizabeth's personal handling of the fraught period of the 1641 rebellion, the constant dislocation that followed and the demise of her dynasty highlights her capacity to operate independently and proactively. Her agency in liaising with city authorities as she negotiated the safe passage of Protestant English people fleeing Catholic rebels, her capacity to 'hold the fort' in Kilkenny for as long as she could, her affording protection to those who sought her aid, her capacity to manage her husband's finances during his absences in Dublin, London, and France, and her capacity to re-locate with her family and without the company of her husband, living separately in London and Caen, together with her capacity to negotiate a financial arrangement with the king for the maintenance of herself and his dependent children, reveal a woman of agency, advocacy, independence and influence, in mid-seventeenth century Ireland.

Between 1642 and 1660, the earl and countess of Ormond remained powerless in their former earldom as they were forced to acquiesce to the Catholic confederates including their cousin Viscount Mountgarret, president of the confederacy. In contrast with the experiences of previous earls of Ormond, particularly those for whom religion was not a contentious matter, from the outbreak of the Catholic uprising in 1641, none of the twelfth earl's 'gentry clients lifted a finger in defence of his land'.²⁴² Furthermore, in a departure from the era of the earlier countesses of Ormond, during Elizabeth Preston's lifetime, religion was such a divisive and contentious issue that as Edwards has put it, 'the traumatic flight of the countess of Ormond and her Protestant followers to Waterford in early 1642 was not helped, but

²⁴² Edwards, *The Ormond lordship*, p. 329.

impaired and aggravated, by a number of local kinsmen and former clients'.²⁴³ Following over a century of support from the Tudor monarchy (as documented from chapters three to seven) during which many Ormond women played significant roles both within the dynasty and wider public political arena, after the 1641 rebellion the earldom itself 'had been suddenly reduced to the level of any other Irish lordship'.²⁴⁴ For the former powerful Protestant magnates and their wives – in particular Thomas, tenth earl of Ormond who was virtually untouchable given his status and relationship with the queen – the once powerful hegemonic Ormond lordship had been significantly subdued. Any sense of continuity and prosperity were irrevocably challenged and disrupted in the early decades of the seventeenth century. Elizabeth Preston's husband was, according to historian John Lowe, a singularly unsuitable agent of the king at a time of monumental distrust between Irish Catholics and the Stuart regime.²⁴⁵ Following the downfall of Lord Deputy Sir Thomas Wentworth (d.1641) in 1640-1, the twelfth earl of Ormond's acquiescence to Crown policy and his cooperation with the lord deputies' policy of replacing 'regional power with undiluted central power' was exposed.²⁴⁶ In reaction, the Kilkenny Catholic gentry who viewed Ormond as betraying the noble traditions of his ancestors, responded with a ferocious rebellion against the earl and his policies that brought about the sudden and violent demise of the Ormond dynasty.²⁴⁷

It was not until 1660 following the restoration of Charles II in England that Elizabeth Preston re-joined her husband James Butler in England after almost eight years apart.²⁴⁸ Almost immediately Ormond received copious rewards for his support of the king. Among these

²⁴³ Ibid.

²⁴⁴ Ibid.

²⁴⁵ John Lowe, 'Charles I and the confederation of Kilkenny' in *IHS*, xiv, no. 53 (Mar. 1964), p. 10.

²⁴⁶ Edwards, *The Ormond lordship*, p. 338.

²⁴⁷ Ibid.

²⁴⁸ Carte, *A history of the life of James, duke of Ormonde*, ii, 524.

accolades, he was appointed to one of the highest offices of state, the lord stewardship which involved the management of the royal household ‘behind the scenes’ as well as multiple opportunities for patronage. His recognition by the king continued when he was raised to the peerage, and on 20 July 1660 he was given the English earldom of Brecknock, with the added title Baron Butler of Llanthony in Wales. However, after decades of decline and virtual demise of the earldom of Ormond, the highest recognition ever given to an Irish earl and countess was bestowed in London on 30 March 1661 when James Butler and his wife Countess Elizabeth Preston were elevated to Duke and Duchess of Ormond.²⁴⁹ As the recipients of the first ever dukedom in Ireland, it confirmed the Prestons standing as the crown’s foremost subjects in the kingdom of Ireland. Following their dramatic and fortunate turnabout, when James Butler became Duke of Ormond and lord lieutenant of Ireland, his wife Elizabeth, first Duchess of Ormond, became the wealthiest and most powerful woman in Ireland.²⁵⁰

The Stuart restoration in 1660, together with the elevation of the Butler dynasty to a dukedom the following year, provides an appropriate conclusion to this thesis which commenced with the Wars of the Roses and spanned the entire Tudor period. This chapter set out to examine the lives of Black Tom’s women and to explore the manner and extent to which his relationship with the Ormond women discussed above, shaped their lives and their performances as individuals in their roles as wives, mothers, widows and heiresses, and to gauge the extent to which they fulfilled these roles either under or beyond the constraints that he and other members of the Butler family, imposed on them. As the first wife of Black

²⁴⁹ Ibid.

²⁵⁰ Naomi McAreavy, ‘Elizabeth Preston Butler, duchess of Ormond (1615–1684)’ in Carole Levin, Anna Riehl Bertolet and Jo Eldredge Carney (eds), *A biographical encyclopaedia of early modern Englishwomen: exemplary lives and memorable acts, 1500-1650* (London, 2017), p. 228.

Tom, Countess Elizabeth Berkeley's alleged accusations of extra-marital behaviour resulted in her divorce from the earl, which not only had the potential to denigrate the family, but the earl himself. Their childless marriage, which had brought the earl closer to the Elizabethan court and significant prestige, irrevocably failed, as the countess actively and directly destabilised their marriage. Elizabeth Berkeley's alleged behaviour was in direct contrast to his second wife, the much-lauded Elizabeth Sheffield whose contribution to the earldom was such that when she died, she had one of the highest profile funerals in late Elizabethan Ireland. She provided the earldom with an heir and an heiress, and while the death of her only son propelled her daughter into the heart of a protracted and ruthless inheritance crisis, nonetheless, as countess of Ormond, her pedigree and background contributed to the maintenance of Thomas Butler's standing at court, following the failure of his first marriage. Countess Elizabeth actively engaged with each of the protagonists during her elderly husband's kidnaping in 1600, while protecting their only surviving child, at a cost to the countess's own health. Through her role as intermediary and advocate, she made a significant contribution towards ensuring the stability of the earldom, one that set her apart from the earls' other two wives.

