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## FRANCIS COPPINGER'S SECRET MARRIAGE

On Friday 28 May 1596, at about eleven o'clock at night, a young couple were married in the chapel of the Savoy hospital. The bridegroom, Francis Coppinger, was seventeen or eighteen years old.<sup>1</sup> The bride was his cousin, Elizabeth Randolph. Earlier in the day, the pair had ridden up to Westminster from their uncle Ambrose Coppinger's house in Harlington, Middlesex. They arrived at an inn in Charing Cross at around seven o'clock in the evening. They set out for the Savoy an hour or two later, accompanied by John Biggs and Robert Dugdale. The former was a clergyman, the latter a servant of Ambrose Coppinger. Biggs married Elizabeth and Francis in the presence of Dugdale, a clerk named Thomas Gallard and a 'Wayting gentlewoman' named Wright.<sup>2</sup> After the ceremony, the newlyweds and Dugdale returned to Charing Cross by boat, and spent the night there.<sup>3</sup>

Unfortunately for Francis and Elizabeth, their clandestine marriage incurred the 'high displeasure' of the most influential men in Elizabethan England.<sup>4</sup> William Brooke, tenth baron Cobham (1527-1597) was lord warden of the Cinque Ports, a privy councillor and lord chamberlain of the royal household. He had served Queen Elizabeth as a courtier and diplomat since the start of her reign, only falling temporarily from favour in the aftermath of the Ridolfi plot (1571). He was a long-standing friend of Elizabeth's closest advisor, Lord Burghley. His second wife Frances, who died

1 According to a 'Note of the value of M<sup>r</sup> Copinger landes', Francis Coppinger was sixteen on 18 December in the thirty seventh year of Elizabeth's reign (1595). As the document is dated 1594, it seems strange that Francis' age in 1595 is recorded. It is possible that Francis was actually sixteen on 18 December 1594. It is very unlikely that he was as young as sixteen on 28 May 1596, as he subsequently sought to explain his elopement by referring to his circumstances 'from xvij yeares of age'. Staffordshire Record Office, D593/P/5/3/4/1.

2 The name 'Peter Lyly' appears on the marriage certificate issued for Francis and Elizabeth. Lyly, like Biggs, was a chaplain at the Savoy. However, Biggs later admitted that Lyly was not present at the wedding. See the 'testimonyal of the maryage' and the 'Questyons moued to M<sup>r</sup> Bygges one of *the* Chapleyns of the Savoye concernyng the Mariadge of M<sup>r</sup> Coppinger', Staffs. RO, D593/P/5/3/4/1.

3 'francys Copyngers confession', Staffs. RO, D593/P/5/3/4/1.

4 'Mystrys rayndolle To the Right honorable my verie good Lord the *Lord* Cobham', Staffs. RO, D593/P/5/3/4/1.

in 1592, had been a gentlewoman of the privy chamber and a trusted confidante of the Queen for over three decades. Despite his advanced years, Cobham was still a very active and powerful member of the political establishment in 1596. He was certainly not a man who could easily be crossed.<sup>5</sup>

Cobham was Francis Coppinger's grandfather. In 1545, before he inherited his father's title, William Brooke married Dorothy Neville. The marriage was not a success, and the couple eventually separated. Their only child was a daughter named Frances, born on 31 July 1549.<sup>6</sup> Dorothy died on 22 September 1559, almost exactly a year after her husband became Lord Cobham. Cobham sent his daughter to live with her maternal uncle, Henry Neville, fourth baron Abergavenny. He had very little contact with her thereafter, and seems to have devoted all his energy and affection to the family he raised with his second wife, Frances Newton, whom he married in 1560. In 1566, Frances Brooke married Thomas Coppinger, a Kentish gentleman. Frances and Thomas had five sons, the eldest of whom was William Coppinger. Thomas Coppinger died on 21 March 1580; his widow married a London merchant named Edward Becher on 5 October 1580. Cobham procured the wardship of William Coppinger within seven months of Thomas' death. On 8 September 1594, William Coppinger died childless. His younger brother Francis was left as head of the Coppinger family, and became Cobham's presumptive ward. However, Francis' wardship was not formally conferred upon Cobham until 1 March 1597.<sup>7</sup>

By May 1596, Cobham already had matrimonial plans for Francis Coppinger. He wanted his grandson to marry Mary More, the daughter of George More and granddaughter of Sir William More.<sup>8</sup> Sir William was an MP, and (among other offices) deputy lieutenant of Surrey and Suffolk.

