

## THE COURTSHIP AND SINGLEHOOD OF ELIZABETH ISHAM, 1630–1634\*

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**ABSTRACT.** *Scholars have long known of the proposed marriage in 1630 of John Dryden, grandson of Sir Erasmus Dryden, and Elizabeth Isham, eldest child of Sir John Isham. All knowledge of this proposed marriage came from correspondence revealing that, having reached a financial impasse, the two families aborted the proposed match. At first glance, such a case seems rather unremarkable, since similar stories abound of other contemporary families and in more detail. The Dryden–Isham match, however, takes on increased importance with the recent discovery of Elizabeth Isham’s 60,000-word spiritual autobiography. Unlike the correspondence that mainly deals with the economic aspects of the match, Elizabeth’s autobiography provides a more personal and emotional account, revealing the importance that familial love and honour played in the arrangement. In addition, the autobiography shows that the failed match caused Elizabeth to have a religious aversion to marriage, leading her to choose singlehood for the remainder of her life. Her experience forces scholars to recognize the significance that familial love, honour, and personal piety could have on marriage formation in the seventeenth century, and it illustrates the lasting impact that a failed match could have on a woman in early modern England.*

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In 1630, Sir John Isham of Lamport sought to marry his eldest child, Elizabeth Isham, to John Dryden II, the grandson of Sir Erasmus Dryden of nearby Canons Ashby. On hearing of Sir John’s desire and knowing him to be a patron of a faithful minister, Sir Erasmus welcomed the proposal with open arms: ‘This causeth mee with due thankfulness to god (for this speciall fauor) to declare my correspondensye in embracinge your alliance and readines to yeild such present maintenance and such Jointure as your porcion shall requier.’<sup>1</sup> Sir Erasmus’s son, John Dryden I, also welcomed the match, sending word to Sir John nearly a fortnight later: ‘you shall neuer treat with any man that shall more truly desier

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<sup>1</sup> Sir Erasmus Dryden to Sir John Isham, 22 Apr. 1630, Isham MSS, Northamptonshire Record Office (NRO), IC 184.

your loue and aliance then my selfe'.<sup>2</sup> Having concluded the initial courtesies, these men then began negotiations over the financial details of the match, negotiations that lasted for roughly a year. Such protracted talks, although increasingly irritating to the senior family members, had the virtue of allowing the young couple ample time to court and grow accustomed to calling each other 'Sweet Heart' and speaking of their 'constant love' for one another.<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately for the couple, they never married; the family patriarchs ultimately aborted the proposed match, after failing to resolve the outstanding financial issues between them.

For some time, all knowledge of this failed marriage alliance among the Northamptonshire gentry in the early seventeenth century came from a group of letters sent between the two families during their negotiations. The tale of the frustrated courtship of Elizabeth Isham and John Dryden, although poignant, is nonetheless unremarkable, for it holds at best only fleeting historiographical interest; after all, similar stories have survived about other contemporary families and often in more detail. Even the involvement in the Isham–Dryden match of the godly minister, John Dod, and noted parliamentarian, Richard Knightley, only adds slightly more interest to the tale. The hard fact of the matter is that since the young couple never wed, scholars have never felt this episode merited careful attention.<sup>4</sup>

Yet the bundle of letters about the aborted arrangement has abruptly increased in importance with a recent discovery that gives the story a profoundly different perspective: one from a would-be bride, rather than family patriarchs. Roughly a decade after the failure of the match, Elizabeth Isham wrote a 60,000-word spiritual autobiography entitled 'My booke of remembrance', in which she accorded her courtship with John Dryden pride of place.<sup>5</sup> The discovery of this manuscript in the library collections of Princeton University vaults Elizabeth into a highly select group of twenty-nine known women whose diaries, memoirs, or autobiographies have survived from the seventeenth century.<sup>6</sup> Completing her

<sup>2</sup> John Dryden I to Sir John Isham, 4 May 1630, Isham MSS, NRO, IC 185.

<sup>3</sup> John Dryden II to Elizabeth Isham, 25 Apr. 1631, Isham MSS, NRO, IC 199.

<sup>4</sup> See Mary Finch, *The wealth of five Northamptonshire families, 1540–1640* (Oxford, 1956), pp. 34–5; J. T. Cliffe, *The puritan gentry: the great puritan families of early Stuart England* (London, 1984), p. 67; Kate Aughterson, 'Isham, Elizabeth', in H. C. G. Mathew and Brian Harrison, eds., *Oxford dictionary of national biography (DNB)* (Oxford, 2004).

<sup>5</sup> Elizabeth Isham, 'My booke of remembrance', the Robert Taylor Collection, Manuscripts Division, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library, RTCO1 (no. 62).

<sup>6</sup> The women are Ann Bathurst, Elizabeth Bury, Margaret Cavendish, Lady Anne Clifford, Lady Elizabeth Delaval, Elizabeth Egerton, Ann, Lady Fanshawe, Celia Fiennes, Elizabeth Freke, Mrs Goodal, Elizabeth Grymston, Anne, Lady Halkett, Janet Hamilton, Anne, Lady Harcourt, Margaret, Lady Hoby, Lucy Hutchinson, Joyce Jefferies, Mary II, Queen of England, Grace, Lady Mildmay, Elizabeth Mordaunt, Mary Rich, Sarah Savage, Alice Thornton, Isabella, Lady Twysden, Elizabeth Walker, Mary Woodforde. Scholars have yet to identify the authors of two of the autobiographical writings. For discussion of women's autobiographical writings see Sharon Seelig, *Autobiography and gender in early modern literature: reading women's lives, 1600–1630* (Cambridge, 2006); Effie Botonaki,

work c. 1640, Elizabeth offers a wealth of information on her life, her view of the world, and – most eloquently – her experience of the proposed marriage to Dryden. Consequently, this once obscure woman affords us unparalleled access into an early modern woman's mental world, permitting us to see what a potential bride thought about marriage. Instead of a cold account of economic calculation and haggling by family patriarchs, the story she tells is a highly personal tale of love not just for Dryden, but also for her family. In addition, Elizabeth's experience also illustrates the importance of religion in a woman's experience with courtship, and chronicles the lasting impact that a failed marriage arrangement could have on a woman in early modern England.

Elizabeth Isham's experience is significant in its relevance to the scholarly debate over whether economics or romantic love was more important in the formation of early modern English marriage. Lawrence Stone has argued that when it came to marriage negotiations, the concern for the upper ranks of English society was to maintain, if not to expand, their family status and estates. For this reason, the landed classes de-emphasized the importance of love as a reason for marriage and, in turn, stressed that wedlock had to be a family affair, since it was too important to be left to the bride and groom alone.<sup>7</sup> Other historians have stressed that such a situation was not only true for the landed elite, but also for all social levels of English society. In her work on courtship and marriage in the sixteenth century, Diana O'Hara has asserted that marriage formation occurred in a 'social-moral' community of family, kin, and neighbours. This community exerted pressure on young people that could assume a number of forms, such as moral sanctioning or physical intimidation, but financial considerations took precedence over all other pressures.<sup>8</sup> Likewise, Peter Rushton's study of Durham court records from 1560 to 1630 argued that 'the marriages before the Durham courts were based on contributions of property and funds by both sets of parents or "friends" that should match in some way'. Thus in Rushton's analysis, few people entered into marriage without a sound economic foundation.<sup>9</sup>

Not all historians, however, have agreed with this assessment. Alan MacFarlane has argued that a 'Malthusian marriage system' existed in England, in which it was not the parental family, or extended kin that mattered, but the conjugal couple. In this system, marriage revolved around the individual's selection of a potential partner, and central to this choice was whether or not a young couple loved one another, rather than the extent to which they felt they

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*Seventeenth-century English women's autobiographical writings: disclosing enclosures* (Lampeter, 2004); S. H. Mendelson, 'Stuart women's diaries and occasional memoirs', in Mary Prior, ed., *Women in English society, 1500–1800* (London, 1985), pp. 181–210.

<sup>7</sup> Lawrence Stone, *The family, sex, and marriage in England, 1500–1800* (New York, 1977), pp. 86–91.

<sup>8</sup> Diana O'Hara, *Courtship and constraint: rethinking the making of marriage in Tudor England* (Manchester, 2001), introduction, pp. 218–20, and conclusion.

