DISCUSSION OF EARLY modern aristocratic women in Scotland is commonly restricted to marriage alliances, the production of heirs (preferably male) and, occasionally, matters of religion. Although these roles are in themselves important and certainly had political repercussions, Jacobean aristocratic women also had the opportunity, if they so wished, to play a more active role within national or local politics. However, the paucity of information on aristocratic women in standard secondary texts could lead to the impression that if they did indeed have such a role, it was certainly very circumscribed. Nor is it unusual for aristocratic women to be discussed merely as extensions of their spouses. Naturally, whilst furthering their husbands' interests, they were also looking to their own welfare as well as that of their children. They also paid close attention to the interests of their own kin networks, for Scotland's co-agnatic society meant that a woman's family influence was just as important as that of her husband's. Indeed, this played a key role in determining many marriage alliances. Aristocratic women were not eclipsed by their husbands' kin, for they could and did act in their own right. Status and position within the court could easily derive from these women and may have been the primary means through which family interests were protected. The subjects of this chapter exemplify all or some of these traits: Jean (or Janet) Scott, lady Ferniehirst, Elizabeth Stewart, countess of Arran and Henrietta Stewart, countess and first marchioness of Huntly.¹

Primary material indicates that although aristocratic women rarely came to the forefront of politics they could nevertheless exercise considerable influence. Those active in politics usually worked behind the scenes, perhaps utilising the opportunities presented at court or overseeing the affairs of the locality during the absences of their husbands. Lady Ferniehirst and the Countesses of Arran and Huntly were all politically active, influencing the course of national politics. Certainly, both Lady Ferniehirst and the Countess of Huntly approached politics in a fairly traditional way by taking advantage of their position to enhance or create networks, as well as working in the background. Perhaps it was because they did not challenge the natural order of politics that they were
so successful in achieving their objectives, whereas the Countess of Arran attempted to navigate uncharted territory and encountered considerable opposition. Her political dominance in national government even threatened the male hierarchy and although she probably achieved her political zenith in 1584–5, her fall was swift and complete.

Perhaps one of the most traditional roles adopted by aristocratic women was supervising the affairs of the estates in the absence of their husbands. Both the Countess of Huntly and Lady Ferniehirst were well practised in this role. For instance, Sir Thomas Ker of Ferniehirst’s open espousal of Catholicism had resulted in periodic banishments from the realm. In April 1581, he received licence to return to Scotland after banishment for his role in the murder of Mary, Queen of Scots’ second husband, Lord Darnley. His recall and pardon were procured by Esmé Stewart, duke of Lennox, whose subsequent fall from grace put Ferniehirst into exile again until the autumn of 1583. Whilst he was abroad Ferniehirst’s estates and personal interests were overseen by his wife, Jean Scott. In May 1583, she wrote to Thomas Blair, desiring him to sign and ratify an act of pacification at her lawyers’ request. She signed her letter, ‘your assured frend at pauar’, a term infrequently used by women, but Lady Ferniehirst was then factor for her husband and had full power of attorney during his absence. The endorsement on the letter indicates that the act of pacification referred to Ferniehirst, rather than Jean Scott. After her husband’s return she still took action regarding his affairs, for in October 1584 Sir Cuthbert Collingwood of Eslington in Northumberland wrote to remind her of an overdue debt for £30 sterling. This had been lent to her husband and she had promised to repay it at Michaelmas. This seems to indicate that she had a recognised role concerning her husband’s financial affairs.

On 1 September 1583, Lady Ferniehirst wrote to her husband from Falkland Palace, having been at court for a month petitioning King James VI to allow the laird to return home. Her persistence with the aid of the Earl of Huntly, finally paid off as she obtained the king’s letters granting Ferniehirst leave to return. She instructed him not to come home with Ludovic Stewart, second duke of Lennox, but to arrive in the north, where he was to stay with Huntly until his affairs were sorted out. She also sternly admonished him that he was ‘mekill bund to that gentil man for his gud offyces and contenuall payne and travel he taks for you at all tymes, quhairoff I think ye will neid be . . . myndfull’. Her familiarity with court politics and the contacts that she made certainly facilitated her husband’s later integration into the Arran government.