Ormond's third marriage, to Helen Barry, his only Irish-born wife, presented the promise of providing the earldom with another male heir. Whereas from Ormond's perspective the marriage proved disappointing since he and Helen did not have a male child to succeed to the earldom, the union does not appear to have been unhappy and for Helen at least, it proved advantageous. Thanks to her being countess of Ormond, she was well positioned to exercise and steer her own filial family in County Cork through a delicate phase through her guardianship of her nephew. Once widowed, she capitalised on her standing as countess

dowager to marry well for a third time whilst also extricating herself from the succession crisis centred upon her step-daughter Elizabeth Butler.

When Thomas, tenth earl of Ormond died in 1614, his sole surviving daughter Elizabeth, focused her energy on the succession of her father's nominated heir, Walter Butler. So successful was she in doing so, that she gained the full backing of the king which in turn resulted in recognition of her legitimate claim as the tenth earl's heiress (in monetary if not titular terms) and the lengthy imprisonment of the eleventh earl. Elizabeth's pursuit of her claim in particular through her second marriage and having been side-lined by her father after the death of her first husband led to the king's re-creation of her grandmother Joan Fitzgerald's ancestral earldom of Desmond. This was to compensate Elizabeth Butler for losing out on the Ormond title, but it also lent legitimacy to James's preferring her over the Catholic Walter, for Elizabeth. However, Walter's lengthy absence during the period 1619-28 had a significant and lasting negative impact on the state and management of the earldom. The prospect of female succession to the earldom in 1515 and 1614 resulted in serious tensions within the immediate and extended Butler family and heightened levels of instability within Ormond territories. But they were very different in terms of the mark each left on the family and their patrimony. Whereas the succession crisis in 1515 was followed by decades of stability, progress and prosperity in the earldom, by contrast, the 1614 crisis led to its temporary demise. However, over four decades later, in 1660, the Ormond dynasty reached its highest status since its creation in 1328, when James Butler and Elizabeth Preston became Ireland's first duke and duchess (see Fig.7.).

As has been highlighted, the bitter contest between Elizabeth and Walter Butler also impacted Walter's wife Ellen Butler, who supported both her husband and their large family, often

alone, in particular throughout his imprisonment. As a patient wife and countess, protective mother, and proactive negotiator and estate manager during her husband's absence, she demonstrated her independency aptitude and agency throughout her tenure as countess of Ormond.

The only one of these six women that Thomas, tenth earl of Ormond did not have a direct personal relationship with is his grand-daughter, Elizabeth Preston, who was born in 1615 one year after his death. By then, significant damage had already been done to the family and the stability of the earldom. But the fact that Thomas's heiress, Elizabeth Butler in turn had one female heir (Elizabeth Preston) meant that the succession crisis that followed his death had implications for the next two generations: the consideration undoubtedly lent added impetus to the king and others to support Elizabeth senior's claim. Within twelve years of Elizabeth Preston's marriage to her cousin James Butler, shortly after the death of both of her parents in 1628, the 1641 uprising and subsequent wars propelled her into the roles of Ormond agent and advocate and protector of Protestants targeted during the most politically divisive and turbulent periods in seventeenth-century Ireland.

When viewed in this context of the long-term history of the Ormond dynasty and the earldom, on the whole, these six Ormond women contributed to and enhanced the prosperity and stability of both, albeit to varying degrees and in different ways, as wives, mothers, advocates, intermediaries, managers of households and estates, protectors of family and dependents during periods of dynastic instability or politico-religious upheaval. But their mark on the family was not always positive. Elizabeth Berkeley's alleged extra-marital affairs threatened to disgrace the earl and his family. Furthermore, by virtue of their gender and through no fault of their own, Thomas's daughter and grand-daughters' assertion of their

claim as heiresses to the earldom resulted in instability and conflict within the Ormond family and the earldom that precipitated the demise of both for several decades after the death of Black Tom.

Conclusion

Countess Avice Stafford, with whom this thesis began, and Elizabeth Preston, duchess of Ormond with whom it ended, both contributed to the survival, perpetuation and prosperity of the dynasty. However, their lives and experiences as Ormond women were significantly different. Whereas Avice married once, had no children, and predeceased her husband, James Butler fifth earl, her status as an aristocratic and wealthy woman in medieval England was vitally important in elevating the earl's status and increasing his wealth, thereby facilitating the expansion and enhanced prosperity of the earldom of Ormond in England. Just over two-hundred years later, in Ireland, Elizabeth, duchess of Ormond, also married only once, had six children, was an effective advocate of her family, provider of protection and succour for several persecuted Protestant families, and was one of the most influential, wealthy and powerful women in mid-seventeenth-century Ireland. Through the prism of family, power, and politics, the lives of generations of Ormond women between their lifetimes (*c.*1450-*c.*1660) have been explored in this thesis, from the Wars of the Roses to the elevation of the earldom to a dukedom, the highest status of any aristocratic dynasty in Ireland. This study has traced the lives, roles and challenges experienced by six generations of women across three centuries of unprecedented social, religious and political changes in Ireland.

Between the 1450s and 1660 the Ormond women, like their male counterparts, featured centrally – albeit less visibly – in the aftermath of wars, succession crises, survival of the earldom, and internal family disputes. However, this was a period of highs and lows in the history of the dynasty, especially in 1515 and 1614 when protracted succession crises placed the chief female protagonists at the centre of the conflict. As has been highlighted, each crisis resulted in new and significant changes in the life of the dynasty itself. It is also true,

however, that in the ninety-nine years between the two crises, the earldom of Ormond experienced some of its longest phases of stability and prosperity. From the arrival of Margaret Fitzgerald through the tenure of her successor and daughter-in-law, Joan Fitzgerald, several successive Ormond women played important roles in the political affairs of their husbands' family, and, in the case of Joan, between the earldoms of Ormond, Ossory and Desmond. While their husbands and sons were undoubtedly the chief protagonists in the strife of the mid- and late sixteenth-century in Ireland, as wives, mothers and widows these women demonstrated their political agency and influence in various roles available to them, either through court representations or participation in peace negotiations, and several were accorded due recognition by successive monarchs for doing so. Like the 'Kildare women', several of the 'Ormond women' capitalised on the opportunities that came with their social position (especially once they married) in order to make significant contributions to the advancement of Ormond interests; some gained recognition as influential, and at times, powerful individuals in their own right.

