

‘No one can serve two masters’:¹ Female recusancy and rebellion during the Elizabethan period

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In its literal sense ‘recusant’ means a person who refuses to submit to an authority or to comply with a regulation. In its historical setting, it applies to those who maintained an attachment to the Roman Catholic Church and who refused to attend Anglican services.

This article will use a portrait of Catherine Neville, Lady Constable in comparison with the Earl of Northumberland’s confession following the 1569 Northern Rebellion to deduce what we can learn about the life of a recusant woman from the scant material and written evidence that remains.

On 14 November 1569 the Earls of Northumberland and Westmoreland stormed Durham Cathedral, ripped apart all the Protestant books and celebrated a Catholic mass. Within days six thousand armed men marched under the banner of the Five Wounds of Christ besieging Northern towns. Many of the public participated in the Catholic services, some under fear but others enthusiastically. Across the country reactions were mixed, with some urging others to join the uprising and others fretful and frightened. Elizabeth and her Council mustered an army of fourteen thousand and put up special defences in London. As the Queen’s forces arrived the Earls fled to Scotland and the rebellion amongst the common people quickly died down.

Hundreds of rebels, both amongst the nobility and the common people, died on the gallows with Elizabeth issuing at least seven hundred executions. The North was put under new tight controls in an attempt to secure the Elizabethan religious. In some ways the rebellion of 1569 resembled many of its predecessors quite closely – however the biggest difference lies in the response of the crown.² Although not the first Tudor rebellion regarding religion, the Rising of the North was the most significant domestic threat that Elizabeth faced during her tenure. As such the response and fallout from the rebellion was carefully managed and orchestrated over a substantial period of time so as to try and further engrain Elizabeth’s power in the northern counties.

¹ Matthew 6. 24.

² K. Kesselring, *The Northern Rebellion of 1569: Faith, Politics, and Protest in Elizabethan England* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

Northumberland's Confession

One year after the rebellion the Earl of Northumberland, Thomas Percy, was captured and turned over to Elizabeth who beheaded him on charges of treason for which he issued a full confession and refused an offer to save his own life by renouncing his Catholic faith. Despite his confirmation and seeming acceptance of his own guilt, Northumberland's confession seems to assert that, before the rebellion, he, the Earl of Westmoreland Charles Neville, the Duke of Norfolk Thomas Howard and Leonard Dacre were themselves resolved not to instigate a rebellion and wished to excuse themselves from the plotting as they were so unwilling. Indeed, this may be Northumberland attempting to protect his fellow recusants who had fled. However, the reasons he gives for reluctance to rebel, such as a small likelihood of success (and therefore the risk of losing their heads) and the credit and favour of their companions seem to be legitimate and well-founded. Furthermore, he is not reluctant in admitting to the rebellion's aims of restoring Catholicism to England and marrying Thomas Howard to Mary Queen of Scots whom they had hoped to put on the English throne.

Instead Northumberland claims that after the men met to discuss the rebellion and then disseminated to make their own decisions, it was the wives who insisted the men must rise in rebellion. He recounts that Lady Westmoreland, upon hearing of their decision not to rebel, 'cried out, weeping bitterly and said: "we and our country were shamed for ever; that now in the end we should seek holes to creep into"'.³ He also notes the pressure placed upon him by his servants and households who he says 'showed unto me afterwards, if I had not turned back at the first time (to engage in the rebellion), some of the others meant me a displeasure'.⁴ Thus upon their instigation, amid rumours of the imminent naming of the new heir apparent, Northumberland claims the rebels were forced to act.

With such a specific and condemnatory quote from Lady Westmoreland it can be reasonably assumed that various Catholic recusant rebels who partook in the rising were urged and encouraged to do so by their own wives and female relatives, along with possibly others from their domestic household. It is suggested that Lady Westmoreland, Jane Neville and Lady Northumberland, Anne Somerset rode out with the rebels to Durham and participated actively in the Catholic mass on 14 November.⁵ Jane Neville was refused a pardon from the Queen for her involvement and lived in virtual imprisonment in Kenninghall, Norfolk

³ 'The Earl of Northumberland's confession', in *Memorials of the Rebellion of 1569*, ed. by Cuthbert Sharp (London, 1840), p. 199.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 200.

