Heroines of the Catholic Resistance. Female Recusancy in Elizabethan England

TJ Guile

Abstract

This article is a study of some aspects of the role of English Catholic women under Elizabeth I. It assesses how the Catholic faith was passed on in troubled times. It looks at how some Catholic women resisted the imposition of the established church and how they managed to access the sacraments and continue their devotions in secret. It argues that some English Catholic Women used their homes and servants to pass on the faith and support to the recusant English Catholic community as well. In fact, the use of a recusant woman's home as a haven for fellow recusants and itinerant priests was the main method of preserving Catholicism in England during this period.

During the reign of Elizabeth I, from 1585 onwards, as Catholic practice was removed from the parish church and gradually became more of a dissident, underground faith, some Catholic women applied their skills pragmatically and, together with lay men, became effective agents in the preservation of their faith. It could be argued that women were widely viewed as upholders of Catholic morality, serving primarily as matriarchs of the domestic household. Women of different ranks and strata of society were generally instructed and expected to become devoted mothers, and to rear and raise their children as proper Christians. However, a Catholic woman's role in sixteenth century society could be much more complicated than that. The term 'Church Papist' was used during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I to describe those who outwardly fully conformed to Anglicanism but who were secretly convinced Roman Catholics whilst 'recusant' was one who refused to attend services in their parish church. Catholicism adherence was a spectrum with lots of grey areas rather than a binary choice. Catholic recusant wives, widows, and daughters were something of a mystery for local authorities because their recusancy was not regulated by law in the same way as it was for men. There are several reasons for this. During the Tudor period, husbands controlled their wives' property and were responsible for their actions. In practice, however, women enjoyed a greater interest in their marital property than the law gave women, both during marriage and as a widow. Unmarried women's responsibilities were also not clear-cut in practice. Unmarried women and widows who had reached their 'majority' were deemed to be responsible for their own actions and therefore punishable for their actions which were contrary to common law. Access to wives' property could only occur at their husband's death when a will was proved. The government could, depending

on the case, tentatively seize two-thirds of their combined assets at his death because of her recusancy.[1]

By mutually supporting one another, English Catholic men and women ensured two very important outcomes. First, they assisted in the development of a network that allowed missionary priests to move throughout the country in the decades after 1570. Second, no Catholic community, urban, rural, gentry, aristocratic, man or woman, was left totally isolated from other Catholic communities or from continental Catholics or religious orders. The circulation of literature, devotional items, and news was possible because of recurrent connections among English Catholics especially through trade with the continent through the ports and via gentry 'safe houses' up and down the country. This should not, however, be over-emphasised. This network was not always consistent or extensive but in the crisis of tightening control by the state, it was generally enough for their immediate faith needs. The term Church Papist referred to Catholics who attended some or all services in the Church of England as required by the state but secretly considered themselves to be Catholics. People were allowed to keep their consciences to themselves. Some married couples came to arrangements such as the children could be brought up as Catholic except the first-born son who often had to be, at least publicly, an Anglican, to preserve property and land and inheritance rights. People often played a double game to satisfy the state and abide by the laws and statutes of parliament. Church Papists were often treated differently from those who refused to attend any church services at all. However, the lines were often blurred between recusant and church papist and shifted continually and varied within households and changed over time. Although church wardens were meant to keep lists of householders who did not regularly attend church services or who attended but refused communion for whatever reason, this was not always consistent.

Recusant wives, widows, and daughters were something of a mystery for local authorities because their recusancy was not regulated by law in the same manner as men. There are several reasons for this. Under Elizabethan laws, girls under the age of their majority were the responsibility of their father or ward. Once a woman married, her husband would control their wives' property and were responsible for their actions. Access to married women's property could only occur at their husband's death when a will was proved. The government could, depending on the case, at least in theory, seize two-thirds of her jointure, or marriage settlement, at his death for her recusancy. In practice, however, women enjoyed a greater interest in their marital property than the law gave them, both during marriage and as a widow. Unmarried women's responsibilities were also not clear-cut in practice. Spinsters and widows were given the category of 'competent age' and thus were responsible for their own actions and punishable.[2] These lack of rights, and thus of property, meant that it was very difficult for the authorities to impose fines on married women unless their husband paid the fine. Marshall points out that recusancy by wives of wealthy landowners was not