Whereas studies of Ireland's experience of the aftermath of the Wars of the Roses, the Tudor Conquest, the centralisation of power to Dublin, the impact of the Stuart monarchy on Ireland and the 1641 rebellion have been well documented, little scholarly attention has been given to female experiences of these developments. This study has endeavoured to address this lacuna by exploring the lives of six generations of Ormond women, exploring how in turn they responded to these events. Despite the methodological challenges and the limited body of sources necessary for such a study, the thesis has attempted to present fresh insights into the multigenerational experiences of twenty-one women, including several who were based in England. In doing so, it has revealed what can be gleaned from extensive mining of surviving sources. By adopting the interpretative concepts of 'roles' and 'family', this study

has sought to make a contribution to the historiography of late medieval and early modern Ireland, not only through a multi-generational gendered study, but also through its examination of the importance of marriage, legitimacy, succession, female agency, and widowhood.

II

Family

The anomalies and contradictions experienced by aristocratic women within their private domestic lives has been explored throughout this study. Their demonstrated ability to challenge and manipulate the constraints imposed by the patriarchal order in which they lived and operated has been highlighted in their exercise of influence and at times power and authority to impact the actions and prospects of men in their immediate orbit. Evidence featured in this thesis bears out O'Dowd's assertion that sixteenth-century dynastic politics in Ireland were impossible without the co-operation of aristocratic women. This is best illustrated in the cases of Margaret Fitzgerald and by extension, her six daughters whose marriages were integral to the creation and maintenance of political allies before and after the Henrician policy of surrender and regrant in the 1540s. O'Dowd's contention that the 'regional power vested in the Tudor aristocracy compelled men to rely on their wives as partners in the enterprise of enhancing their families' social, economic and political status'¹ has also been borne out in the case of the Ormond women. The opportunities with which they were presented as daughters, wives, or widows frequently outweighed restrictions of gender or subjugation and afforded them opportunities for developing and expressing their individuality and identities as women with the ability to influence, represent, promote, inspire fear, disrupt, or mediate within their private and public spheres.

¹ O'Dowd, *A history of women in Ireland*, p. 272.

This thesis has also shown that as mothers, aristocratic women fulfilled multiple duties including ensuring their children's financial and educational security. This is, perhaps, best demonstrated by Margaret Butler, daughter of Countess Margaret Fitzgerald, who presented herself to Queen Elizabeth I after the murder of the father of two of her sons, and successfully procured the queen's provision of an education and landed estates for her sons. As mothers, Countess Elizabeth Sheffield, Ellen Butler, and Elizabeth Preston protected and provided for their respective families during the abduction, imprisonment and exile of their husbands, the tenth, eleventh and twelfth earls respectively. Furthermore, this study has highlighted the fact that it was not unusual for aristocratic men to be dependent to a significant degree on their mothers and wives. When Thomas Butler, tenth earl of Ormond lost his father, James Butler in 1546, his smooth succession depended upon his mother's ability to successfully protect and maintain his estates and patrimony for seven years until he came of age. That she did so very effectively was evident in the size and value of the earldom he inherited on his return to Ireland in 1554. Despite the ascent of the Boleyn family in the early 1500s, Margaret Butler Boleyn's son Thomas Boleyn – an ambitious and popular courtier – nonetheless relied heavily on his mother's wealth and status and the outcome of the first female succession crisis in 1515 from which he stood to gain in both wealth, status and title. Indeed, these were not the only men whose fortunes relied upon female relatives in the Ormond dynasty. The same was true for the eleventh and twelfth earls of Ormond who relied on their wives to protect their children. Walter Butler, eleventh earl, depended on his wife, Ellen, to rear his children in Ireland while he was imprisoned in England and later when she moved to London to be closer to her husband. Equally, his successor, James Butler twelfth earl, depended on his wife, Elizabeth Preston to protect and rear their children following her return to Kilkenny while he was forbidden to do so during his exile with King Charles I in the 1650s.

Within their individual nuclear families, the Ormond women represented the dynasty and played a vital role in perpetuating the succession, frequently protecting and promoting the interests of the future of the earldom through their advocacy on behalf of their husbands and sons. As mothers, Margaret Butler Boleyn, her sister Anne Butler St Leger, Countess Margaret Fitzgerald and successive countesses as mothers sought to promote and protect their children's interests, even if that necessitated personal visits to court as demonstrated by Margaret Fitzgerald, her daughter Margaret Butler, Countess Joan Fitzgerald in the mid-sixteenth century, and Elizabeth Preston countess and duchess of Ormond in the mid-seventeenth century.

The life cycle of these twenty-one aristocratic women resembled that of their contemporaries in Ireland, England and on the Continent. Once married, the majority of the Ormond women were propelled into the public arena as wife and countess, and secured their children's prosperity to the best of their ability. While Countess Anne Hankford, wife of Thomas Butler, seventh earl did not live to see her daughters struggle in the protracted conflict of the succession crisis in the years after their father's death in 1515, she nonetheless brought substantial wealth and estates into her marriage with the earl, which in turn subsequently became a significant part of her daughters' disputed inheritance. Her successor, Countess Margaret Fitzgerald, in her capacity as wife and mother, availed of every opportunity to advance her husband's claim to the earldom, even going so far as to seek proof of his eligibility and entitlement in his claim to the earldom. Moreover, by ensuring the future of the earldom was reinstated in tail male, she was looking to the future, to the inheritance of her son and heir, and her influence over her six daughters demonstrated her capacity as an authoritative and active mother, and mother-in-law, in her active perpetuation of the future of the earldom.