⁵ Jade Scott, 'Percy [née Somerset], Anne, countess of Northumberland (1536–1591), rebel and Roman Catholic exile.' In *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford University Press, September 2015).

<https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001/odnb-9780198614128-e-107539> [accessed 16 February 2020]

until her death in 1593. Meanwhile, Anne Somerset escaped to Bruges and lived her life in exile engaging in Catholic plots and surviving on a pension from Philip II until her death in 1596.

However, little else has been documented of other recusant noble womens' involvement and engagement with the uprising and their fates after the rebellion. One such woman is Catherine Neville, later Lady Constable and sister of Charles Neville the Earl of Westmoreland. Women played a substantial role in the recusant movement.⁶ Catherine was a known recusant during her life and as a sister of Charles could arguably be one such woman who helped to instigate and encourage such rebellions and plotting. She is said to have spent time herself imprisoned for recusansy at Sheriff Hutton from 1582-84 under the watch of the Earl of Huntingdon, an English Puritan nobleman who was hotly opposed to the Northern Rising and was entrusted by Elizabeth to see that she did not escape at the time of the threatened uprising.⁷ Furthermore, in her will she left substantial bequests to known recusants such as her son-in-law Henry Constable and her niece Katherine Gray.⁸

Like many Elizabethan, and particularly recusant or non-conformist women, few other details or documents survive of Catherine's life or beliefs. The belongings of many recusant families were either burnt as heretical or seized by the Crown. However there is a surviving portrait of Catherine, painted by Robert Peake in 1590, and currently held in Lytes Cary Manor. The portrait (Fig.1) speaks to various aspects of the life of a female recusant during Elizabethan times.

⁶ Alan Dures, *English Catholicism, 1558-1642* (Essex: Longman, 1983).

⁷ 'Parishes: Sheriff Hutton', in *A History of the County of York North Riding: Volume 2*, ed. William Page (London, 1923), pp. 172-187. British History Online <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/vch/yorks/north/vol2/pp172-187> [accessed 16 February 2020].

⁸ East Riding of Yorkshire Archives and Local Studies Service, Exemplification of Will of Lady Katherine Constable widow, DDCC/134/9.



Figure 1: Robert Peake the elder, *Lady Catherine Neville, Lady Constable* (1590), oil on panel, 76.8cm × 6.35cm (Lytes Cary Manor © National Trust)

Lady Catherine Constable's Portrait

The portrait of Lady Catherine is one of the few surviving portraits of any Elizabethan recusant woman. This could be due to the false attribution of the painting, which was believed to be of Bess of Hardwick, ensuring its survival. The portrait was only correctly identified in 1963 upon the discovery of an identical

portrait at Burton Constable Hall.⁹ Such confusion could have arisen from the inscription on the portrait; with a date of 1590 and the age of the sitter as sixty, thus implying she was born c.1530. This would certainly cause confusion, as her father was born in 1525, thereby contradicting other records dating Catherine's birth as 1541. Such mystery and confusion surrounding recusant women's identities is not unfamiliar. These women would often be forced to live secretive and discreet lives due to the fear of repercussions for their beliefs. Furthermore, women at the time, due to their relative anonymity, would be utilised within the recusant movement to carry out unlawful activities such as hosting Jesuit priests and secreting Catholic objects. Due to the domestic setting in which women existed, they had comparatively more freedom than men to engage in such activities without investigation.¹⁰

