WOMEN, MARRIAGE AND SURVIVAL IN EARLY MODERN ENGLAND

THE HASTINGS, EARLS AND COUNTESES OF HUNTINGDON, 1620 TO 1690

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract ................................................................. i

Declaration ............................................................... iii.

Acknowledgements .................................................... iv

List of abbreviations ................................................... v

Chronology of events ................................................... ix

Family Tree ............................................................. xix

Chapter 1  
Introduction ........................................................... 1

Chapter 2  
The child marriage: Lucy Davies and Lord Hastings, 1623-1627  19

Chapter 3  
Marriage and the Impact of the Civil War, 1628-1656  57

Chapter 4  
Lucy’s Widowhood and the estate, 1656-1671  98

Chapter 5  
The earl’s match: Elizabeth Lewys and Theophilus, 1672-1673  142

Chapter 6  
Marriage and the sisters, 1660-1681  185

Chapter 7  
Marriage and revolution, 1674-1688  228
Epilogue

Chapter 8  
Conclusion ............................................................. 278

Bibliography ............................................................ 282
ABSTRACT

In the seventeenth-century aristocratic families faced a variety of national, local and personal crises that threatened their survival. In dealing with and recovering from these crises, both men and women played important roles. This thesis examines the role that women played in the survival of their families through their experience of marriage.

For aristocratic women in the early modern period marriage was the focal point of their lives. Marriage was not only the only career open to aristocratic women but it was also the major way by which aristocratic families obtained wealth, influence, political power, important connections and the continuation of the family name and title. Aristocratic women were defined by their relationships because they could not hold political office or have careers independently of their families. For many, if not for most women, their most important relationships were created by marriage and their experiences were filtered through it. How their marriage was made, how it was worked out and what its circumstances were, all dictated how much influence they would have and how they would exert it. Their roles in the survival or failure of their families were coloured by the relationships created by their marriages and the types of marriages they experienced.

This thesis uses the Hastings family, Earls and Countesses of Huntingdon as a case study to explore these themes. It examines the way in which women in the Hastings family experienced marriage during the period 1620 to 1690 and how these experiences affected the family’s welfare. The seventeenth-century is a particularly
pertinent time to examine how aristocratic families survived as it was a time when civil war and social and economic upheaval intensified the problems of many of these families. Indeed, during this period the Hastings family faced ruin. While the family's changes of fortune made the period 1620 to 1690 a particularly interesting one on which to focus, it was also during this time that the family contained and was connected to a significant number of influential women. The entrance of women such as Elizabeth Stanley, Lucy Davies and Elizabeth Lewys into the family, and, significantly, the presence of their daughters, mothers and sisters enables the examination of a network of women to see how they worked within the family for its benefit or otherwise. An examination of women's experiences of marriage reveals the inner workings of this family and its relationships with the outside world, while also highlighting the way in which families survived.