One of the most important themes in this thesis is marriage. It had the potential to provide the Ormond women with significant power in the first instance within the private realm of their households, and beyond this, in the public arena of the earldom and the wider political arena in Ireland and England. It also presented them with the opportunities to exercise influence and power in multiple roles and capacities as political agents, suitors, petitioners, and patrons. When this worked in their favour, re-marriage and widowhood accentuated these trends; for instance, when Joan Fitzgerald mediated between her third husband, Gerald Fitzgerald, fourteenth earl of Desmond and her son and heir, Thomas Butler, tenth earl of Ormond. So too Margaret Butler Boleyn, as a widow, and having outlived several of her children and grandchildren – including her granddaughter Queen Anne Boleyn – bequeathed substantial wealth and estates to her granddaughter, Mary Boleyn, having accumulated vast amounts of wealth and property throughout her long life.

Of all of the women in this study Countess Joan Fitzgerald best exemplifies the advantages and disadvantages of marriage for aristocratic women. Her first marriage facilitated her fulfilment of public and political obligations associated with her status as wife and widow of the ninth earl of Ormond and guardian of the heir to the earldom. Her second marriage provided her with even more wealth and greater access to the Tudor court, while her third and final marriage enabled her to carve her own public role and expand her authority as a peace keeper and successful negotiator between her husband and her son, and the Crown.

Following her second marriage in 1614 Elizabeth Butler and in turn her daughter, Elizabeth Preston, each responded and adapted to the changes that occurred during the early decades of the seventeenth century. This involved adapting to the changing political dynamics under the new Stuart monarchy, increasing religious tension in Ireland, decreasing powers of dynastic lordships, and changing roles and opportunities for women. The impact of adapting to the

religious, ethnic and social changes on female identity was borne out by the examination of the experiences of the Ormond women in the final chapter of this thesis. Interestingly, they remained politically active at a time when women holding public positions grew increasingly inopportune.

Roles

This thesis has shown how the lifecycle of the Ormond women was punctuated with multiple roles from childhood through to widowhood. Several of these women outlived their husbands and during their widowhood, some continued to amass wealth, status and authority. Once married, the wife and countess was positioned at the front line of the dynasty alongside her husband; her role was extended if and when she became a mother. Within the family, it has been shown that women exerted considerable influence on their husbands and their children as matriarchs, and as protectors of under-aged heirs. Outside the private family environment, some of the Ormond women exerted authority over tenants and as has been shown in the case of Katherine Butler in her role as widow of Richard Power and mother of Piers Power, the authority exerted by some women was at times unpopular, provocative and troublesome.

Like all of their peers, the Ormond women were expected to live their lives in compliance with social conventions associated with their class. However, in spite of this, individuals like Margaret Fitzgerald rejected the customary pattern of supporting one's natal family following the breakdown of relations between her brother, herself and her husband. Instead, she chose to fully support her husband's family and the future of the Ormond patrimony. The actions of several of the Ormond women have shown how instrumental individual women were in redefining domestic, social, economic and political roles and, how these evolved over

successive generations. Moreover, this study has highlighted how the activities of individual women were driven by political as well as familial agendas.

As wives, mothers and widows they had many servants and led privileged lives in comfortable and sumptuous surroundings in a society ‘that regarded gentility and nobility as inherent qualities’.² This study has highlighted how their roles as wives and daughters conferred social and political significance on them. As O’Dowd has emphasised, ‘any consideration of historical change must be formulated within the context of real women’s lives and circumstances’³: this thesis has sought to adopt that approach.

As was common among their English and continental peers, several of the women featured in this thesis represented their husbands, their sons and their own interests as and when they deemed fit, and presented themselves to the relevant council, in Dublin, Waterford, London and at court. This bears out the important roles of agency and advocacy assumed by women as wives in the perpetuation of their families and their own interests.

As heiresses, the Ormond women in 1515 and 1614, exemplified the challenges aristocratic women could encounter through inheritance disputes and bitter family feuds. This study has highlighted how in each case, despite differences in the origins and outcomes of each protracted crisis, the central female protagonists were equally determined in their pursuit of their claims, and far from defenceless or passive individuals when faced with intense pressure from usurpers, cousins, fathers, and even the Crown.

² Harris, *English aristocratic women*, p. 243.

³ O’Dowd, *A history of women in Ireland*, p. 271.

Less than half of the Ormond women featured in this thesis experienced widowhood. Among those who did, many re-married including Eleanor Beaufort, wife and countess of James Butler fifth earl, and Joan Fitzgerald who was twice widowed. Five of Countess Margaret Fitzgerald's daughters became widows with some also re-marrying. As widows, these women made vital contributions to the prosperity and stability of their families. Their roles as estate managers, chatelaines – and for some as mothers of young children – expanded as they were required to draw upon the legal knowledge, business skills, and management of households, servants and vast amounts of real and moveable property, for the efficient running of the patrimony, including when the heir was underage. Countess Margaret Fitzgerald and her daughter-in-law, Countess Joan Fitzgerald, performed these duties as widows in the years following their husband's deaths and as has been shown, each received recognition both positive and negative during their tenure as dowager countesses. In her capacity as widow of Black Tom, tenth earl of Ormond, Countess Helen Barry successfully negotiated and secured the guardianship and protection of her nephew, David Barry, as a young heir following the death of his father (her brother) and was instrumental in ensuring his prosperous future.

III

It is encouraging that the wider study of social history across the last three decades has questioned and explored perceived attitudes to the position of women in history, and in doing so, highlighting how women operated within the formal structures that governed late medieval and early modern Ireland, as well as exploring what they could and did achieve. The surge of recent and ongoing research into various aspects of women's lives in this period comes not only in response to long encouraged research by established academics in this field but also due to a wider interest in reaching a more complete and deeper understanding of the

historical record that is only possible through a rounded and thorough analysis of all parties concerned.⁴ Until recently, the absence of the female voice and experience resulted in an imbalanced rendition of the past. This thesis has endeavoured to give voice to those individuals who have been silent in the record for too long and to explore in greater detail the lives of those who have some footprint in existing historiography, demonstrating their integral importance in shaping the fortunes of the Ormond dynasty as it made the transition from the medieval to the early modern era.

⁴ *The letters of the first duchess of Ormonde*, ed. Naomi McAreavy (forthcoming, English Renaissance Text Society).