The painting conforms to various aspects of Elizabethan portraiture which are nonetheless interesting when considered in the light of recusant women – both the sitter being alone in the portrait and the completely plain background. Firstly, Catherine is painted alone. Although this is typical for Elizabethan portraiture and certainly conforms to the style of Robert Peake, it is somewhat ironic for Catherine to be viewed in such a light. Within the recusant movement a key role for women was in establishing and maintaining the networks which ensured the continued practice of the Catholic faith in a covert manner. Recusant women used their homes to harbour conservative Catholic priests but moreover used their noble status to establish and maintain recusant networks through marriages and familial connections.¹¹ Their links to various members of the aristocracy, gentry and government administration were instrumental in their survival during the tightening of the religious settlement.¹² Both of Catherine's nieces were tried for their work in harbouring recusant networks and particularly Jesuit priests such as John Boste. However, they were both pardoned from hanging, although found guilty, due to their noble connections and rank.¹³

Furthermore Catherine is painted with a completely plain and dark background. This was typical of Peake's style when painting nobility. However he, and other Elizabethan portrait artists, would often use codified and contextually rich backgrounds to convey extra detail and information about the sitter. In the case of Catherine Neville, the purposefully dark and shadowy background could speak to the anonymity of location that many recusant women used to their advantage. The wives of many involved in the Northern Rebellion found themselves dispossessed and without a home following the trials.¹⁴ This meant they may

⁹ Roy C. Strong, 'Elizabethan Painting: An Approach Through Inscriptions: Robert Peake the Elder', *The Burlington Magazine*, 105 (719), (1963), p. 54.

¹⁰ B. McShane, 'Negotiating religious change and conflict: Female religious communities in early modern Ireland, c.1530–c.1641', *British Catholic History*, 33 (3), (2017), pp. 357–382.

¹¹ J Hilton, 'Catholicism in Elizabethan Durham', *Recusant History*, 14 (1), (1977), pp. 1–8.

¹² McShane, 'Negotiating religious change and conflict'.

¹³ M. Cross, 'The Third Earl of Huntingdon and Trials of Catholics in the North, 1581–1595', *Recusant History*, 8(3), (1965), pp. 136–146.

¹⁴ K. Kesselring, 'Mercy and Liberty: The Aftermath of the 1569 Northern Rebellion', *Journal of the Historical Association*, 90 (298), pp. 213–235.

rent or live with family connections and many recusant women used this nomadic existence to their advantage in order to evade the authorities and official records of Church attendance. Catherine's niece was accused of withdrawing from society and residing at properties rented from other recusants, through which she would conduct her Catholic practices.¹⁵ The plain background could further be a deliberate choice by Catherine to avoid exposing any of the Catholic iconography and decoration which may have been present, or in fact hidden, within her living quarters at the time of painting. The removal of Catholic adornment and decoration from the churches - and therefore their restoration - was a key motivation for those involved in the Northern Rebellion of 1569 and thus would likely be a cause close to the Nevilles' beliefs. This could further be an attempt to prevent the seizure of any assets that she had saved from the Crown's removal and destruction of many of the families items following the rebellion. Such seizures often financially impacted women more significantly in the long-term than the men who had been arrested or executed.¹⁶

Unlike the composition of the portrait, Catherine's clothing is somewhat unusual for a typical portrait of the time. Women in Peake's portraiture were often painted in elaborate and embellished gowns to convey a sense of their social standing and wealth. Catherine however is painted in a plain black gown. This could be to convey her status as a widow, following the death of her husband John Constable in 1579. However, it could also indicate a wider sense of metaphorical mourning of the Catholic faith. In terms of her Catholic background, such a plain dress could be viewed as surprising, as recusant women often engaged in needlework and the embroidery of vestments as a way of covertly practising their Catholic faith. The making of vestments by the families of recusant women was done as a form of a Jesuit-led meditation upon the Virgin Mary and served both to replace confiscated articles, secure the family wealth through embroidery of high-value jewels and to establish tight connections with Catholic seminaries. Needlework was used as visual rhetoric and as a vehicle through which elite women participated in patronage networks and consolidated their political relations, facilitating their political agency in a female political hierarchy hidden from wider society within which they could not engage.¹⁷ Other aspects of Catherine's dress, such as her exaggerated arms and shoulder pads, could be a more covert way of her attempting to convey the power and status she held still amongst recusant groups and societies.