<sup>9</sup> Peter Rushton, 'Property, power and family networks: the problem of disputed marriage in early modern England', *Journal of Family History*, 11 (1986), pp. 205–19, at p. 210.

could economically benefit from one other.<sup>10</sup> David Cressy has echoed this view in his work on the life cycle of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English. As he writes: ‘what place did love have in courtship and marriage? It seems to have been fundamental ... love seems to have been a common and expected ingredient in the majority of matches.’<sup>11</sup> Other scholars have adopted a more cautious position. Keith Wrightson and Ralph Houlbrooke have felt that financial gain was not the only consideration in finding an ideal match, but that romantic attraction could prove as important. Yet love or affection did not overshadow economics entirely, especially further up the social scale.<sup>12</sup> Taking a similar position, Martin Ingram has contended that attitudes toward marriage formation in early modern England were simultaneously complicated and flexible. This ensured that a subtle marriage system existed in which love and economic considerations had equal or greater influence over the other, depending on the situation.<sup>13</sup>

One aspect of this debate seems clear: it is contested and its resolution appears no closer than it did when it began. However, looked at more closely, the debate is rather narrow and offers a limited perspective of marriage formation in early modern England. By focusing on affection or finances, scholars have created a false dichotomy between romantic love and economics, making it an ‘either or’ issue. To her credit, O’Hara has declared the dichotomy oversimplistic because it does not consider that other issues besides monetary and romantic concerns could prove important in the courtship process.<sup>14</sup> Whilst she contradicts this declaration by also stressing that financial concerns played the main role in marriage formation, O’Hara’s observation is nonetheless a welcomed insight; it allows for the possibility that other factors, such as familial love, honour, and personal piety, could be as or more important than romantic love and economics. Lastly, by concentrating only on the factors for wedlock, historians of marriage formation have wholly neglected to take into account the lasting impact that a failed match could have on an individual.

To find scholars who have taken up this issue we must look to those concerned with those women who never married in the early modern period. The fate of such women has recently come to interest scholars, one of whom, Bridget Hill, has produced an extensive study of never-married women from the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries. Since Hill’s main concern has been to show how never-married women from all social levels lived, she has examined women from the landed elite down to the labouring classes. From this examination, she has

<sup>10</sup> Alan MacFarlane, *Marriage and love in England, modes of reproduction 1300–1840* (New York, 1986), pp. 35–48, 174–208.

<sup>11</sup> David Cressy, *Birth, marriage, and death: ritual, religion, and the life-cycle in Tudor and Stuart England* (Oxford, 1997), pp. 261. See also chs. 10 and 11.

<sup>12</sup> Keith Wrightson, *English society, 1580–1680* (New Brunswick, 1982), pp. 80–6; Ralph Houlbrooke, *The English family, 1450–1700* (London, 1984), p. 76.

<sup>13</sup> Martin Ingram, *Church courts, sex and marriage in England, 1570–1640* (Cambridge, 1987), p. 142.

<sup>14</sup> O’Hara, *Courtship and constraint*, pp. 2–3, 218–20, and conclusion.

concluded that the status of being a never-married woman was not ideal: ‘women who did not marry were regarded at best “failed women” to be pitied or derided, at worst, ruined women whose presence “contaminated society”’.<sup>15</sup> Amy Froide has also made never-married women a focus of study, providing important information on how these women came to be single all their lives. As she has written, most never-married women experienced courtship and the possibility of marriage, ‘but for various reasons these women were either tripped up or they stopped short. They then diverted to an alternative path, that of singlehood.’ Such women, Froide stressed, rarely made a straightforward choice to remain unmarried; more often than not their status as never-married women stemmed from a series of decisions and different factors, ranging from sickness or deformity to the pursuit of a religious vocation. Yet whatever the reasons that led a woman to a life of singlehood, this marital status greatly determined how she constructed her identity.<sup>16</sup> A closer look at the Isham–Dryden match highlights the work of Hill and Froide, for once the match dissolved Elizabeth Isham remained single all her life. There were a number of factors that determined Elizabeth’s fate, the most obvious being the disagreement that occurred between the Ishams and Drydens over the financial details of the proposed marriage. Elizabeth’s autobiography, however, reveals that there were other, if not more significant, factors that caused her to never marry: familial love, honour, and a religious calling.

## I

At first glance, the evidence from the discussions surrounding the Isham–Dryden match supports the positions of Stone, O’Hara, and Rushton, for they largely failed for financial reasons. Consider the arrangement that Sir Erasmus Dryden proposed to Sir John Isham on 22 April 1630: ‘namely, if you will parte with 4000£ my grandson, [and] your daughter shalbe allowed (during my life) 300£ by the year and after my death, her jointure [will be] 400£ yearly’.<sup>17</sup> Plainly Sir Erasmus assumed that the Ishams were sufficiently wealthy enough to provide such a large portion and the assumption was not unfounded. Sir John’s branch of the Ishams had begun their journey into the ranks of the gentry in 1560, when Sir John’s grandfather, John Isham, had purchased Lamport Hall from William Cecil. This turned out to have been a wise decision, for Lamport served as a steady source of wool for John Isham’s commercial activities as a London mercer, the substantial profits of which created a sound financial base for his descendants. John’s son, Thomas, who succeeded in 1596, proved no less skilled when it came to the family finances. Not only did he continue many of his father’s business practices, but Thomas was also extremely prudent financially. Realizing that in order for the Ishams to advance their position, he refrained from the excessive

<sup>15</sup> Bridget Hill, *Woman alone: spinsters in England, 1660–1850* (New Haven, 2001), p. 1.

<sup>16</sup> Amy Froide, *Never married: singlewomen in early modern England* (Oxford, 2005), pp. 182–216.

<sup>17</sup> Sir Erasmus Dryden to Sir John Isham, Isham MSS, NRO, IC 184. See also Finch, *Five Northamptonshire families*, pp. 34–5 n. 9; Cliffe, *The puritan gentry*, p. 67.

expenditure that crippled the finances of many aristocratic and gentry families in the early seventeenth century. In so doing, Thomas could afford to send Sir John to Queens' College, Cambridge and, later on, to the Middle Temple. This extended the Isham's networks beyond their home county of Northamptonshire and created the connections that enabled Sir John in 1607 to marry Judith, the daughter of William Lewin, a noted ecclesiastical lawyer and a master of chancery. Given Lewin's contacts at court and within the legal community, the marriage plainly placed the Ishams firmly into the ranks of the landed elite, a position confirmed in 1608 when Sir John received a knighthood from James I and again in 1627 when he received a baronetcy from Charles I. With this new standing, Sir John continued his predecessor's prudent approach to finances, whilst simultaneously serving as a JP for his county and working to maintain, if not increase, the family's overall status.<sup>18</sup>

The Drydens were solid members of the landed elite of Northamptonshire and a marriage alliance with them potentially increased the political and social ties of Sir John and his family in the county. Arriving in Northamptonshire about a decade before the Ishams acquired Lamport, the Drydens had gained possession of Canons Ashby when Sir Erasmus's father, John Dryden, married the daughter of Sir John Cope, a wealthy Banbury lawyer and prominent Midland puritan. At his father's death in 1584, Sir Erasmus succeeded to the head of the family and maintained that position until his death in 1632. As the family head, Sir Erasmus became a baronet in 1619 and five years later served as MP for Banbury. An ardent puritan, Sir Erasmus was also close friends with Richard Knightley, a man of similar religious persuasion and fellow Northamptonshire gentleman. Together, both men patronized a number of godly ministers who had lost their benefices from the Church of England, the most notable of whom was John Dod. Between 1606 and 1625, Dod actually lived with the Drydens at Canons Ashby and, thereafter, at the Knightley's home of Fawsley. Such a situation, naturally, created strong personal ties between Dod, the Drydens, and the Knightleys, as the Isham–Dryden marriage talks revealed.<sup>19</sup>

From the beginning Knightley and Dod played integral parts in the negotiations, serving as intermediaries for the two families. Sir Erasmus indicated as much on 22 April when he told Sir John:

I haue bene informed (by your and my much honored freind Mr. Knightley and by our truly reuerensed and worthily beloued Mr. Dodd) that you haue a greate desier to match your eldest daughter (of whose pietye and modestye I haue recieued ample testimonye) with my Grandson John Driden.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Finch, *Five Northamptonshire families*, pp. 4–36.

<sup>19</sup> John Fielding, 'Conformists, puritans, and the church courts: the diocese of Peterborough, 1603–1642' (Ph.D. thesis, Birmingham, 1989) ch. 1, especially pp. 13–17; Cliffe, *The puritan gentry*, pp. 37, 113, 178–81; Tom Webster, *Godly clergy in early Stuart England: the Caroline puritan movement, c. 1620–1643* (Cambridge, 1997), p. 25; Oliver Garnett, *Canons Ashby: Northamptonshire* (London, 2001), pp. 32–6.