5 David McKeen, *A memory of honour: the life of William Brooke, Lord Cobham*, 2 vols (Salzburg, 1986).

6 Cobham also gave the name Frances to a daughter by his second wife. See McKeen, *Memory of honour*, 1, 53.

7 McKeen, *Memory of honour*, 1, 47-53. Documents relating to Cobham's acquisition of the wardships of William and Francis Coppinger can be found at Staffs. RO, D593/P/5/3/1.

8 Subsequently, when Cobham's servants were questioned about Francis' elopement, the interrogators suggested that Cobham intended his grandson to marry another of George More's daughters, Ann. However, Francis himself clearly stated that he was told to marry Mary. 'Interrogatories to to be ministerid to Finche and Nicholas Foster', Staffs. RO, D593/P/5/3/4/1. Ann More infuriated her father five years later, with her own secret marriage to John Donne. See M. Thomas Hester, Roger Parker Sorlien and Dennis Flynn, 'Introduction', in *John Donne's marriage letters in the Folger Shakespeare Library*, ed. by Hester, Sorlien and Flynn (Washington DC, 2005), pp. 10-32 (pp. 10-19).

He built Loseley House in Surrey, and received the Queen there. He maintained long-term friendships with leading luminaries of the Elizabethan court, such as Burghley and the earl of Leicester.<sup>9</sup> His son George was also an MP and local administrator.<sup>10</sup> Cobham ‘liked soe well of [Mary More] and her parentage’ that he sent Francis to stay with the family for a over fortnight, to let the boy become acquainted with his future bride. Francis was favourably impressed, and sent Mary a pair of gloves as a love-token.<sup>11</sup> This gesture was significant, because gloves were a popular choice among the gifts that were commonly exchanged by parties intending to marry.<sup>12</sup> Francis also told Cobham that he ‘could be contented to marrie’ Mary ‘if his lordship were so pleased’. A second visit to Sir William More’s house was arranged – which, Francis explained, he would have undertaken ‘if I had not bin withdrawne to phancie and marrie’ elsewhere in the mean time.<sup>13</sup>

The cousin to whom Francis transferred his ‘phancie’ was the daughter of Ursula Coppinger and Thomas Randolph. Ursula was the sister of Francis’ father, Thomas Coppinger. Thomas Randolph (1525/6-1590) was a distinguished diplomat. He was particularly close to Sir Francis Walsingham, to whom he was related by marriage.<sup>14</sup> Randolph’s *DNB* biographer describes his relationship with Cobham as ‘equivocal’, noting that Randolph ‘sent Walsingham nervous secret denunciations of Cobham’s relatives – though not him – for corruption’. Nonetheless, Randolph’s will, drawn up in 1589, named Cobham as one of the men whom he hoped would help his widow secure the wardship of their eldest son, Thomas. The other potential protectors whom Randolph nominated for Ursula and Thomas were Walsingham and Sir Walter Mildmay.<sup>15</sup> Both, however, predeceased Randolph.<sup>16</sup> When her husband died on 8 June 1590, Ursula Randolph therefore placed herself and her children

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9 William B. Robison, ‘Sir William More (1520-1600)’, in ‘More, Sir Christopher (b. in or before 1483, d. 1549)’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 60 vols (Oxford, 2004), vol. 39, 34-6 (35-6).

10 Lewis A. Knafla, ‘More, Sir George (1553-1632)’, *DNB*, vol. 39, 37-9.

11 Francis Coppinger, ‘I doe acknowledge and hereby confesse...’, Staffs. RO, D593/P/5/3/4/1.

12 Diana O’Hara, *Courtship and constraint: rethinking the making of marriage in Tudor England* (Manchester, 2000), pp. 57-98, esp. p. 69.