Lady Ferniehirst’s sojourn at court was far from atypical. Records are replete with references to aristocratic women attending court in order to elicit favours for others and to tend to their own affairs. These women
appear to have been adept at developing or using court networks and manipulating the system. This facilitated their access to those in different levels of government and thus enabled them to advance their causes. For example, the Countess of Huntly, daughter of the first duke of Lennox, enjoyed the protection of James VI and interceded on behalf of Lord Maxwell in June 1588. By May 1589 she was at court making suit for her husband following the discovery of his secret correspondence with Spain and his treasonable raising of troops against the king at Brig O’Dee. Following the discovery of the infamous Spanish Blanks in 1592, that involved her husband and others, the countess journeyed to Aberdeen in order to obtain the king’s grant for their houses and rents. She continued to plead for her husband throughout the 1590s, which will be discussed below.

Outwith court intrigues Jean Scott had an interesting role in covert Marian politics. She was a regular correspondent with the exiled Mary, Queen of Scots and in the early 1580s appears to have acted as an intermediary between King James VI and his mother. James’s correspondence with this deposed Catholic queen filled the English with trepidation, but spurred on both Scottish and European Counter-Reformers. It fuelled their hopes for his eventual conversion to Catholicism and subsequent promotion of the Counter-Reformation in Britain. Just as importantly, Lady Ferniehirst was also a means for other Scottish nobles to contact Mary. Her exchange of correspondence, particularly with the younger nobility, contributed greatly to keeping the Marian interest alive in Scotland. The young earl of Huntly is but one example of this. In a lengthy letter of 22 October 1583, Lady Ferniehirst forwarded letters from Lord Seton and introduced Huntly to Mary, informing her that he was ‘very desirous to hear from your majesty ... and to command him with anything he is able to do for the advancement of your majesty’s service’. Following on from this, in February 1584, she gave refuge to four or five English Catholics, who intended to shelter in the north with Huntly, ‘to whom ... they were commended by’ Queen Mary. The role of Lord Seton has often been recognised as vital in maintaining Scottish contact with Queen Mary and for receiving mission priests and Catholic refugees. The role of Lady Ferniehirst, however, in covert Marian politics during the early 1580s has been overlooked, yet it was equally important and revealing.

A less discreet approach to politics was adopted by Elizabeth Stewart, countess of Arran, formerly countess of March and lady Lovat, and eldest daughter of the Earl of Atholl. Whilst still Countess of March, she became pregnant with Arran’s child and very publicly had her marriage to her elderly second husband annulled on grounds of his impotency or, according to Moysie, ‘because his instrument was not guid’. She then
married the politically aspiring James Stewart, earl of Arran on 6 July 1581 which latterly earned her the epithet ‘Lady Jezebel’. Their first child was born on 8 January 1582 and the couple were compelled to do ‘ecclesiastical penance for the irregularity, much against her will’. The earl of Arran’s political ascendancy followed the collapse of the anglophile Ruthven Regime in June 1583, causing, according to one chronicler, many noblemen to leave either the country or the court. This was ‘to the gret contentment of the Erle of Arran and his wyf, to gyd all ther allane’, while another stated that ‘nothing was done in courte but by him and his ladey’.

Although written some years later, these quotes encapsulate the relationship between the countess and her husband working together as a political team. Although this was not a unique arrangement if one draws a parallel with the Drummonds during the reign of David II, their partnership and the Countess’s prominent and decidedly non-traditional role in Scottish national politics between 1583 and 1585 earned her opprobrium from across the political spectrum. However, it may well have been the special circumstances at court in the 1580s that accentuated Elizabeth Stewart’s role. Until Arran’s government, there had been neither a queen consort, queen dowager, nor wife of a regent at court. The dexterity with which the countess filled this vacuum made her all the more conspicuous and perhaps prey to greater criticism. Additionally, in what could be perceived as an insult to her husband, she was suspected by the English politician, Walsingham, of being the brains behind the Arran administration. Indeed, since Arran was elevated to the peerage only three months before his marriage to Elizabeth Stewart, she may have been vital to Arran securing his place at court.