<sup>20</sup> Sir Erasmus Dryden to Sir John Isham, Isham MSS, NRO, IC 184.

Both Knightley and Dod continued to play major parts as negotiations began to heat up in the summer of 1630. On 4 August, in a letter to Knightley, Sir John discussed a stumbling block: Sir Erasmus's offer of £300 during his life and then £400 after his death for Elizabeth's jointure. Seeking to clarify the offer, Sir John asked that:

If there uppon I may conclude that thereby an estate in land of 400 $\text{£}$  a yeare in present may be made good to my daughter to ioynture & maintenance for the young gent [John Dryden II] & her & free from all encumbrances to be enjoyed bytween during their liues & the longer liuer of them & after to the heires males of their two bodies. Wherein my meaning is that if Sir E [rasmus] will not be wiling to parte with that reuenuue during his life out of his estate for their present maintenance then to haue the same supplied by Mr. Driden [John Dryden I] during that tyme in some such sort as hath bene formerly debated between him & my selfe both for the quantity of the present maintenance & securely therfore.<sup>21</sup>

Sir John's insistence on this point was sound, ensuring as it did the steady maintenance of the young couple. Yet his concern for their financial security did not end here.

Sir Erasmus's offer for a jointure was comparatively low for the time, when most prospective brides obtained a jointure that represented more than £100 for each £1,000 of portion. In fact, out of fifteen marriages that took place among other contemporary landed families in Northamptonshire, most did not have such low a jointure and maintenance as that offered by Sir Erasmus. A typical example of the ratio of jointure to portion in the 1630s was the alliance cemented between the Fitzwilliams of Milton and the Perrys, a mercer family from London. The marriage occurred in 1638 and involved Lord Fitzwilliam's heir William and Jane, daughter of the London alderman and mercer, Hugh Perry. For a portion of £5,000, Fitzwilliam provided a jointure of £600, going well beyond the standard of £100 for each £1,000. Fitzwilliam was not alone in offering such a handsome jointure; other landed elites in the county acted similarly. For a marriage in 1633 between his eldest son Robert and Mary Constable, Lord Thomas Brudenell provided a £700 jointure in return for a £6,000 portion. Indeed, another excellent example comes from the Ishams themselves; Sir John's only son, Justinian Isham, married Jane, daughter of Sir John Garrard of Lamer, Hertfordshire, in 1634. Justinian's new bride brought a £4,000 portion to the marriage and in return his father guaranteed a jointure of £600.<sup>22</sup>

In light of such examples, it is not surprising that Sir John Isham wished to increase the pressure in response to Sir Erasmus Dryden's relatively low offer of

<sup>21</sup> Sir John Isham to Richard Knightley, 4 Aug. 1630, Isham MSS, NRO, IC 188.

<sup>22</sup> Finch, *Five Northamptonshire families*, pp. 34–5 n. 9, 132, 153. The families are the Spencers, Treshams, Fitzwilliams, Brudenells, and Ishams.

a jointure. In the same letter to Knightley on 4 August 1630 Sir John sought a further stipulation:

Sir E[rasmus] will ioyn with his sonne in assurance that thereby the residue of the land in A[shby] and H[odnell] may be likewise settled by Sir E[rasmus] his death to his sonne there & free from all encumbrances to be enjoyed by him during his life & after his decease to the young gent & the heires males of his bodie on my daughter begotten.<sup>23</sup>

The lands that Sir John referred to were Canons Ashby, the Dryden home estate, and their other property of Hodnell in nearby Warwickshire. On receipt of Sir John's letter, Knightley promptly replied to Sir John's new stipulation:

because there may be noe mistaking there is a worde in your letter imediately after Sir Erasmus deathe to haue the estate to come to my cosen [John Dryden I], there is in one deede which you saw that Sir Erasmus executor shoulde haue it a yeare payinge to the heir 300£. Nowe if my cosen John ouer liue his father then comes there noe preiudice to yor sonne [John Dryden II] (which I pray God make) the estate comes free to him, without any incumbrance.<sup>24</sup>

But Sir John found it wholly unacceptable that any part of Elizabeth's jointure should remain in the hands of Sir Erasmus's executor. Consequently Sir John never wavered from his desire that the Dryden estates should descend immediately to John Dryden I upon the death of Sir Erasmus.

On 11 August John I sought to break the impasse by assuring Sir John that Sir Erasmus's plans for Canons Ashby and Hodnell could change:

I haue seriously endeueured with the assistance of soom of my best friends, to win my father to condiscende to your desires. I know not in anything that wee differ, saue onely in the yeare after my fathers death which I make no question, but that hee will bee drawn to release.

John I then went on to explain, in far more detail than Knightley, why the Dryden estates would not pass directly to him after his father's death, informing Sir John:

that when hee made his will, his desires were no other, but that theare shoulde haue beene an indifferent choice made of 4 honest Gentlemen our neighboures to set downe the rates of the stock and chattells in Ashby. And if I would so take them at those rates they were praised then I should peaceably enter upon all of Ashby and Hodnell.<sup>25</sup>

Such an action on Sir Erasmus's part was rather unusual for the landed elite in the early modern period and, together with the Dryden patriarch's other actions, caused Sir John's patience to wear thin as the year progressed.

While Ashby and Hodnell became an issue, John Dod contacted Sir John. When Elizabeth Isham was a child, Dod had often visited Lamport Hall during

<sup>23</sup> Sir John Isham to Richard Knightley, 4 Aug. 1630, Isham MSS, NRO, IC 188.

<sup>24</sup> Richard Knightley to Sir John Isham, Aug. 1630, Isham MSS, NRO, IC 3666.

<sup>25</sup> John Dryden to Sir John Isham, 11 Aug. 1630, Isham MSS, NRO, IC 3683.



the life of her mother, Judith, Lady Isham, who thought very highly of the godly minister, deriving a great deal of spiritual comfort from his visits.<sup>26</sup> Such contacts with Dod suggest that the Ishams, although perhaps not quite as 'hot' a sort of protestants as the Drydens, had godly tendencies in their religious beliefs. Whatever the case, Sir Erasmus was lucky to have such a representative, for Dod's connections to the Ishams ideally placed him to tell Sir John on 22 September that 'Sir Erasmus Driden [desires] upon my report that as soone as the marriage was concluded and the articles agreed upon that then (upon sufficient securitie) you would be pleased to make present payment of one 1000*£*.'<sup>27</sup> To demonstrate his good will, Sir John promptly made the requested payment early, not waiting for the marriage of the young couple to provide the money. The payment was part of the *£*4,000 portion that Sir Erasmus had proposed at the beginning of the negotiations. As Dod and Sir John corresponded, it seems that Sir Erasmus may not have had full contact with Dod and did not know of the *£*1,000 payment, for he asked for the same amount plus an additional *£*1,000 on 28 September. He was also eager to conclude the negotiations: 'My desier is that wee hasten to a conclusion as soone as conuiently possible.'<sup>28</sup>

Regrettably for all involved, the unresolved matter of Sir John's insistence on Canons Ashby and Hodnell remained. Some progress had been achieved in March 1631 when Knightley offered hope to Edward Shagborough, an Isham representative, that Sir Erasmus was willing to meet Sir John's demands concerning the Dryden estates: 'this is resolved that the younge people, shall presentlie during Sir Erasmus Drydens life haue 320*£* yearely, & after his death to make it up 400*£*, & soe much ioynture & Ashby and Hodnill to be assured upon their heire males'.<sup>29</sup> Although an extra *£*20 added to the jointure was not a major concession, Sir Erasmus's decision to concede on the issue of Ashby and Hodnell offered hope for successful conclusion of the negotiations. As April began, however, he dashed such hopes by refusing to compromise on Sir John's demands on the estate of Hodnell. In response, the Dryden's lawyer, Christopher Sherland, suggested to the Isham's lawyer, Robert Tanfield, that John I add an annuity of *£*100 to Sir Erasmus's promised *£*300 so as to meet Sir John's request of *£*400 for Elizabeth's jointure.<sup>30</sup> Reflecting the impatience that doubtless all involved felt by that point, John I alluded to these suggested alterations to the proposed match in a letter to Sir John on 8 April:

This day upon commande from my father I haue beene with Mr Sheriland, who hath had a seconde veiue of the Marriage Bookes, soom things are altered by my father his directions but of no greate moument the particulars are all mentioned in a letter that Mr Sheriland hath written to Mr Tanfield. I would intreate you to peruse these lines and

<sup>26</sup> Isham, 'My booke of remembrance', fos. 11v–12r, 13r–15r, 19r.