13 Francis Coppinger, ‘I doe acknowledge and hereby confesse...’, Staffs. RO, D593/P/5/3/4/1.

14 William Camden, *The historie of the life and reigne of that famouse princesse Elizabeth* (London, 1634), pp. 38-9.

15 Julian Lock, ‘Thomas Randolph (1525/6-1590)’, *DNB*, vol. 46, 14-20.

16 Mildmay died on 31 May 1589, a mere two months after Randolph drafted his will. Walsingham died on 6 April 1590.

in Cobham's protection.<sup>17</sup>

After the event, Francis Coppinger suggested that marriage with Elizabeth Randolph was his idea. He testified that he approached Ambrose Coppinger on Monday 24 May, to inform the latter that 'there was loue betwene, my cosen Elizabeth Rand: and me, and such, as I ment to marie her'. He asked Ambrose to win Cobham round to the match. On Thursday, whilst still awaiting news of his grandfather's reaction, he engaged Mr Biggs to marry him and his cousin. On Friday, Ambrose returned home to report that he had failed in his mission; Cobham disapproved entirely of Francis' scheme. Unwilling to concede defeat, Francis seized the initiative and took Elizabeth off to London immediately. According to this version of events, the elopement was predominantly Francis' project.<sup>18</sup> However, Cobham clearly suspected that the whole escapade had been orchestrated by Ambrose Coppinger.<sup>19</sup> His servants were asked whether Francis or anyone else had revealed 'what *somme* of money or other consideracion was *promised* him in marriage with his nowe wieff', and whether anyone had suggested 'that M<sup>r</sup> Ambrose Copinger meant to make him his heire for marreing with the said Eliz. Randall. Or that the said Ambrose liked him the better for mareing with her'.<sup>20</sup> Francis himself was required to account for details that appeared to incriminate Ambrose – such as the convenient availability of horses to take him and Elizabeth from Harlington to London on their wedding day.<sup>21</sup> Cobham's suspicions were probably justified; as his biographer David McKeen points out, his plans for Francis would have detached the young man from his paternal relatives, and placed him in the orbit of a new family.<sup>22</sup> Ambrose may well have believed that it would better serve the Coppingers' interests to have Francis marry Elizabeth than to see him make a strategic alliance on behalf of his maternal relations.

Cobham was certainly determined to blame someone for Francis' disobedience. Servants from his

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17 BL, Lansdowne MS 67, fol. 82<sup>r</sup>.

18 'Francys Copyngers confession', Staffs. RO, D593/P/5/3/4/1.

19 For biographical details of Ambrose, see Charles Henry Cooper and Thomson Cooper, *Athenae Cantabrigienses*, 3 vols (Cambridge, 1858-1913), II (1861), 379.

20 'Interogatories to to be ministerid to Finche and Nicholas Foster', Staffs. RO, D593/P/5/3/4/1.

21 'Frayncys copingers ansuer to the interogatoryes', Staffs. RO, D593/P/5/3/4/1.

22 McKeen, *Memory of honour*, II, 641.

own household and that of Ambrose Coppinger were interrogated, and those who were complicit in the elopement felt the full force of Cobham's displeasure. The baron had his baker, John Punter, imprisoned; in a pathetic letter, Punter begged Cobham to release him, if only for the sake of his poor mother, 'who other [w]ise will perish for extreem sorowe'.<sup>23</sup> John Biggs, the Savoy chaplain, was hauled before interrogators to account for his part in 'th'offensive and wycked mariage of M<sup>r</sup> Coppinger'.<sup>24</sup> Ursula Randolph was desperately afraid that her daughter's escapade would cost her Cobham's 'countenance towardes me and myne'. She wrote to her protector, protesting that the marriage 'is a matter don without my knoweledge or consent'. She assured him that, 'haveinge examyned every *particuler person* within my House, I can not fynde any Childe or *Servant* I haue was therewith acquainted'.<sup>25</sup> Francis' minders were accused of gross negligence. They were angrily charged with allowing Cobham's grandson to keep bad company, and to stay up all night drinking with 'the meanest of the servauntes & other baze persons'. This lifestyle, it was alleged, made Francis wilful and unruly – to the extent that he was prepared to compromise his family's honour and interests by disrupting Cobham's carefully laid marriage plans. Francis declared himself 'hartelie sorrie', for the trouble he had caused, and expressed the hope that 'through my confession and hartie repentanse his lordship will voucsafe not accordinge to the meritt of mine offence but in the greate compassion, of his *Lordship's* fatherlie loue and tender affection, to forgiue me my fault and receiue me his poore grandchild into fauour againe'.<sup>26</sup>

Among all the apologies and explanations, however, one document strikes a discordantly defiant note. Francis drew up a statement of his grievances, which bristled with indignation at the treatment he had received from Cobham and others who were supposed to be concerned for his welfare.<sup>27</sup> Most of his complaints were financial. He claimed that after the death of his father,

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23 'Jhon Poynter To the Right honorable the *Lord Cobham*', Staffs. RO, D593/P/5/3/4/1.