Appendix

The Ormond women c.1450s–1660

Wives of James Butler fifth earl

- **Countess Avice Stafford (d.1457)**
- **Countess Eleanor Beaufort (d.1501)**

Mistress of James Butler sixth earl

- **Renalda Ní Bhriain (d.1510)**

Wives of Thomas Butler seventh earl

- **Countess Anne Hankeford (d.1485)**
- **Countess Lora Berkeley (d.1501)**

Daughters of Thomas Butler seventh earl

- **Margaret Butler Boleyn (d.1540)**
- **Anne Butler St. Leger (d.1532)**

Wife of Piers Butler eighth earl

- **Countess Margaret Fitzgerald (d.1542)**

Daughters of Piers Butler

- **Margaret Butler (fl.1530s)**
- **Katherine Butler (d.1552)**
- **Ellen Butler (d.1597)**

- **Butler Ellice Butler (d.1546)**

- **Eleanor Butler (fl.1550s)**

- **Joan Butler (b.1528)**

Wife of James Butler ninth earl

- **Countess Joan Fitzgerald (d.1565)**

Wives of Thomas Butler tenth earl

- **Countess Elizabeth Berkeley (d.1582)**

- **Countess Elizabeth Sheffield (d.1600)**

- **Countess Helen Barry (d.1642)**

Daughter of Thomas Butler tenth earl

- **Elizabeth Butler (d.1628)**

Wife of Walter Butler eleventh earl

- **Countess Ellen Butler (d.1631)**

Wife of James Butler twelfth earl and first duke

- **Countess Elizabeth Preston (first duchess of Ormond) (d.1684)**

Fig. 1. The Ormond women, c.1450s-1660.



Fig. 2. Tomb of Piers Butler, eighth earl of Ormond (d.1539) and his wife, Countess Margaret Fitzgerald (d.1542), St Canice's Cathedral, Kilkenny.

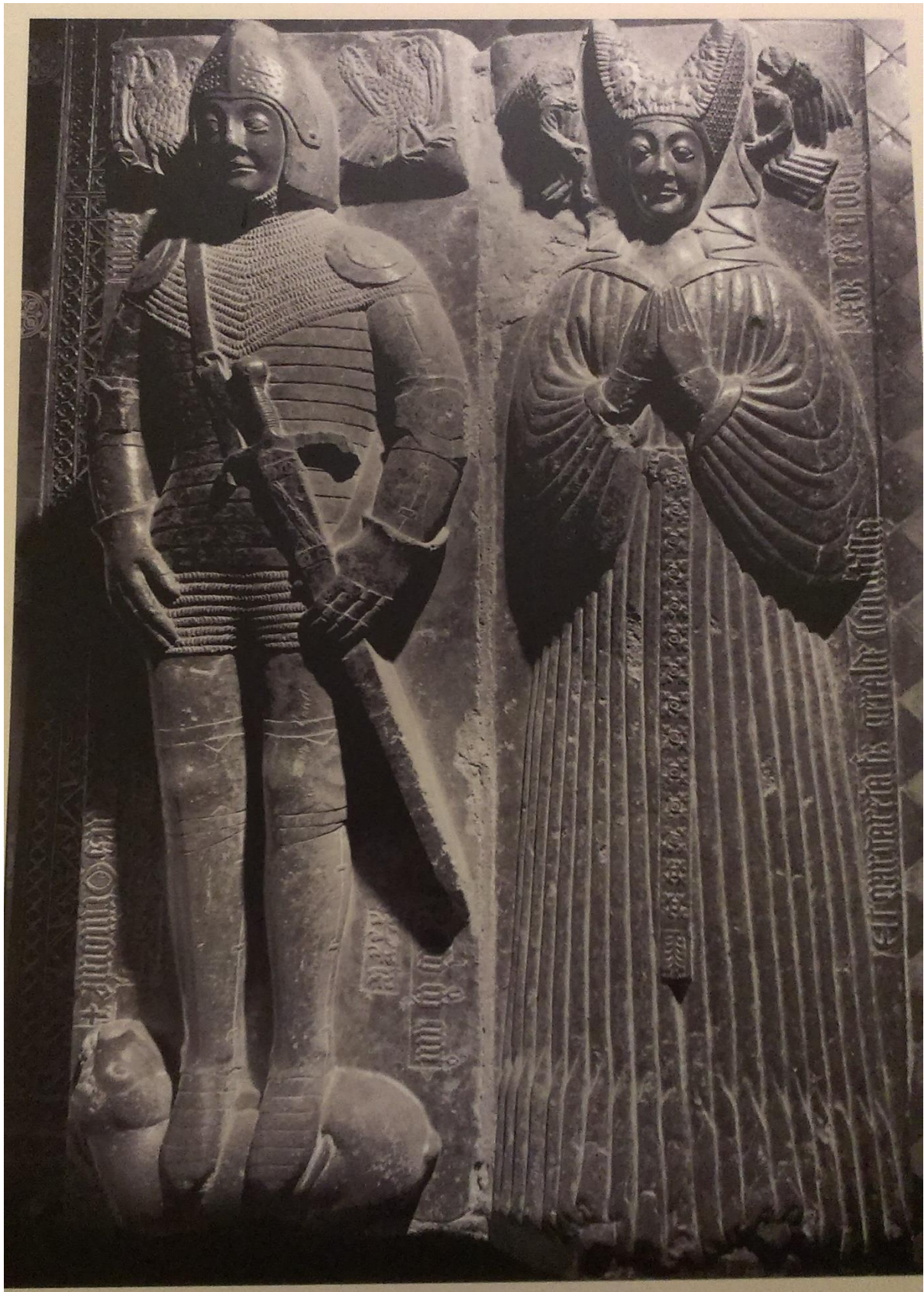


Fig. 3. Tomb of Piers Butler, eighth earl of Ormond and his wife, Countess Margaret Fitzgerald, St. Canice's Cathedral, Kilkenny.



Fig. 4.

Headpiece of Countess Margaret Fitzgerald's tomb, St Canice's Cathedral, Kilkenny.