Elizabeth Stewart’s greatest enemy may well have been her own forwardness, for in November 1583, when a brawl broke out between the earl of Bothwell and Lord Hume, the countess encouraged the king ‘to strike off’ Bothwell’s head! It is questionable if such an impetuous comment would have been taken lightly when placed within the context of her husband’s partial responsibility for the executions of the earl of Morton, for complicity in the murder of Lord Darnley (1581), and of the earl of Gowrie, for involvement in the unsuccessful coup attempt in 1584. Concerning Gowrie, it was reported that she had consulted ‘Highland oracles’ who informed her that Gowrie would fall; she then merely ‘helpit fordwart that prophesie the best sche culd’. If she did further Gowrie’s demise, it would not have been out of character, as the lands of Gowrie and his wife (Dorothy Stewart) were subsequently acquired by her husband and herself.

This was the first association of the countess with supernatural powers, which were subsequently pursued by her critics. In April 1584 a man from Atholl affirmed that ‘he heard a witch say that the Ladie Arran had used
witchecraft against him, and if he provided not for contrare venome, it would come to his destruction'. The proclamation of the Lords at Stirling on 22 April 1584 referred to her as 'depending on the response of witches and enemie to all human society'. Again, in 1585, she was described as a 'lascious viccked woman, and one blundered of witchcrafte'. The link between descriptions of Elizabeth Stewart as a witch and her unconventional political role does not seem merely coincidental. Sources such as Calderwood were writing in a period when witchcraft was an issue. Her unpopularity can be partially attributed to her avaricious nature as she reputedly plundered Mary's jewels and clothing. More invidious, in the eyes of her contemporaries, was her great influence once Arran became chancellor in 1584. Nor is it coincidental that her name was consistently linked with her husband's concerning both policy and finance throughout his chancellorship from May 1584 to November 1585. During this time Arran's political enemies tried jointly to indict him and his wife. One 1584 excerpt reads:

The effaires and state of the realme is by them misgoverned and abused; the prooфе wherof plainlie appears by that libertie and commandement which that pestilent persoun, and his divelish wife, have usurped in Secret Counsell and Sessioun, wherein by their minacings and boastings, they preceeselie commanded suche as are of the lower and meaner ranke, and by their vitious and outrageous language overhailed suche of the nobilitie, and others of greater authoritie, that would not consent to their affections.

In August 1584 the English ambassador wrote that nothing could be done in the Privy Council 'without the privitie of my Lady'.

By February 1585 it was rumoured that the countess of Arran was made 'Lady Comtroller', and was supposedly not averse to raising funds for the treasury (or herself) when administering justice. According to Calderwood, in the justice courts the poor were 'sold and ransomed at the hundreth punds the score', without regard to guilt or innocence. Lady Arran, sitting in judgement, 'caused sindry to be hanged that wanted their compositions, saying What had they beene doing all their dayes, that had not so much as five punds to buy them from the gallows?' Additionally, the pursuit of justice had to be purchased, 'the impudent Arran ladie hath found out for shamelesse scafferie, in taking angels, crownes, and ... thrittie shilling peeces, to be soliciter for calling of bills'. She was also accused of appointing Catholic judges, supposedly to the detriment of Protestants.

There seem to be no obvious parallels with the consistent descriptions of the countess's role in government. No other minority government in early modern Scotland mentions involvement of a regent's or chancellor's
wife in national affairs to a similar degree. Although she does not appear in records listing her formally as comptroller, neither can she be traced as presiding over any justice courts. This does not necessarily negate the fact that she did exert real influence and control in these capacities. Her gender certainly precluded her from official recognition in the records, though her presence or control may have been taken as given. Such pervasive malignment in primary texts could not have been baseless. This can only lead to the conclusion that the countess did indeed play a prominent political role. This aberration was bitterly resisted, provoking accusations of witchcraft and descriptions of her as ‘a monster of nature’. Just as John Knox referred to the rule of female monarchs as ‘the monstrous regiment of women’, so was it considered equally unnatural for an aristocratic woman to dominate what was considered an almost exclusively male sphere of influence.