[1] Erickson, A, L, Women *and Property in Early Modern England (Routledge*, New York 1993) 18-20
[2] Erikson, AL 18-20

uncommon as wives, in theory, owned no property of their own and consequently, were hard to fine.[3]

This was clearly a challenge for the Privy Council and relied on local Justices of the Peace and Sheriffs to implement the laws. Some recusant women were able to exploit this loophole to evade the fines which they could, if the law had been different, have imposed on them. The perceived 'weaknesses' of women and girls could also be a possible cover for clandestine activities as they might not have been suspected. However, imprisonment of recusant, non-conforming women was one option for the authorities.

Recusant women were ordered not to proselytise or to influence children.[4] Recusancy and church Papism was particularly strong in York at this time. It was accepted by the authorities that 'a large proportion of the York recusants were the wives of Protestant tradesmen husbands.'[5] For women without property at the bottom of the social scale, the authorities had to be content with public humiliation such as placing them in the stocks which every community had at that time. The imposition of the laws against Catholics varied from place to place depending on who was in charge or the social status of the Catholic in question. One can see how local vendettas could be settled by denouncing your enemy as a Papist even if they were not a Catholic.

Women's recusancy could be divided broadly into two groups: devotional or personal piety and communal activities. The latter drew most attention from the authorities. Acts of individual Catholic piety in the home, while against the law, did not necessarily affect outsiders but could result in the potential conversion of children or a spouse. Aveling argues that the gentry's households could be divided into two types. The first were those run by either widows or recusant wives of conforming husbands. The second were the crucial and far more numerous ordinary households of which there was roughly one hundred. Out of the total of about three hundred households, roughly twenty were characterised as priests' residences. These homes served as operations bases for at least two priests who worked a circuit of the surrounding area. The reasoning for having the priests in pairs was so that they could hear each other's confessions. Normally, these homes were temporary because of the potential for raids. Women administered some of these households, but the largest group of the three hundred were termed "matriarchal households" where the ruling influence of the home was feminine.[6] These tended to be small recusant cells with the matriarch, children, and a few other close female relatives or friends. These women were encouraged to imitate the large Catholic houses, which there was nearly monastic regularity of prayer and devotion. Mass attendance was said to be both a devotional and a communal

---

[3] Marshall, P, *Heretics and Believers, A History of the English Reformation (*Yale, London, 2018) 550

[4] Rowlands, M, B, *Recusant Women, 1560-1640*, in Mary Prior, ed., *Women in English Society*, *1500-1800*, (Methuen &Co., Ltd, London 1985) 150-152

[5] Aveling, J. C H, Catholic *Households in Yorkshire, 1580-1603* (Taylor & Francis Online 2013) 59

[6] Aveling JCH 86-88

activity. First, while attending Mass, women interacted with other recusants, fugitive priests, and, potentially, continental Catholics. Individuals could exchange information, devotional literature, sacramentals, goods, and money at this time. Second, attending Mass distinctly separated recusants from the conforming Anglicans in a community and effectively helped give a devotional foundation for the continuing Catholic community. While these women worked to help fellow recusants, the devotional life they stimulated gave the communal life of their homes and local community a Catholic nature. The primary means for inspiring local or family devotional life was the Mass. To celebrate Mass, either in a home or in some secret place, priests had to be smuggled to that location. These women would often bring children, servants, and friends to Mass. The unpredictable nature of when the next Mass might be held probably inspired some to risk raid and imprisonment by attendance. It was very high stakes. All of this was achieved under sustained pressure from recusancy laws to conform. It was these communities the authorities wished to penetrate with their network of spies and informers. It must have been a difficult time not knowing who to trust and what you could or could not say to neighbours, tenants, servants, friends or even relatives.