<sup>27</sup> John Dod to Sir John Isham, 22 September 1630, Isham MSS, NRO, IC 193.

<sup>28</sup> Sir Erasmus Dryden to Sir John Isham, 28 September 1630, Isham MSS, NRO, IC 194.

<sup>29</sup> Richard Knightley to Edward Shagborough, 24 March 1630/31, Isham MSS, NRO, IC 3435.

<sup>30</sup> Christopher Sherland to Robert Tanfield, 8 April 1631, Isham MSS, NRO, IC 196.

with all to accomplish his [Sherland's] desires with my owne, that you would bee pleased to giue us a meeting at Northampton to finish these occasions.<sup>31</sup>

At this point Sir John became adamant: he did not find the proposed alteration of a £100 annuity for Elizabeth's jointure to his liking, nor was he pleased with Sir Erasmus's renewed stance on Hodnell.

With Sir Erasmus ever unpredictable and unyielding, Tanfield confessed that because of 'the uncertayne and variable resolutions of Sir Erasmus Dryden I know noe better way to reconcile the differences'. With a degree of desperation, he advised his client, Sir John, to think of some other course to follow if he could not convince Sir Erasmus to yield.<sup>32</sup> Weary after more than a year of haggling and likely feeling his honour besmirched, the course Sir John chose was to suspend talks with the Drydens and, in the process, began voicing his frustration with Sir Erasmus's actions. At the end of the following month, John I expressed regret in a letter to Sir John that the whole affair had fallen apart, but he also declared his displeasure on learning that Sir John had spoken ill of Sir Erasmus: 'hearing harsh aspercions which you have caste upon my father, understandably whose honor I cannot but bee jealous of'.<sup>33</sup> With these mutual recriminations, the financial negotiations of the proposed Isham–Dryden match ended.

Analysis of these letters could initially lead to one conclusion: economic considerations determined whether or not Elizabeth Isham would marry John Dryden. Certainly, attorneys, devoted intermediaries, and committed parents could have found a way to increase the jointure to more than £400 to bring it into line with contemporary amounts. If this had indeed happened, Sir John would probably have abandoned his demands on Ashby and Hodnell, allowing the young couple to marry. The problem, however, was Sir Erasmus's 'uncertayne and variable resolutions'; the eighty-year-old patriarch ultimately doomed the match with his determination to minimize financial outlay, whilst ensuring that Sir John provided large and prompt payments for the couple's portion. Thus economics appear to have reigned supreme in the negotiations. Nevertheless closer examination of the letters implicitly suggests the presence of other concerns. Concepts of honour and social standing could also have played a key role in why the relationship between Sir John and Sir Erasmus soured. Although the latter had once held a seat in the House of Commons, both men essentially were social equals, a fact that perhaps led Sir John to feel his honour insulted by Sir Erasmus's constant wavering over what to do about the Dryden estates. Moreover, Sir John may have interpreted the refusal to provide a higher jointure as disrespectful; he likely found it another affront to his social standing, since it did not meet the standard of the period. If examination of the marriage negotiations only occurred within the dichotomy of romantic love or economics, the role that honour may have played would go unnoticed. Fortunately, what is only implicit

<sup>31</sup> John Dryden to Sir John Isham, 8 April 1631, Isham MSS, NRO, IC 197.

<sup>32</sup> Robert Tanfield to Sir John Isham, 20 April 1631, Isham MSS, NRO, IC 198.

<sup>33</sup> John Dryden to Sir John Isham, 26 May 1631, Isham MSS, IC 200.

in the letters becomes explicit when we turn to Elizabeth Isham's experience, as recounted in her autobiography, of the whole affair.

## II

Born on 28 January 1609, Elizabeth was the eldest of the three children of Sir John and Judith, Lady Isham. Elizabeth, in her autobiography, reveals that her formative years revolved greatly around her family. She tells of the loving and affectionate relationship she had with her father, a relationship that would prove instrumental during her courtship with John Dryden. Elizabeth also had a strong bond with her younger brother, Justinian, and sister, Judith II, with whom she spent much time in activities such as playing cards, reading to each other, and singing psalms to their parents. By the time all three had reached adulthood, Justinian had gone to Christ's College, Cambridge, and later attended the Middle Temple in 1628. At the age of twenty-three he married Jane, daughter of John Garrard, who bore him four daughters before she died in 1639 after giving birth to a short-lived baby boy. Justinian would go on to become a staunch royalist in the Civil War, which led to his imprisonment during the Commonwealth. At the Restoration, he benefited politically from his support for Charles I, becoming a knight of the shire for Northamptonshire in 1661. In contrast, Elizabeth's sister lived a less colourful life, plagued by illness; Judith never married and died in 1636 at the age of twenty-six. Notwithstanding Judith's sickly state, the two sisters enjoyed a very close relationship, with each often serving as the primary emotional support for the other while they lived together at Lamport Hall.<sup>34</sup>

Elizabeth also had close bonds with other female members of her family, especially her mother. From Elizabeth's account, Lady Isham was a pious and devout woman who played a large part in the religious education of her eldest daughter. At the age of eight or nine, Elizabeth recalls that her mother gave her a 'Psalm Book' and encouraged her to learn its verses by heart. Not long after, Lady Isham presented both of her daughters with a 'prayer book' and advised them that they should pray up to two or three times a day. Moreover, Lady Isham's influence on her daughters' religious beliefs evidently extended further. With his strong relationship with Elizabeth's mother, Lady Isham allowed John Dod to instruct her children in Scripture and Calvinist piety.<sup>35</sup> Between her mother and Dod, Elizabeth grew into an extremely pious young woman, with a strong Calvinist drive of self-examining her sins.

Nothing better illustrates Elizabeth's personal piety than the structure and nature of her 60,000-word spiritual autobiography. Finished nine years after the failed marriage arrangement, Elizabeth directed her voice in the manuscript to God, giving it the tone of a confession or written prayer. In fact, in a separate

<sup>34</sup> Isham, 'My booke of remembrance', fos. 5r, 15v. See also Robin Priestly, 'Isham, Justinian', in *DNB*; Gyles Isham, ed., *The correspondence of Bishop Brian Duppa and Sir Justinian Isham, 1650–1660* (Northampton, 1955). <sup>35</sup> Isham, 'My booke of remembrance', fos. 11v–12r, 13r–15r, 19r.

document in which she lists events that occurred in her life up to 1649, Elizabeth alludes to the autobiography, noting that she began working on it in 1639 and considered it her ‘confessions’.<sup>36</sup> She expressed her reasons for undertaking such work in the beginning of the autobiography: ‘Not that I intend this published, but to this end I haue it in praise & thankfullnes to God & for my own benefit, which if it may doe my Brother or his children any pleasure, I think to leaue it them.’<sup>37</sup> Elizabeth’s wish to bequeath her ‘confessions’ to an external audience was not unusual for the period; most male and female authors of spiritual autobiographies in the seventeenth century did not produce their writings just for their own eyes but intended others to read their works. Under the encouragement of clerics, spiritual autobiographies and the lives they showcased also often circulated in manuscript or print for others to follow as spiritual models. The result was the creation of a genre: the ‘conversion narrative’ that adhered to the formula of a sinner finding salvation through God’s grace. Since individuals often intended spiritual autobiographies for an external audience and followed generic conventions, scholars have questioned whether these sources reveal the true mentalité or emotions of the authors of such writings.<sup>38</sup>

Although a valid critique, it should not prompt us to dismiss the inner thoughts and feelings of individuals recorded in spiritual autobiographies. In the case of Elizabeth, while she desired her immediate family to view her ‘confessions’, it is vital to remember that she insisted first she wrote it in praise of God and for her own benefit. Elizabeth looked for signs of her salvation, a task she undertook, like any good Calvinist, by self-examination to determine whether she was elect. At the heart of her self-examination was the confession of her sins, something she made clear at the opening of the autobiography:

To thou deepest searcher [God] of each secret thought  
 Infuse in me thy all affecting grace;  
 So shall my workes to good effects be brought,  
 While I persue my ugly sinnes a space  
 Which (I confesse) in me hath taken place.<sup>39</sup>

These verses expressed Elizabeth’s faith in God’s grace and her desire for amendment by confessing her transgressions. It was precisely the desire for amendment that Elizabeth, along with other Calvinists, felt was a sign of grace. For this to occur, a believer had to be honest with one’s self and the almighty,

<sup>36</sup> Elizabeth Isham’s listing of events in her life, Isham MSS, NRO, IL 3365.