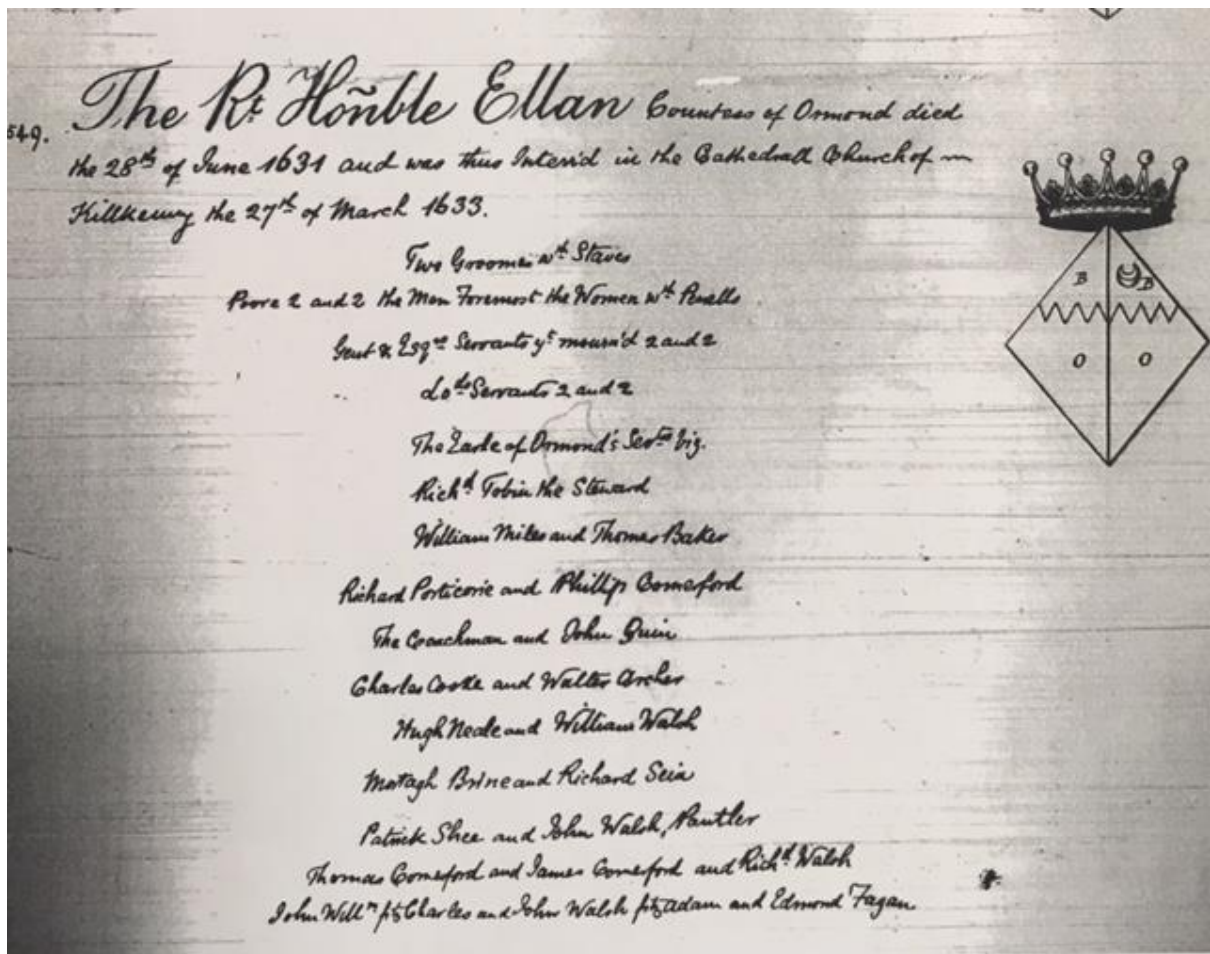


Fig. 5. Funeral entry of Ellen Butler Countess of Ormond (d.1633) from Genealogical Office, National Library of Ireland, GO MS. 79.

Mr. John Russell and Mr. Richard Fitz Thomas
 Mr. Thomas Hayes and Mr. John Butler Fitz Edward
 Mr. James Fennell and Mr. William Morgan
 Mr. Edward Pierce and Mr. Thomas Moxey
 Stewart and Mr. Edward Cornysford Comptrol^r of the
 Great Chamber by Mr. John Fitz Thomas and Mr. Rich^d Fitz Thomas
 Mr. Edward Butler of Pierce and Mr. Richard Butler of Killemore
 Mr. Butler of Palester and Mr. Butler of Mayallie
 Mr. Tobias Butler and Mr. James Fitz Edward of Ardenny
 Mr. Edward Butler Fitz James and Mr. Rivers Butler son of Edm^d
 - Mr. Thomas Coker and Mr. Robert Shee
 Mr. Butler of Mordlers and Mr. Mathew
 Mr. Nicholas Reynold and Mr. Pierce Power
 Mr. G. West Fitz Edward and Mr. Theobald Fitz Edward
 Mr. Pierce Butler Fitz Robert and Mr. James of Derrinstown
 Mr. Parrell of Longme and Mr. Pierce Power
 Mr. James Butler of Grantstown
 All these Pursuivant of Armes
 Walter King of Armes isth a God Waker on his left hand
 Mr. James Butler
Comptrol^r of the
Deft
 Mr. James Butler
of
Palester
 Mr. Edward Butler
of
Mordlers
 S^r George Hamilton
of
Palester
 S^r of Donnyne
of
Palester
 S^r Edward Butler
Comptrol^r of Armes
 Mr. Fitz Patrick
Dean of Upper Cassey
 Fitz Patrick
on her right hand
 The Count^{ess} Dow^{er} of Ormond Chief Mourner
 her Cousin born by Mr. John Butler of Upper Ormond
 The Lady of Skerin and The Old Lady of Thunders
 The Young Lady of Thunders and The Lady Featherin
 The Lady Ellen and The Lady Grace
 The Lady Mary and The Lady Elizabeth
 The Lady Eleanor and The Lady of Upper Cassey
 Mr. Adams and Mr. Grayne
 Lady Dow^{er} of the Old Abby and Lady Downings Dow^{er}
 The Lady Ann Dow^{er} in Law
 Two Brides beheaded at St. Stines
 The Countess Dow^{er} of Southwester and the Deft
 Lady Thelma Southwester
 other Ladies Southwester

Fig. 5.1. Funeral entry of Ellen Butler Countess of Ormond (d.1633) from Genealogical Office, National Library of Ireland, GO MS. 79.



Fig. 6. Funeral entry of Elizabeth Sheffield Countess of Ormond (d.1600) from Genealogical Office, National Library of Ireland, GO MS. 65.