By 1590, Elizabeth I's chief advisor, William Cecil, Lord Burghley had singled out women recusants, and especially high-ranking gentlewomen, as a special problem and had decided that one of his priorities should be ensuring that these recusant wives be indicted, condemned and imprisoned. Cecil set as the main goal of English policy the creation of a united and Protestant nation. The obstinacy of female recusants, especially in the north of England, was a problem he had to try to solve. Henry Hastings, the Earl of Huntingdon and the President of the Council of the North, tried to solve this problem by imprisoning more recusant females as a way of trying to persuade other women not to follow their example. He apparently took his task seriously and in 1592 opened new prisons in which to incarcerate them. He committed twenty-three gentle women, including Margaret Dormer, the wife of Sir Henry Constable of Constable Burton; the wives of Thomas Metham, William Ingleby, Ralph Babthorpe, Ralph Lawson, Marmaduke Cholmeley; and Katherine Radcliffe who was a spinster. These women were apparently not deterred by this, as one priest reported, referring to the old faith: 'The gents were much fallen off, but the gentlewomen stood steadfastly to it.'[7] As noted earlier, the persecution of Catholics was not uniformly imposed, and it varied from place to place but government efforts were sufficient to warrant clandestine activities by women for the sake of the recusant community. Recusant women were sometimes able to act as go-betweens amongst their family members and co-religionists who were either imprisoned or under house arrest. Some harboured itinerant priests and recusants moving through the countryside. Others often sent relief to imprisoned recusants. Money was often collected from sympathetic families and was taken by women to prisoners in gaol under the noses of the authorities. Wives were usually able to visit their husbands in gaol. After all, it was considered part of a wife's duty to her spouse to discuss legal or household matters. As a result of this, the minimum duration for the wives to remain at most places of imprisonment was one month. This system aimed to prevent

[7] Bossy, J, *The English Catholic Community, 1570-1850* (Darton, Longman &Todd, London 1975) 156

recusant women from acting as messengers or bringing their men what the authorities might have suspected as what they might call Popish 'trish trash' such as rosary beads. By January 1588, local authorities were still unsure of how to proceed against women who persisted in recusancy but whose husbands were communicant members of the established church. Some bishops, priests and magistrates advocated the taking out of bonds against the conformed husband to ensure his wife would remain at home and not interact with those who were of the Popish religion. Men were encouraged to control their wives by any means including beating, in order that they did what they were told. Local magistrates brought charges against women because, according to the Privy Council, wives were examples to their whole families and would cause disorder if they were not detained. Like their male counterparts, the highest-ranking or most disruptive recusant women were to be detained until their husbands had gained some measure of control over them. We know that some 'church Papist' men had recusant wives and some practicing Anglicans did too such as the husband of St Margaret Clitherow. It was sometimes expedient to turn a blind eye or ignore what their wives were doing behind their back. Surprisingly, despite their views on dangers of recusant women, the Privy Council was sometimes merciful with imprisoned recusant women. These recusant women must have assisted each other and used other resources, such as servants and relatives, to maintain links between families and friends throughout the country and in continental countries where Catholicism was allowed such as France, Spain and the Low Countries. Servants and tenants were often carefully chosen from good Catholic families either locally or elsewhere in the country. More importantly, the women must have helped to make sure members of their families had some relief from outside pressures from the authorities to conform.

Women could not tramp the lanes as guides or bodyguards for priests but what they did do was to make a distinct and vital contribution. As Connelly points out, what women could do was to achieve the same purposes by ways more acceptable to the sensitivities of their contemporaries and the most important and most valuable thing they could do was to stay at home within their own recognized sphere of domestic responsibility and there make adequate provision for the reception and safety of the priest visitors delivered to them by the men.[8]