24 'Questyons moued to M<sup>r</sup> Bygges one of *the* Chapleyns of the Savoye concernynge the Mariadge of M<sup>r</sup> Coppinger', Staffs. RO, D593/P/5/3/4/1.

25 'Mystrys rayndolle To the Right honorable my verie good Lord the *Lord Cobham*', Staffs. RO, D593/P/5/3/4/1.

26 In a separate statement, Francis also referred to 'my vnfeined desire to recouer some part of your Lordships fauour'. Francis Coppinger, 'I doe acknowledge and hereby confesse...'; 'To the right honorable my verie good Lord and graundfather the *Lord Cobham*', Staffs. RO, D593/P/5/3/4/1.

27 As well as complaining about the Brooke family, Francis stated that 'Twoo Leases belonginge tyme owte of mynd

Thomas Coppinger, his grandfather had visited the newly widowed Frances Coppinger and ‘used muche speeche, savouringe of *honourable* affection an[d] love towardes my saide mother and her Children’. According to Francis (who claimed that Ambrose Coppinger could verify his story), Cobham promised to look after the daughter whose existence he had hitherto barely acknowledged, and to defend the interests of her children. However, he disapproved of her subsequent marriage to Edward Becher. Whilst insisting that neither ‘he nor none of his’ would exploit Frances’ sons, he diverted the profits from the lands that had been bequeathed to William Coppinger (and were later inherited by Francis). Francis also claimed that Cobham had over-compensated himself for the fines that he paid to the Crown for the acquisition of his grandsons’ wardships. He pointed out that Cobham had been an executor of Thomas Coppinger’s will, and was consequently responsible for ensuring that its provisions were honoured. Coppinger had stipulated that Francis and another of his younger sons, Thomas, should have an allowance: ‘But to this hower there was never penny paid hereof, saveinge for my owne mainteynance vij. or vij. yeares past’. Francis’ elder brother William had been forced to incur certain debts, which Francis had inherited (including, interestingly, ‘well neare iij yeares bord to mistris Randolphe’). Furthermore, the Coppinger lands and manors had been woefully neglected during the minorities of Thomas Coppinger’s sons.<sup>28</sup>

Francis’ experience was far from unique. Throughout the sixteenth century, it was argued that wards and their estates were routinely subjected to gross financial exploitation. As Joel Hurstfield explained, wardship was originally a feudal institution, grounded on the assumption that the king would grant land to his followers in return for military service. If an estate bestowed on such terms devolved to a child, the king’s interests were compromised, as his new vassal was unable to fight for him. He consequently assumed guardianship of the child and the estate until the former came of age. Clearly, however, no ruler could personally supervise the upbringing of all juvenile landowners, or the administration of their inheritances. The Plantagenet kings thus developed the

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to one of my Mansion howses called Alhallowes’ had been taken over by his stepfather, Edward Becher. ‘Proof of my Grevaunces’, Staffs. RO, D593/P/5/3/4/1.

<sup>28</sup> ‘Proof of my Grevaunces’, Staffs. RO, D593/P/5/3/4/1.

practice of selling off their rights to act *in loco parentis*. The early Tudors were quick to grasp the lucrative potential of this practice. In 1540, the Court of Wards was established, to oversee the sale of wardships and the leasing out of wards' lands.<sup>29</sup> Dealings with Court tended to be protracted and expensive; but many suitors regarded the acquisition of a wardship as a worthwhile investment. Speculators could – and did – recoup their initial outlay by milking their wards' estates for short-term profit. In such cases, the unfortunate minor might find the value of his lands sadly depleted when he finally came of age.<sup>30</sup>