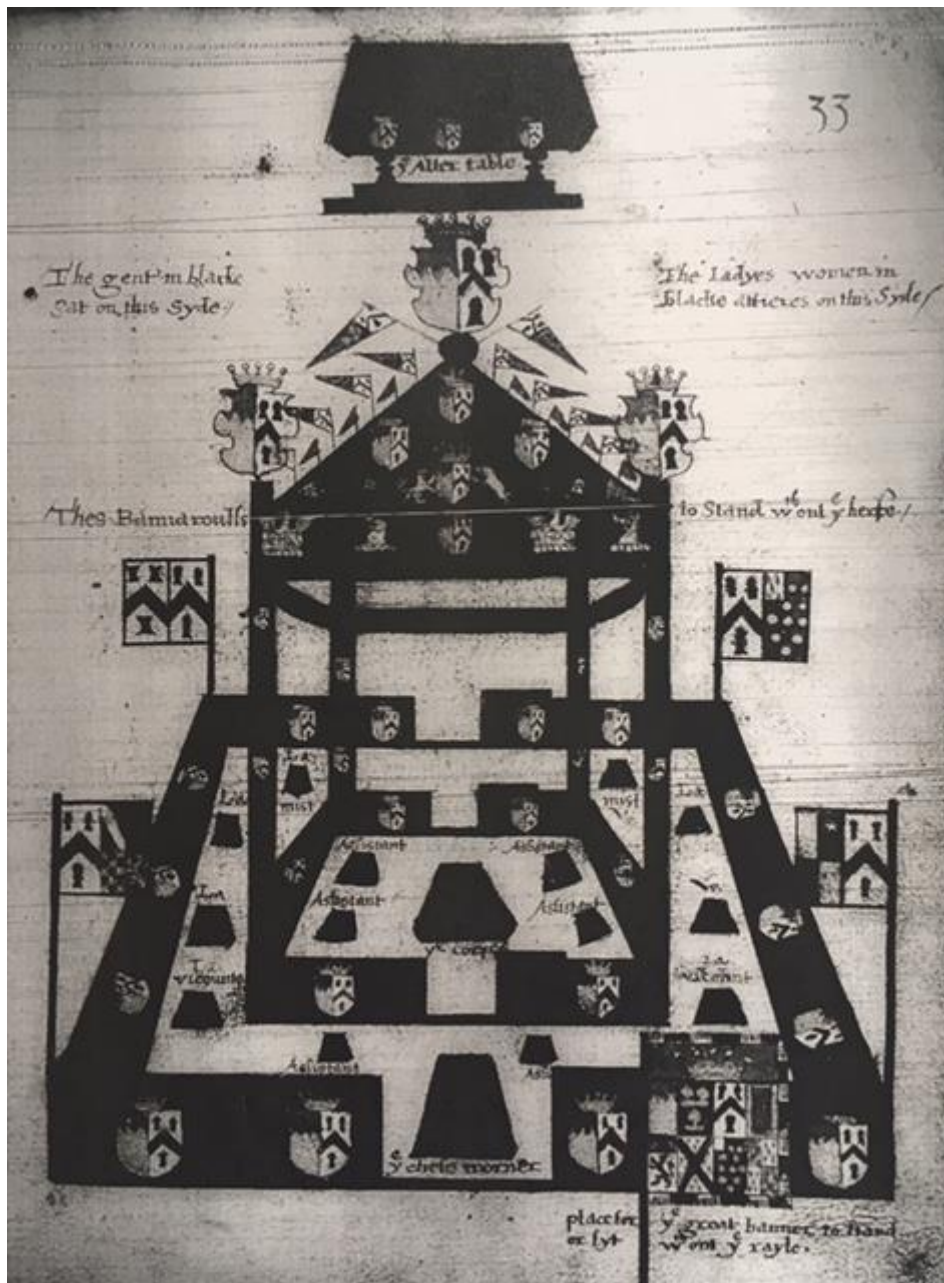


Fig. 6.1. Details of Elizabeth Sheffield, countess of Ormond's funeral, including corpse and chief mourners, from Genealogical Office, National Library of Ireland, GO MS. 65.