<sup>37</sup> Isham, ‘My booke of remembrance’, fo. 2r.

<sup>38</sup> Michael Mascuch, *Origins of the individualist self, autobiography and self-identity in England, 1591–1791* (Stanford, 1996), prologue, ch. 3, pp. 117–18; Elaine McKay, ‘English diarists: gender, geography, and occupation, 1500–1700’, *History* (2005), pp. 191–212, at pp. 191–2. For further methodological discussion of autobiography see Seelig, *Autobiography*, pp. 1–14, 154–9; Botonaki, *English women’s autobiographical writings*, pp. 32–42.

<sup>39</sup> Isham, ‘My booke of remembrance’, fo. 1r. Only the last line of this passage is by Elizabeth Isham, with the rest lifted from Nicholas Breton, *The passion of a discontented minde* (London, 1601).

since there was no way of deceiving God who after all was the ‘deepest searcher of each secret thought’. Consequently, it is reasonable to assume that Elizabeth expressed what she felt was the truth about her life in the autobiography. Furthermore, whilst she utilized rhetorical styles commonly found in the autobiographical writings of the period, such as expressing thankfulness and modesty in the face of God, she also did not strictly follow the conventions of the ‘conversion narrative’; Elizabeth did not tell a story of spiritual journey that culminates in a moment of revelation of Christ’s redeeming qualities. Rather, her autobiography is exactly what she deemed it was, the ‘confessions’ of her sins and all she felt important in her life from the age of eight to thirty-one. The tone of the document leaves the impression that she was a woman with a deep sense of asceticism who struggled to achieve an austere piety, a struggle that, in turn, created anxieties in her life. Arguably the greatest of these anxieties resulted from the prospect of marriage.

In 1627, Sir John sent Elizabeth, at the age of eighteen, to spend the better part of a year with her uncle, James Pagitt, in London.<sup>40</sup> Her sojourn to the capital was not unique at this time; it was common for young gentlewomen in the seventeenth century to journey to London, and such trips exposed women from the countryside to the fashionable metropolitan life of the city and its large marriage market. As the kingdom’s administrative, legal and cultural centre, London attracted aristocracy and gentry from all over England for many reasons, not least of which was that the city contained a larger pool of potentially well-connected and high-status marriage partners than existed back in the provinces.<sup>41</sup> Since a baronet of Sir John Isham’s wealth and standing was understandably interested in his eldest daughter testing the London marriage market, he dispatched Elizabeth to stay with her uncle.

This strategy paid dividends, for Elizabeth explained that a number of potential suitors immediately showed interest, all of whom Elizabeth ‘had no desire they should’. Of these men, one in particular stirred her ire. Left unnamed in her autobiography, she describes her first encounter with this suitor: ‘he told me my father was willing but I spake to him as if I would know my fathers mind my selfe before any and so thought farely to put him off diuers times auoiding his company when I thought he would come’.<sup>42</sup> Plainly Elizabeth disliked her would-be suitor, but mere distaste does not explain fully why she wanted nothing to do with the man. A closer analysis of the autobiography reveals that Elizabeth’s dislike of him, or indeed of any of the other London suitors, owed much to her religious sensibilities. By the time she was

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, fo. 20v.

<sup>41</sup> Susan Whyman, *Sociability and power in late-Stuart England: the cultural worlds of the Verneys, 1660–1720* (Oxford, 1999), pp. 124–39; Vivienne Larminie, *Wealth, kinship and culture: the seventeenth-century Newdigates of Arbury and their world* (Woodridge, 1995), pp. 117–18.

<sup>42</sup> Isham, ‘My booke of remembrance’, fo. 21r.

eighteen, Elizabeth had developed an ascetic piety that left her with an aversion to marriage:

being full of that ioy which Religion kindeled in mee through the vehemency of my zeale I offered my affections to thee my God at diuers times desiring that if it might be more acceptable to thee (which I thought therefore would be better for me) that I might not marry.<sup>43</sup>

Throughout her autobiography, she makes it evident that she desired to love God more than anyone else and to disregard worldly temptations. One of these temptations, Elizabeth felt, was marriage since it would divert her attention away from God and redirect it toward her husband. The various suitors who made advances in London posed no real threat to such an ideal, for none of them gained the hearty acceptance of Sir John and so became mere footnotes in her life.

When Elizabeth returned to the Isham estate of Lamport Hall in 1628, the homecoming filled her with contentment:

I found my friends well and as ioyfull to see me as I was them and while after I found I misse of the company which I had at London withall leauing to learn that which before I did yet I pacified my selfe finding this place [Lamport Hall] fitter to adorne in rich my soule then adorne my Body.

Such a statement suggests that Elizabeth may have missed the bustle of metropolitan life in London, but, as she explained, her ascetic piety overshadowed and quelled such feelings. To cultivate this piety, Elizabeth adopted a rather austere lifestyle on her return, as her father discovered in the winter of 1629 when he presented her with a fashionable new garment: ‘I cared not to follow the extremity of fashions set forth to my selfe because you Lord hadest giuen me enough content and not to be proud.’ Rejecting human creations, Elizabeth instead delighted in nature, often, with her sister Judith, taking the family coach out to enjoy blossoming flowers in the surrounding countryside. By the summer of 1629 Elizabeth had forgotten London, growing accustomed to such a trouble-free lifestyle and became even more resolute not to marry: ‘I suppose that I might haue had the more mind to marry but I thought my mind should not be a slaue to my body.’<sup>44</sup>

The country life, however, that she found so tranquil abruptly ended in the following year. She had experienced a peaceful autumn in 1629, with few worries, but by its close, Elizabeth recounted: ‘the winter of aduersity came on and my soule began to lage afflictions [which] like mundations of waters entered in to my soule [that they] liked to drowne me’. The afflictions came in the form of John Dryden who caught her father’s eye as someone he found ‘both for religious breeding and estate to be a fit match’ for his daughter. It is not known how Sir John became aware of the young gentleman; perhaps John Dod had suggested

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, fo. 20v.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, fo. 21r.

that Dryden was an ideal match for Elizabeth. Whatever the case, Sir John thought he had found the right man to marry his daughter, and at the end of March 1630, he invited Dryden to visit Lamport. Her father, Elizabeth recalled, had not warned her of the young man's visit so that she might formulate an unbiased opinion of Dryden. Initially, Elizabeth was not overly impressed, just as she had been underwhelmed with her earlier suitors in London. Suspicious that the motivation for Dryden's visit was indeed marriage, Elizabeth described how she 'began in my mind to take care how I should put him off'. Her steadfastness, however, dissolved when Sir John revealed that he had indeed invited Dryden, before asking whether she would consider entering into courtship with him. Sir John's polite intervention caused Elizabeth to reconsider her stance: 'I was the more moued to give way to his desire because (I thought) his affection appeared rather then his authority to command.' Implicit in such a statement is Elizabeth's feeling that Sir John did have the right to command her to enter into such a courtship, but it seems that his affection for his daughter prevented him from utilizing this power. Above all, Sir John wished that his daughter was comfortable with the idea of courting and eventually marrying Dryden. With this in mind, Elizabeth felt obliged to reconsider her former stance on marriage: 'therefore I resined my will to my fathers'. Yet her decision to do so was not simply one of filial respect; it also related as much to her relationship with God. Elizabeth interpreted Dryden's sudden appearance in her life as an act of divine providence. Reflecting on her decision, she wrote that 'trusting in thee O Lord God that thou wouldest doe for the best which way it pleased thee I thought my selfe safe in thus doing'. Combined with her admiration for her father, this strong faith in God's plans provided Elizabeth with ample reasons to begin what proved to be a year-long courtship.