The third ‘politicking woman’ is Henrietta Stewart, countess of Huntly. She did not aspire to pulling the strings of government, yet her political influence operated through her close relationships with both King James VI and Queen Anna. This was revealing and perhaps much more effective than the countess of Arran’s approach. Henrietta’s kinship to the king furthered her interests as he referred to her as ‘his daughter, and beloved of his blud’. The countess began to attend Queen Anna in December 1590 and their ensuing friendship was another significant factor in her success in influencing royal decisions and in further insulating herself and her husband from many of the kirk’s demands.

Ministers complained about her Catholicism in November 1596, but the king reminded them that ‘the kirk had the wyte [blame], that dealt not with her’. Raised in France, Henrietta arrived in Scotland to marry George Gordon, sixth earl of Huntly in 1588. This was a marriage strongly encouraged by both Queen Mary in 1584 and King James himself, who paid 5,000 merks for their marital celebrations. The king granted Huntly the commendatorship of Dunfermline to be used as her tocher. These lands were later surrendered to Queen Anna, upon reversion to the countess when the queen died. Her residence in Dunfermline was pivotal in providing easy access to the court when it was in Edinburgh or Falkland and it was used extensively by the couple until 1590. Like Lady Ferniehirst, she paid careful attention to her locality by receiving the king’s gift to appoint a sheriff of Aberdeen in 1597 or through settling a dispute between John Ross and Grant of Freuchy in 1610. Her main strengths, however, lay at court.

The countess was described as ‘a vertuous wyff and prudent lady; who providentlie governed her husband’s affairs, and carefullie solicited his business at home dureing his banishment from Scotland’ after 1594. She furthered their affairs through her close attendance upon the queen.
As early as 1590, the English ambassador speculated that ‘it is thought that under the shadowe of her abode about the Quene that her husband shall gitt longer tyme to abide here and in courte’. It is significant that during any period of crisis or when the favour of the king or queen was needed, the countess was invariably at court. In conjunction with courtiers who promoted their interests, such as Sir Patrick Murray, Lord Hume, the master of Glamis and Lord Spynie, she was usually successful in achieving her objectives. Huntly’s autonomy in the North East, especially during his feud with James Stewart, earl of Moray, and the protection of his political interests depended largely on the nexus of power he had carefully built up within the king’s bedchamber. This was mirrored by his countess’s power base within the queen’s bedchamber for in 1590 she even persuaded the king to suspend for fifteen days Huntly’s bond of £20,000 for keeping the peace with Moray, who did not receive a like suspension and complained of partiality. Likewise, from 1592 when the Spanish Blanks were found until Huntly defeated Argyll at the Battle of Glenlivet in 1594, the countess was conspicuously present in court. Intermittent residence in court provided the perfect opportunity for friends and servants of her husband, who conveniently attended upon her, to pursue their petitions on the earl’s behalf. For example, Huntly’s personal servitor, Alexander Duff, and the Laird of Pitlurg accompanied her to court in 1592 in order to petition the king and Council to intercede with the kirk regarding Huntly’s repentance for murdering Moray. Perhaps more importantly, she also provided a line of communication between the king and her husband during 1592-94. It was frequently suggested that James or Anna deliberately summoned her to court in order to find out what Huntly’s position was. Thus, while James publicly refused to read Huntly’s letters, mostly for the benefit of the kirk and Elizabeth I, he was still intimately acquainted with the position of this errant earl.