Francis also claimed that he and William had been denied a proper education. This neglect, he insinuated, made his elopement an accident waiting to happen: 'it is notoriously knowene that I was not applied from xvij yeares of age to any course of studye or fitt education for those yeares, for lacke whereof I was the sooner over taken by my youthfull and vnstayed affections'.<sup>31</sup> Having been cast as a feckless and riotous youth, Francis thus turned the tables on his detractors by accepting the characterisation, and blaming his guardians for his unsteadiness. Throughout the Elizabethan era, concern had been expressed about the haphazard provision of schooling and training for youths in Francis' situation. Of course, many wards received an excellent education. Lord Burghley supervised the instruction of numerous orphaned aristocrats and gentleman in his London household. The programme he devised for the seventeenth earl of Oxford encompassed everything that a young nobleman needed to know – dancing, languages, composition, drawing, cosmography, penmanship, horsemanship, shooting and other accomplishments.<sup>32</sup> However, many guardians were disinclined to invest money or time on their charges' education. In 1561, Humphrey Gilbert warned the Queen that her wards were 'for the moste parte brought vp, to no small grief of their frendes, in Idlenes *and* lascivious pastimes, estranged from all serviceable vertues to their prince and Cowntrey, obscurely drowned in educac[i]on forsparing Charges, of purpose to abase their mindes,

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29 For most of Elizabeth's reign, the Master of the Wards was Cobham's good friend, Lord Burghley.

30 Joel Hurstfield, *The Queen's wards: wardship and marriage under Elizabeth I* (London, 1958), pp. 1-17; 84-93.

31 'Prooff of my Grevaunces', Staffs. RO, D593/P/5/3/4/1.

32 Alan H. Nelson, *Monstrous adversary: the life of Edward de Vere, seventeenth earl of Oxford* (Liverpool, 2003), pp. 35-7. See also Hurstfield, *Queen's wards*, pp. 255-9.

leaste, being better qualified, they should disdain to stowpe to the mariage of such purchasers daughters'. Gilbert proposed the establishment of an academy that would provide the royal wards with a comprehensive grounding in religion, chivalry and humanist scholarship, 'that all the World shall knowe and say, when the face of an English gentleman appeareth, that he is eyther a Sowldier, a philosopher, or a gallant Cowrtier'.<sup>33</sup> This scheme was never brought to fruition, and wards like Francis continued to complain that deficient education left them unprepared to serve their prince and country.

In his statement of grievances, Francis insisted that his grandfather had previously given him 'leave, and libertie of chosinge my Wife'. The guardian's right to select a marriage partner for his or her ward was probably the most bitterly resented aspect of Tudor wardship. It was also the prime attraction for investors to whom the acquisition of a wardship was purely a money-making enterprise. Wealthy, well-born wards were often matched with members of their guardians' extended families. The only stipulation for such matches was that they should not degrade the social status of the ward. If the ward refused to marry as his guardian dictated, he was liable to incur a swingeing fine.<sup>34</sup> Francis was not so badly treated. Cobham undoubtedly had his grandson's best interests at heart when he packed the latter off to Loseley House. An alliance with the Mores was an attractive prospect; had he proceeded with the courtship, Francis would have obtained a wealthy bride from a well-respected family, with useful political connections. We should also remember that he initially declared himself satisfied with Cobham's arrangements. Nonetheless, the young man's statement of grievances – not to mention his actions on 28 May 1596 – demonstrates his reluctance to accept that his grandfather should have the first and last word on

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33 Humphrey Gilbert, 'Queene Elizabethes achademy', in *Queene Elizabethes achademy, a booke of precedence, &c., with essays on Italian and German books of courtesy*, ed. by F. J. Furnivall, Early English Text Society, Extra Series no. VIII (London, 1869), pp. 1-12 (pp. 1; 11). The idea of an academy for wards was by no means new. In 1549, Hugh Latimer demanded to know 'why is there not a school for the wards, as well as there is a court for their lands? Why are they not set in schools where they may learn? Or why are they not sent to the universities, that they may be able to serve the king when they come to age?'. Hugh Latimer, *The sermons of Hugh Latimer*, ed. by John Watkins, 2 vols (London, 1824), I, 64. Sir Nicolas Bacon also drew up proposals for the establishment of a humanist school for wards. See Robert Tittler, *Nicholas Bacon, the making of a Tudor statesman* (Athens OH, 1976), pp. 59-60.