At first, since she barely knew Dryden, Elizabeth evidently found it difficult to develop an interest in him and remained rather unmoved during the early stages of their relationship. The passage of time, however, eventually changed her feelings:

I was yet indifferent not being much aqua[i]nted with him which came to me, yet the winter coming on and company departing he had few to be with but my selfe who kept him the more company because his only coming was to mee, so in time his company bred liking and liking loue.<sup>45</sup>

This love was strong enough to cause Elizabeth to become a concerned partner, often worrying over Dryden's well being: 'when he was long absent I should with much vehemency thinke of him fearing that he was not well'. Yet notwithstanding her growing love, Elizabeth's affection could not totally eclipse her earlier misgivings about marriage. During the courtship, Elizabeth was constantly concerned that if she loved Dryden too much, it might interfere with her devotion to God. Indeed, at times, she seems to have weighed in her mind the merits of

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, fo. 21v.

her would-be husband and God himself: 'I thought how well I should be if I were delivered from this cumbersome trouble [that] if it should chance break off that I might think of Marriage no more but that I might with more freenes serve thee [God] without those thoughts of human loue.'<sup>46</sup> In addition, Elizabeth found that Dryden's own piety did not always meet her high standards, causing her to consider ending the courtship.<sup>47</sup> In the end, however, she decided not to break off the relationship while the negotiations proceeded, suggesting that her love for Dryden was eclipsing her devotion to God, albeit narrowly.

Elizabeth appears to have resolved her internal conflicts about marriage – at least until the negotiations between Sir Erasmus and her father hit an impasse. In her autobiography, she never explicitly mentioned the financial details, but certainly alluded to them. With a critical eye on arranged marriages, she wrote with relation to the talks between her father and the Drydens:

Now as I fashion of the world in those parents which standmore upon worldly estate then loue thereby hassarding the parties affection, so for this time which was almost a yere they many times seemed to breake it off, though my father I suppose was resolved what to do, yielding to them in what indifferent way might be for the best withall asking me diuers times if I were willing it should goe forwards who answered I was.<sup>48</sup>

Since she expressed that her father was indifferent during the entire negotiation process, such statements perhaps show that Elizabeth did not know the finer details of the proposed marriage contract. It is hard to conclude, however, that Sir John's stance on the Dryden estates was an act of indifference. Elizabeth's statement is nonetheless significant, due to her explicit recollection of her father's constant consultation with her about whether he should carry on negotiating with the Drydens. Just as Sir John had initially approached Elizabeth about Dryden, so he felt the need to take his daughter's feelings into account during the negotiations. It is also significant that, despite Elizabeth's repeated uneasiness about marriage, she willed her father to proceed due to her love for Dryden. Sir John heeded his daughter's wishes, despite becoming increasingly apprehensive about his dealing with Sir Erasmus.<sup>49</sup> Thus, romantic love played an equal, if not more important, role in the affair.

As the final breach in the negotiations approached in April 1631, the Drydens were well aware of Elizabeth's feelings and thought that her love for her suitor could influence Sir John to abandon his reservations about Sir Erasmus's terms. This strategy was clearly evident in a letter that John Dryden II wrote to Elizabeth at the end of April. He first greeted her with professions of love: 'Sweet Hart ... Never was time so tedious to me as this since my departure from you.' He then explained that his apparent long absence was due to Sir John's insistence on the matter of Canons Ashby and Hodnell and the constant income of £400. Wishing for a successful conclusion of the talks, Dryden sought to persuade Elizabeth to intervene and convince her father to soften his stance: 'If it please

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, fo. 23r.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, fo. 23v.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, fo. 21v.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, fo. 23r.



your father to yeeld to the former conditions [Sir Erasmus's terms] I will present my true love to you speedily [otherwise] if not than hee [Sir John] thinke it not [fit] I will deferre it [his love] till I can doe better in it.' Perhaps feeling some guilt in attempting to turn Elizabeth away from her father and towards her lover's family, Dryden felt the need to explain himself: 'Thy constant love makes mee plaine hearted therefore Sweet Heart excuse these my waies and returne mee an answer as pleases your sweet self.'<sup>50</sup>

The future of the match lay in Elizabeth's hands. Considering that Sir John had always consulted his daughter as to whether she wanted to continue the negotiations, there is little doubt that he would have come to terms with the Drydens had she wished. Unfortunately for the Drydens, Elizabeth chose not to continue the match, largely due to the depth of her relationship with her father and her own religious misgivings about marriage. As Elizabeth wrote:

I could not but admire thy just dealing my God. That I should feele that smart of loue which was not to be obtained, which I supposed others felt for mee and so might wish me to haue and then I saw the vanities and unconstances of peoples mindes which when it was in hand upplused it beyond the reach of wisdom.

Yet Elizabeth's religious beliefs were not the only reason why she altered her position on the proposed marriage. To a large degree, she felt that if the match were to continue, it was up to Dryden to mend the breach, rather than herself and her family: 'Now some would haue had me sent or written to him but I thought a womans [place] consisted more in being sought to then to seeke, which was his part & if he had not so much loue [for me] I desired him not.' Such hope in her suitor honouring their love and salvaging the match was wishful thinking on Elizabeth's part, for she received word that he had spoken ill of Sir John, probably because of her father's resolve not to concede to Sir Erasmus's demands. In response to Dryden rallying to the side of his grandfather, Elizabeth firmly lined up with Sir John:

I could not tel how to speake to my father for him [Dryden], because he had spoken against him [Sir John] and though my father said (as I was told by one) that he would haue sought after them and yeelded to them, if I did desire it rather then I should take harm or be the worse for it yet I did not desire through my weaknes to haue my father stoope to them.<sup>51</sup>

Elizabeth refused to accept her father's humiliation in the negotiations as a price for her hand in marriage. Here again was love triumphant: not love for her intended husband, but rather love for her father that influenced Elizabeth to protect his honour.

Elizabeth Isham's decision encourages us to rethink the dichotomy of romantic love and economics that Lawrence Stone first postulated to interpret the formation of marriage in early modern England. Whilst financial considerations

<sup>50</sup> John Dryden II to Elizabeth Isham, 25 Apr. 1631, Isham MSS, NRO, IC 199.

<sup>51</sup> Isham, 'My booke of remembrance', fo. 23v.

played a major role in this and almost all other gentry marriages, Elizabeth's autobiography reveals that love and affection were essential to the continuation and final outcome of her relationship with Dryden. This fact would seem to lend credence to the argument of Wrightson, Houlbrooke, and Ingram that both romantic love and economics were essential elements in the decision-making of parents and children during the process of marriage formation. Yet Elizabeth's choice to terminate the proposed match also calls for an expanded definition of love. It is true that romantic love was a powerful stimulus in the formation of marriage, but by only focusing on romantic love, scholars have missed the power of other emotional bonds. Love for family could have as strong or greater an influence, as Elizabeth's affection for her father demonstrated. After all, her love and loyalty for her father effectively brought the negotiations to an end; she insisted on the protection of Sir John's honour by not having him 'stoope' to the Drydens. As for her own honour, Elizabeth wished Dryden to respect her status as a woman, since she felt a woman's role 'consisted more of being sought then to seeke'. Thus, because of her concern for Sir John's honour and for her own, Elizabeth chose not to continue the match. Her decision illustrates that familial love and honour could be just as or more important than romantic love or economics in marriage formation during the seventeenth century. Elizabeth's experience after the dissolution of the Isham–Dryden match provides further evidence of additional influences in the process of courtship and marriage: namely personal piety.

### III

While decisive, the exercise of Elizabeth's own will haunted her in various ways throughout the rest of her life. In the immediate aftermath of the dissolution of the match, Elizabeth sought to continue her life as best she could, but wistful thoughts of John Dryden and the dissolution of the courtship regularly flooded her memories after the courtship. Her thoughts returned again and again to how she 'kept him company whereby he thought himselfe sure of my loue, which neuer altered for I carried myselfe farely towards him and with that respect which I thought fit for him, always which should have been my husband'.<sup>52</sup> Whilst Elizabeth clearly lamented having to choose between her father and Dryden, her religious beliefs would not allow her entering into a perpetual state of melancholy. Just as Elizabeth felt that providence had brought Dryden into her life, so she believed that it had ushered him out. Elizabeth clung to this belief, expressing her trust in God:

Being confident that thou lord neuer leaue thy seruant which put there trust in thee for thou hast neuer failed them wouldest that seeke thee, but I must needs confesse I was very low and should haue bine worse if I had not remembered that I trusted in thee [God].

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, fo. 23r.

This trust gave Elizabeth comfort, as did her pious desire to devote herself to God, which had never ceased to exist: ‘And though at the first braking off it much troubled me, yet I was the better pasified (it being at that time) to thinke that I might the more liue unto him (Christ) which died for me.’<sup>53</sup> Her spirit gained great comfort from this faith: ‘my comfort was my loue to thee [God] was euer aboute all and I knew thou wouldest not forsake me’.<sup>54</sup> Bolstered by such beliefs, Elizabeth sought solace in deep spiritual contemplation and self-examination.