It could be argued that recusant women's family and social relationships as well as their determination not to be coerced by the patriarchal society they found themselves in, or even, in some cases, their own husbands and fathers, must have aided the survival of Catholicism in both towns and rural areas. Without their courage, stoicism, obstinacy and grim determination let alone their unwavering faith in God, Catholicism may have been virtually extinguished in England during the sixteenth century. Recusant women provided the necessary social glue to keep different recusant families close together and to allow them to support each other. The sacrifice Catholic mothers made in sending their sons and daughters away to the continent to become priests or nuns cannot be underestimated

[8] Connelly, R, *Women of the Catholic Resistance: In England 1540-1680* (Pentland Press, Bishop Auckland, 1997) 3

either. Some of those priests returned to England to minister to the faithful. Many priests travelled the roads, using secrecy and subterfuge, often assuming aliases, sometimes under cover of darkness, to bring the sacraments to the scattered faithful community but always aided by the women they visited. Risking their lives daily, they played cat and mouse with the authorities and by hiding priests in priest hides in the houses of the local gentry, they defied the laws prohibiting the celebration of the mass and Catholic sacraments. Catholic women were clearly central to this enterprise and must have cooperated with others to achieve their goals. The many priest hides which have survived, such as those at Harvington Hall, near Kidderminster, are testament enough to the courage and ingenuity of these Catholic families. In addition, several recusant women were instruments in both conversion and apologetics. Certainly, their contribution was just as vital in maintaining the Catholic faith as was the work of their husbands, brothers, fathers, and friends.

TJ Guile

Sources

Aveling, J. C H, Catholic Households in Yorkshire, 1580-1603 (Taylor & Francis Online 2013

Battigelli, A, Eighteenth Century Women and English Catholicism https://www.academia.edu/48697533/Eighteenth_Century_Women_and_English_Catholicism, Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature, Vol 31, No1/2 Spring/Fall (2012)

Bossy, J, The English Catholic Community, 1570-1850 (Darton, Longman &Todd, London 1975)

Childs, J, God's Traitors: Terror and Faith in Elizabethan England (Bodley Head, London, 2014)

Connelly, R, Women of the Catholic Resistance : In England 1540-1680 (Pentland Press, Bishop Auckland, 1997)

Crawford, P, Women and Religion in England: 1500-1720 (Routledge, London, 1993)

Erickson, A, L, Women and Property in Early Modern England (Routledge, New York, 1993)

Fraser, A, The Gunpowder Plot: Terror and Faith in 1605 (Phoenix, London,1996

Lake, G, and Questier, M, The Trials of Margaret Clitherow: Persecution, Martyrdom and the Politics of Sanctity in Elizabethan England (Bloomsbury, London, 2011)

Marshall, P and Scott, G, (Editors) Catholic Gentry in English Society, (Routledge, London, 2016)

Marshall, P, Heretics and Believers, A History of the English Reformation (Yale, London, 2018)

Matthew, D, Catholicism in England 1535-1935 (The Catholic Book Club, London, 1938)

Neary, M, No One Can Serve Two Masters: Female Recusancy and Rebellion During the Elizabethan Period
https://open.conted.ox.ac.uk/sites/open.conted.ox.ac.uk/files/resources/Create%20Document/e.%20No%20one%20can%20serve%20two%20masters_Maria%20Neary.pdf
Oxford University Continuing Education (2020)

Rose E, Cause of Conscience: Alternatives Open to Recusants and Puritans Under Elizabeth I and James I, (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2008)

Rowlands, M, B, Recusant Women, 1560-1640, in Mary Prior, ed., Women in English Society, 1500-1800 (Methuen &Co., Ltd, London, 1985)

Somerset, S, Elizabeth I, (Phoenix Giant London 1997)

Websites

https://www.historic-uk.com/HistoryUK/HistoryofEngland/Margaret-Clitherow

https://www.newadvent.org/cathen/04059b.htm

http://www.charlwoodsociety.co.uk/resources/The%20Free%20Men%20of%20Charlwood.pdf

https://history.hanover.edu/texts/engref/er87.html

https://www.british-history.ac.uk/vch/warks/vol3/pp74-86#h3-0003

https://brill.com/display/book/edcoll/9789004335981/BP000007.xml