34 Hurstfield, *Court of wards*, pp. 18; 89.



his matrimonial prospects.

In 1596, Francis' choice of wife was disallowed. His marriage to Elizabeth Randolph was apparently annulled. The examiners who interviewed John Biggs were clearly looking for evidence of irregularities in the service at which he officiated. They reported triumphantly that 'Concerninge the Order of mariadg he *confesseth* that yt is [in his] Judgement altogether vnlawfull, and without Order; without Bannes, or weaving Sacrament. The words concerning mariadg in the booke of Common prayer were only vsed'. The phrase 'altogether vnlawfull, and without Order; without Bannes, or weaving Sacrament' was underlined. Nonetheless, it is difficult to identify the grounds on which the union of Francis and Elizabeth could have been declared invalid. Ecclesiastical law defined a simple exchange of vows as legally binding, as long as there were witnesses and the vows were made in the present tense. Hence, when Francis affirmed that he took Elizabeth to be his wedded wife, he bound himself irrevocably to her. A promise to marry at some point in the future could be broken if the relationship remained unconsummated – but Francis definitely stated that he and Elizabeth spent their wedding night together at Charing Cross.<sup>35</sup>

The ease with which consenting couples could forge marital alliances was a (surprisingly durable) legacy of twelfth century canon law.<sup>36</sup> Throughout the early modern era, attempts were made to ensure that the state and its established church policed the making of marriages more rigorously. In 1597, a parliamentary committee investigated the abuse of marriage licenses by 'vagrant ministers and lawless peculiars'. A dossier compiled for the committee cited the case of 'a young man in Oxford, who was Mr. Thinn's son and heir, married without his father's consent, by a licence'.<sup>37</sup> The problem of clandestine marriages was addressed at the start of James I's reign. As Lawrence Stone observed,

the canons of 1604 stipulated that a church wedding must take place between the hours of

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35 Lawrence Stone, *The family, sex and marriage in England: 1500-1800* (London, 1977), pp. 31-2.

36 O'Hara, *Courtship and constraint*, p.10.

37 John Strype, *The life and acts of John Whitgift*, 3 vols (Oxford, 1822), II (1822), 377. See also Leo Frank Solt, *Church and state in early modern England* (Oxford & New York, 1990), pp. 126-7.

8am and noon in the church at the place of residence of one of the pair, after the banns had been read for three weeks running. Marriages performed at night, in secular places like inns or private houses, or in towns or villages remote from the places of residence, would subject the officiating clergyman to serious penalties. The canons also forbade the marriage of persons under twenty-one without the consent of parents or guardians.<sup>38</sup>

Despite such initiatives, marriage law was not effectively reformed until 1753, when Lord Hardwicke passed his Act for the Better Preventing of Clandestine Marriage.<sup>39</sup>

The documents relating to the Coppinger elopement thus shed interesting light on the issues of wardship and marriage in early modern England. Francis' subsequent experience of both is worth recounting. Within a year of the elopement, the tenth Lord Cobham was dead. Francis was still a minor, and became the ward of Cobham's youngest son, George Brooke. In 1596, Francis' minders had been told that it was their responsibility 'to haue exhorted him to keepe the companie of his vncler M<sup>r</sup> George', instead of allowing him to waste his time with 'baze persons'.<sup>40</sup> Cobham presumably imagined that his son would be a stabilizing influence for Francis. Unfortunately for the latter, George Brooke was neither stable nor reliable. In 1599, he married Elizabeth Burgh. Francis was betrothed to George's new sister-in-law, Frances Burgh. George seduced and deserted Frances, leaving her pregnant.<sup>41</sup> This crisis can only have rekindled Francis' resentment of the Brooke family, and the influence that they exerted over him.

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38 Stone, *Family, sex and marriage*, p. 32.

39 John Witte, *From sacrament to contract: marriage, religion and law in the western tradition* (Louisville, 1997), pp. 159-62.

40 'Interrogatories to to be ministerid to Finche and Nicholas Foster', Staffs. RO, D593/P/5/3/4/1.

41 Bod. MS Carte 80, fol. 622<sup>r</sup>; McKeen, *Memory of honour*, II, 440-1.