Accordingly, Elizabeth did exactly this in the autobiography, divulging various actions and thoughts that troubled her in life. She recounted, for example, the shame she felt for stealing a primer at the age of nine, and the way in which her act had caused her to reveal the offence to her parents.<sup>55</sup> Elsewhere, Elizabeth often bemoaned her tendency for slothfulness and gluttony.<sup>56</sup> Most ominous was her deep belief that the Devil lured her to have blasphemous thoughts and desires. Not surprisingly Elizabeth recalled that such thoughts and desires were extremely intense in 1632, only a year after the collapse of her proposed marriage to Dryden. Whilst she had supported her father, the extraordinary tension involved with this decision led her to confess that the Devil had caused her to think ill of God and Sir John:

Satan could not overcome me but that I utterly hated all rebellious and blasfemus thoughts against my maker [God], yet then he [Satan] would tempt, to curse my owne father, this I also utterly hated for I not onely knew that by the Law of God it deserued death.<sup>57</sup>

Considering the magnitude of her decision to break off the negotiations, it is scarcely surprising that Elizabeth felt tempted to vent her emotions against the one who had greatly influenced her decision: her father.

Other emotional demons haunted Elizabeth in the aftermath of the Dryden courtship. Although she found Satan a ready cause for her transgressions, Elizabeth also felt that she was responsible on her own accord for her sins. This is clearly evident when she recalls her worried state when she was twenty-seven in 1636:

for in these yeres not only I temptations of Satan troubled me, but also there slid into me the temptations of the world and I found those sinnes which my own flesh were prone to for I had euill thoughts which were not lawfull (besides the deuill tempting me to filthy thoughts which were not desent) and I had vaine thoughts which were not expedient for tho[ugh] I esteemed not the world very much yet sometimes I hoped for a worldly rewarde for things to please my owne sensuall delight.<sup>58</sup>

Although Elizabeth’s ascetic sensibilities are clearly evident in earlier portions of her autobiography, such sensibilities came to the fore in the descriptions of her life after 1631. As she explained, it was the temptations of the world that led her to sins such as vanity or carnal delight as well as a lack of caring for others.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, fo. 23v.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, fos. 4v, 26r, 31v.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, fo. 24r.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, fo. 24v.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, fo. 4r.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, fo. 32r.

Moreover, such a worldview induced acute states of anxiety, as revealed when she recounted the feelings she had experienced after completing some needlework, a favorite pastime of hers:

My owne worke many times affected me so much that I apprehended to be better then I found it to be when I againe looked on it which caused some discontent in me because it pleased me not againe other whiles looking on it when it happened to please me I thought there was a kind of temptation in it when I looked on it too or I found my selfe tempted to displeas thee [God] in beholding too much such vanities.

Elizabeth's distrust and misgivings of the temporal world prompted her to make other statements that expressed her ascetic sensibilities, perhaps no better exemplified than by the following:

Now finding the things of this world false, shadowy and vaine uncertain riches, the truths are to be found no where but in heauen for these things are not good but in there lawfull use, nothing is absolutely good but only O Lord God and all other things as they are of thee, yea there is nothing in the world worth remembrance but only thy goodness to us.<sup>59</sup>

To avoid the falsehoods of earthly existence, Elizabeth chose to turn as much as possible from this world to look to what she felt was the truth of God and his heavenly kingdom.

In light of these beliefs and her dramatic reaction to the collapse of her courtship with Dryden, Elizabeth had ample reason for deciding she would never again entertain the possibility of marriage. Much of this resignation came from Elizabeth's fear that her decision to enter into courtship with Dryden had incurred sombre spiritual repercussions. In many respects, she had come full circle to the stance she had on marriage when she had lived in London at the age of eighteen. As she wrote, recollecting that in 1633:

Now I thought I was much the better by reason my father troubled me not with speaking to me of Marriage and I now resolued if he or any other shoulde aske me to stand out fearing I had offended [God] in yeelding too soone afore. I found great comfort in this resolution considering what I had desired of thee [God].<sup>60</sup>

As clearly demonstrated, Elizabeth felt that she had offended God; love for an earthly man had caused her spiritual father to punish her by removing Dryden from her life. To prevent something similar happening again, Elizabeth turned her back on marriage. She recalled that, in the same year, 'a kinsman of Mr. Dryden, his whom I should formerly haue had would haue bine a suter to me'. Elizabeth explained that her father again 'asked me if I was willing', but this time, 'I refused'. Another man, whom Elizabeth called 'Mr. Fant', declared his love for her in the same year, but she had no real interest despite feeling sympathy when she heard that he was near death: 'Now my Sister told me betimes one morning Mr. Fant was ill like to die which stroke very cold to my hart so suddenly that sorrow & pittie tooke place where loue did not.' Elizabeth's aversion to

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., fo. 32v.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., fo. 26v.

courtship and marriage extended well beyond another Dryden and Mr Fant; at least two other men came to win her hand in 1633, one of whom Sir John was extremely eager to see her wed. In speaking of these would-be suitors, she described: ‘now my father being much sought unto for me in Marriage moued me with it’. Yet she ‘flatly refused it and said it was against me (for I found it not to be agreeable to my natural inclination, being so long before minded to the contrary)’. The result could well have been a dispute between father and daughter, but, as with the Isham–Dryden arrangement, Sir John respected Elizabeth’s wishes: ‘I suppose my father thought to put them off, with standing upon those condishons which they there friends would not yeeld to & many times pretending to others that he liked not of there estate.’ Much as before, Sir John seems to have been acutely concerned with his daughter’s feelings regarding the prospect of marriage.

Sir John’s fondness for Elizabeth, however, did not prevent him from attempting to change her mind. Elizabeth made it explicitly clear in her autobiography that her father, whilst respecting her desires, nonetheless wanted to see her become the wife of a well-respected gentleman. Frustrated with her persistent refusals, in 1633, he threatened her financial security if she did not concede to marriage:

he would not giue me as much portion if I liued single as he intended if I married, but I said I esteemed his fauor about any thing I looked for at his hand let him giue me what he pleased; my mind was more to me then wealth.<sup>61</sup>

Such a disregard for wealth made it extremely difficult for Sir John to persuade Elizabeth to marry, but it did not prevent him from continuing to suggest suitors. In 1634, he presented two potential husbands, perhaps hoping that Elizabeth had finally dropped her aversion to marriage. For her part, Elizabeth admitted that she occasionally had positive thoughts about wedlock, but such thoughts seem to have been fleeting at best: ‘I founde my selfe more reasonable till I was put to it whether I would marry or not which troubled me to thinke of especially if I thought to yeeld & much content I found in standing out.’ With such feelings, Elizabeth again chose to reject Sir John’s proposed matches for her.<sup>62</sup>

Elizabeth’s rejection of the new suitors finally proved to Sir John that there was no longer any point in trying to marry his daughter off; she remained unmovable, and to his credit, he ultimately respected her wishes. In 1636, Sir John and his son, Justinian, agreed to provide Elizabeth with an annuity of £300 from the manor of Lampport, with the exception that if they paid her one lump sum of £4,000, the annuity would end.<sup>63</sup> Furthermore, in 1648, Sir John arranged that she would be a major benefactor in a loan he provided to Sir William Fitzwilliam of Milton. For collateral, Sir William agreed to mortgage his estate of Helpston in Northamptonshire to the Ishams, with the sum of the profits of the estate to serve

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, fo. 27r.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, fo. 28r.

<sup>63</sup> Isham MSS, NRO, IL 1256. See also Finch, *Five Northamptonshire families*, pp. 34–5.

as Elizabeth's portion.<sup>64</sup> With such financial backing and her father's permission to continue living at Lamport, Elizabeth had the economic means to fulfil her desire never to marry.