The vital connection, however, seems to have been between the countess and Anna of Denmark, who exerted considerable influence on national politics in her own right. Ministers of the kirk and Anglophiles incessantly petitioned for her removal from the queen’s court, fearing ‘no good fruit in religion coming by her company to the Queen’. Their fears may well have been justified for one Jesuit credited the countess of Huntly with introducing the queen to Catholicism. Despite these numerous petitions, the queen refused to remove her and showed increasing signs of favour towards the countess. In April 1594 it was remarked that when the countess left court, ‘her rewards in the Queen’s chamber were liberal and far exceeding the common order and proportion used here’. She attended the queen at the birth of Princess Elizabeth in 1596 and was named her godmother. In response to the howls of
protest from the kirk, James replied that she ‘was a good discreet ladie, worthie of his affection’.\textsuperscript{36} In 1599 the Earl of Huntly was elevated to a marquisate and one year later they both played a prominent role in the baptism of Prince Charles. It was reported that the Marchioness, instead of the nurse, held the baby for the duration of the sermon.\textsuperscript{37} This may have been due to her position as the closest female relative to the young prince, but her relationship with his royal parents cannot be entirely discounted.

Early modern aristocratic women not only could but did play pivotal roles in Scottish politics. They were by no means, with the exception of Lady Arran, atypical of élite women of their era. High-ranking women could wield political power through a variety of means, ranging from maintaining a high profile at court to manoeuvring in the murky arena of covert politicking. Although the countess of Huntly and Lady Ferniehirst exercised considerable political influence, the former through the court and the latter through the cultivation of connections with the exiled Queen Mary, they have gone largely unnoticed by political historians. Perhaps this is because of the nature of their roles and the discreet means through which they effected their objectives, yet the quasi-official and highly contentious position of the Countess of Arran has similarly passed without notice. Aristocratic women constitute a vital part of the early modern political record and though the evidence is not as abundant as for their male counterparts, it nonetheless exists. It may well be that historians are simply not accustomed to looking for female influence; this provides exciting opportunities for future research.

\textbf{NOTES}

1. See also the portrait of Dame Jean and the illustration of Henrietta Stewart in this volume.
4. SRO, GD40/2/i/x/71.
5. SRO, GD40/2/i/x/68.

7. The Historie and Life of King James the Sext, ed. T. Thomson (Bannatyne Club, 1825), 268; Sir Robert Gordon of Gordonstoun, A Genealogical History of the Earldom of Sutherland, From its Origins to the Year 1630; With a Continuation to the Year 1651 (Edinburgh, 1813), 221; CSP Scot, xi, 72; Calderwood, History, v, 238. See T. G. Law, ‘The Spanish Blanks and the Catholic Earls, 1592–4’, in P. Hume Brown ed. Collected Essays and Reviews of Thomas Graves Law, LL.D (Edinburgh, 1904), 244–76.


12. I am grateful to Prof. Michael Lynch for commenting on this.

13. CBP, i, 165.


16. Calderwood, History, iv, 28–9, 35; Balfour, Works, i, 383.

17. Letters and Papers relating to Patrick Master of Gray, ed. T. Thomson (Bannatyne Club, 1835), 5.


20. Original Letters of Mr John Colville, ed. D. Laing (Bannatyne Club, 1858), 83–4. There is no formal record of the Countess of Arran assuming the office of comptroller.


22. Ibid, iv, 410.


24. BL Cotton, Caligula, DII.94; SRO, CH2/89/1, fo 30r; CSP Scot, x, 429; Acts and Proceedings of the General Assembly of the Kirk of Scotland, ed. T. Thomson (3 vols, Bannatyne Club 1839–45), ii and iii, 1024, 1025; J. Row,

26. SRO, GD24/5/57/15; CSP Scot, vii, 341; ix, 587; RPC, iv, 103; Gordon, History of Sutherland, 208; Calderwood, History, iv, 686–7; Row, History, 137.

27. SRO, GD 44/66/3; Registrum Magni Sigilli Regnum Scotorum [RMS], eds. J. M. Thomson et al (Edinburgh, 1882–1914), no. 126; CSP Scot, x, 86, 109, 298–9, 334, 552; Master of Gray, 168; Calderwood, History, iv, 613.