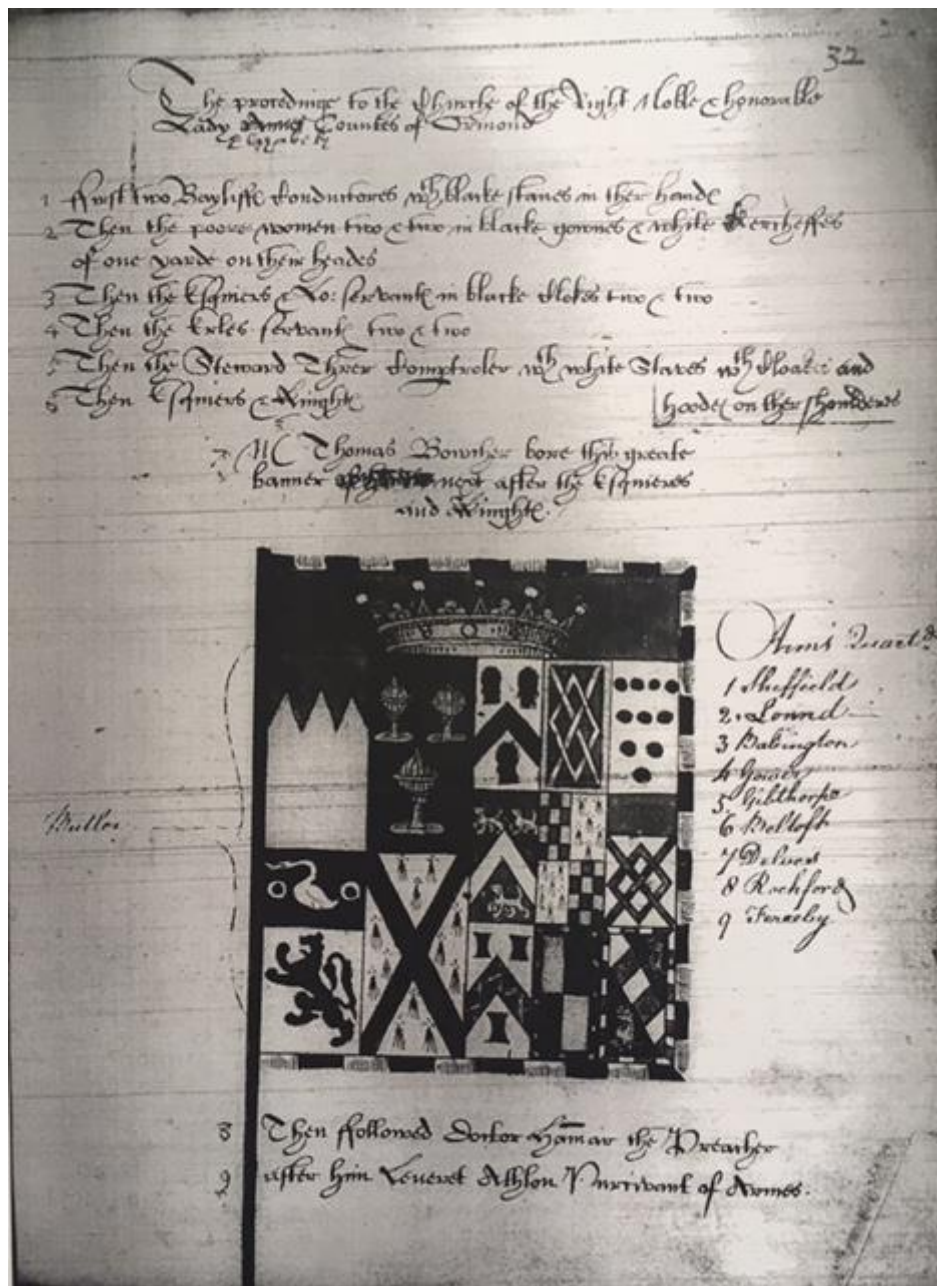


Fig. 6.2. Details of the proceedings of the funeral of Elizabeth Sheffield, countess of Ormond, from Genealogical Office, National Library of Ireland, GO MS. 65.

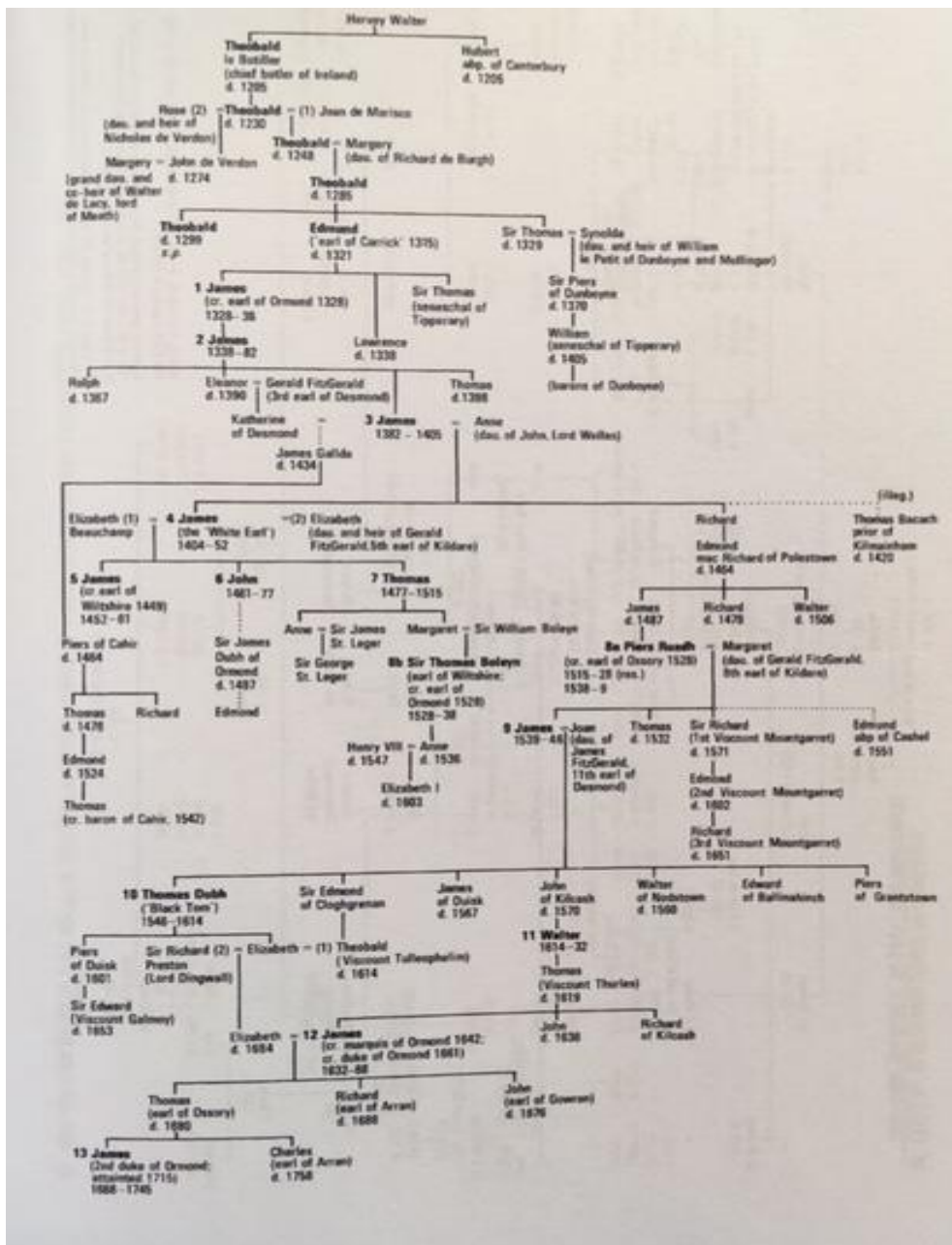


Fig. 7. Earls and dukes of Ormond including several countesses of Ormond, 1328-1745 (from T.W. Moody, F.X. Martin and F.J Byrne (eds), *A new history of Ireland vol ix, Maps, genealogies lists, A companion to Irish history part II* (9 vols, Oxford, 1989), p. 169.

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BCM/H/1 – The Butler Inheritance

BCM/H – The Hankford inheritance

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