Elizabeth's remaining years, while far from uneventful, are woefully documented. In 1644, the Civil War directly affected Lamport, when parliamentary troops ransacked Lamport Hall.<sup>65</sup> By this time, Elizabeth's mother and sister were dead, leaving only Elizabeth and Sir John. Royalist, like the rest of the family, Justinian spent time at Charles I's court in Oxford. At some point during the Civil War, Sir John became infirm, leaving Elizabeth to run the household, whilst her brother lived in exile. With Sir John's death in 1651, Justinian returned to Lamport and became a knight and baronet. Elizabeth would live another three years with the new Isham patriarch and his family, continuing to cultivate her austere piety until her death in 1654.<sup>66</sup>

#### IV

Once again Elizabeth's experience highlights the rather narrow perspective that the dichotomy of romantic love and economics imposes on our understanding of early modern marriage formation. After the dissolution of the Isham–Dryden match, it was neither love nor economics that influenced Elizabeth to decline all other suitors, but rather it was her religious aversion to marriage that was the leading factor in her decision. Elizabeth's refusal to marry also throws into sharp relief a larger question about courtship and marriage; how much power did children of the gentry have in deciding whom they would marry? Stone has contended that, by the early seventeenth century, many landed parents gradually began to allow a degree of veto power to their children over proposed marriage partners. He has stressed, however, that few dependants, especially women, ever exercised such a right in reality and, if they did, it was only once and rarely twice. This was largely due to economic considerations and the fact that refusing marriage could condemn a woman to a life of singlehood, being a status that Stone, like Hill, deemed a social 'black hole' which no woman wanted to enter.<sup>67</sup> Yet, as Elizabeth's case illustrates, she did utilize her power of veto and thereafter did so often when her father continued to present eligible bachelors after the Dryden courtship. Her action thus supports such scholars as MacFarlane and Cressy who have asserted that children – specifically daughters – had power in deciding whom they would marry.<sup>68</sup>

<sup>64</sup> Isham MSS, NRO, IL 3220. See also Finch, *Five Northamptonshire families*, pp. 34–5.

<sup>65</sup> Elizabeth Isham to Justinian Isham, 1644, Isham MSS, NRO, IC 3274; Justinian Isham to Elizabeth Isham, 1644, Isham MSS, NRO, IC 3275.

<sup>66</sup> Isham, ed., *Duppa and Isham*, pp. xxix–xliv; Elizabeth Isham's listing of events in her life, Isham MSS, NRO, IL 3365; Aughterson, 'Isham, Elizabeth', in *DNB*; Priestly, 'Isham, Justinian', in *DNB*.

<sup>67</sup> Stone, *Family, sex, marriage*, pp. 86–91, 180–91.

<sup>68</sup> MacFarlane, *Marriage and love*, ch. 7; Cressy, *Birth, marriage, and death*, pp. 252–60.

Nevertheless Elizabeth experienced social consequences by remaining single, lending credence to Stone and Hill's assessment that singlehood could have negative repercussions for early modern women. After she sealed her fate in 1634, she became the subject of gossip that revolved around puzzlement why she did not marry:

In this time my Sister telling me the seuerall opinion of diuers concerning me, which for the most part she thought was in the wrong, [they] immagining why I did not marry, some thought I was perswaded by some about me, others that I was proud or mallancolly, or for dislike of it refused.

This talk somewhat worried Elizabeth, leaving her with a sense that she had been unwise in refusing all suitors, but she chose to use the gossip for her spiritual benefit, ultimately disregarding what others said of her:

yet this use I made of it [gossip] to examine myselfe whether I was any waies guilty of that they said of me that I might mend myselfe before thee my God, whom I most feared & so that my waies were acceptable before thee I cared not how I was esteemed of by others.<sup>69</sup>

Whilst, in the end, Elizabeth cared more of what God thought of her actions than people did, she nonetheless worried how Sir John felt of her refusal to marry. She expressed as much when remembering the last two men he presented to her in 1634: 'Now it was some sorrow to mee to thinke that I could not condiseend to my fathers desire [that she marry] and haue my owne, for my father hauing two whom he intended or thought fitt to marry; many thoughts pleaded within me for him.'<sup>70</sup> Her sorrow probably derived from her defiance of Sir John's patriarchal authority, as well as from her devotion and affection for him. Yet Elizabeth's inclination to honour her father conflicted with her desire to devote herself to God and remain single. This conflict in turn caused her considerable anxiety:

I now thought it a hard matter to withstand my fathers desire and herein I thought not my will absalute without his neither would I be rebellious therefore I thought to bend my owne mind to my fathers, yet herein I perceiued I went against my natural inclination, which would be some trouble to me as I found then beginning when I thought it besides I knew my fathers intention of Marriage of me was for my good, yet seeing I could not safely alter my mind, I was forced to withstand his desire.

Elizabeth was therefore emotionally torn because of her decision not to marry. She wished to adhere to her father's plans, not only because she desired to show him respect, but also because she realized that he was acting with her best intentions. Such anxiety also underscores the discomfort that, as Hill asserts, many never-married women felt in the seventeenth century.

Yet it would be erroneous simply to view Elizabeth as a victim. Above all, it was *her* decision to remain single, for, as she explained, she found it to be the most advantageous status to allow the cultivation of her ascetic piety. 'I might haue

<sup>69</sup> Isham, 'My booke of remembrance', fo. 29r.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, fo. 28r.

changed [choosing marriage]’, Elizabeth explained, ‘to haue bettered my selfe but it was rather contrary to hauing that true content [living an ascetic life] which I thought the world could not giue.’<sup>71</sup> Hence while her decision to remain single brought some guilt and discomfort, it generally delighted her. Calling her unmarried state the ‘priuet life’, Elizabeth recorded her feelings on remaining single:

For I supposed if wee be industerous in an honest calling and hauing that content which doth spring from the root of all goodnesse wee haue enough. I haue bine so well pleased with this priuat life that I haue verily thought you [God] hast fitted me for it though I confesse I haue sometimes desired a little more liberty but seeing my fathers mind was not so much for it, I haue bene very well passified so that I haue thought it thine [God’s] owne doing to make us so like, for thou onely O Lord doest know how sweet a priuet life hath bine to me.<sup>72</sup>

Elizabeth Isham’s lyric evocation of the joys of ‘this priuet life’ presents a timely caution to Hill’s broad generalization that single life was not ideal for early modern women. It is true that Elizabeth expressed that her father did not permit her as much freedom, suggesting that Sir John perhaps did not allow her much movement away from the confines of Lampport. His decision to limit Elizabeth’s liberty may have come from Sir John’s possible resentment toward his daughter’s refusal to marry; he may have loved Elizabeth and respected her choice, but he did not necessarily agree with it. For Elizabeth, however, happiness came from her belief that being single was her vocational calling and a role that she felt God had chosen her to fill and practise to her fullest abilities. In Elizabeth’s mind, the proper way to practise such a role was by devoting herself wholeheartedly to God, and this devotion gave her ease as she spent the remainder of her days at Lampport Hall with little opportunity to leave the family estate. She had acquired the greatest freedom of all for her: to live life in the way she saw fit, in prayer and meditation.

This account of Elizabeth Isham’s life supports Froide’s assertion that marital status greatly determined how women in the early modern period constructed their identities. Elizabeth’s life, most likely, would have taken a different path had she married Dryden; she would have achieved the norm that English society expected of adult women – that of wife and, perhaps eventually, mother. Marriage would have also accorded Elizabeth the potential of becoming a widow, since Dryden died in December 1631, only months after the Isham–Dryden talks dissolved. As a widow, Elizabeth would have become the head of her own household and, if pregnant with a boy before her husband’s death, she would also have acquired considerable status as the mother of the eventual heir of the Dryden estates.

The most obvious of the factors militating against such an outcome, of course, was the financial disagreement between Elizabeth’s father and Sir Erasmus. But,

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, fo. 29r.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, fo. 29v.



as her account reveals, Elizabeth herself played a significant role in determining whether or not her suitor would eventually become her husband. Indeed, she ultimately had the final say in the Isham–Dryden marriage talks; had she been willing, Elizabeth’s father would presumably have worked to finalize the arrangement with the Drydens. Yet she chose not to, because of her sense of honour and love for her father. Her relationship with Sir John was certainly fraught with ambiguities and tensions, and her decision not to have him bend to the Drydens later led her to curse him. Nevertheless, Elizabeth’s affection for her father illustrates that love could play a role in the process of marriage formation, but not in the way that most historians have conceived it; her story forces scholars to consider the impact of familial love, for it was plainly a determining factor in why Elizabeth did not wed Dryden. Likewise, Elizabeth’s choice to protect Sir John’s honour and her own in the face of the Drydens’ demands further encourages scholars to recognize that factors other than romantic love and economics could be powerful determinants in marriage formation. Additional encouragement comes from Elizabeth’s personal piety, since it led her never to entertain the idea of marriage again. By making such a decision, Elizabeth came full circle to her original stance on marriage before the Dryden affair. Her choice also freed her from the expected role of wife that mainstream society deemed proper for seventeenth-century English women. With such freedom Elizabeth felt she found her vocational calling, creating an austere and pious identity that revolved around God, which illustrates that singlehood was not a social ‘black-hole’ for all women in the early modern period. Consequently, in rejecting earthly marriage, Elizabeth wed herself to God, trusting that he would be her salvation.