Catherine's head covering is also notable. Again, this is unusual for Elizabethan portraiture and Peake's paintings. It could once more be a suggestion of Catherine's status as a widow and reference to her

¹⁵ Robert Surtees, 'Parish of Lanchester', in *The History and Antiquities of the County Palatine of Durham: Volume 2, Chester Ward* (London, 1820), pp.303-360. British History Online <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/antiquities-durham/vol2/pp303-360> [accessed 16 February 2020].

¹⁶ Kesselring, 'Mercy and Liberality'.

¹⁷ Sophia Jane Holroyd, 'Embroidered rhetoric: the social, religious and political functions of elite women's needlework, c.1560-1630' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Warwick, 2002).

mourning. However, Catherine's headdress looks strikingly similar to the coif and veil of a nun. This is then coupled with a ruff collar and sleeves. Such trappings point towards a life not only of mourning but of chastity and religious observance. This could be a reaction on Catherine's part to the claim that many recusant women who harboured networks within their households engaged in events which were immoral both spiritually and carnally – an accusation which was levelled at her own niece.¹⁸ Such coverings could be Catherine's attempt at asserting her upstanding morality despite such accusations. Furthermore, it could be Catherine referencing the intrinsic need for female networks within the recusant movement; networks which had often been borne out of, or mimicked in their structures and organisation those of convent life.¹⁹ This could therefore explain why her outfit emulates that of women living in a religious order.

As well as Catherine's dress and head covering her jewellery is also intriguing. Primarily her necklace which shows a large cross painted on a thin chain. This being the central adornment in the picture undoubtedly points towards Catherine's confident assertion of her Christian faith. However, the necklace lacks the beads of the rosary or the pendant of the crucifix and instead depicts a much more conventional Protestant cross. It would be unusual for a recusant during this time not to opt for a rosary due to their popularity following the papal bull *Consueverunt Romani Pontifices* issued by Pope Pius V, which officially established the devotion to the rosary in the Catholic Church. Nevertheless, such endorsement by the Pope meant that owning a rosary was in contravention of Elizabeth's religious settlement; therefore choosing to be depicted wearing a simpler cross could have been Catherine's attempt to protect herself and avoid repercussions. The lack of a rosary or crucifix could also allude to the confiscation of such relics which took place following the Northern Rebellion – one of the measures which, after execution and the confiscation of lands and titles, had the most significant impact on the families and households of the rebels.²⁰

Catherine's other form of jewellery appears to be a gold bracelet or bangle on her right wrist. Such material riches would have been unusual for recusant women, who were usually punished financially for their non-conformity. Any movable property a woman brought to a marriage became her husband's permanently and her land became his for his lifetime. Thus, a wife's coverture was often compounded and confiscated for the remainder of her husband's life. Although a wife's right to inheritance was safe from permanent forfeiture, such right to dower only began at the moment of death and not imprisonment and therefore the wives of northern rebels often found themselves dispossessed.²¹ Many men, upon their imprisonment,

¹⁸ Surtees, 'Parish of Lanchester'.

¹⁹ McShane, 'Negotiating religious change'.

²⁰ Katherine Emma Watson, 'Aspects of religious change, regional culture and resistance in Yorkshire, c.1530-1580' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of York, 2007).

²¹ Kesselring, *The Northern Rebellion of 1569*.

attested to concerns for their wives' provision. Thomas Dorington claimed he had both goods movable and immovable confiscated during his imprisonment which were needed to maintain his wife and children. William Brestock died in Worcester Jail in 1590 leaving his wife and children with no provision.²² Therefore, life for recusant women amongst the gentry was often financially fraught. Nevertheless, this seems to have been of little concern for Catherine Neville, whose husband remained throughout his life at least outwardly conformist. Therefore she, unlike other recusant women, would not have suffered from forfeiture and confiscation of lands.

Despite the prominent bracelet and necklace one piece of jewellery is notably missing (or at least not visible) from Catherine's portrait: a wedding ring. The reasons for the lack of any indication of marriage, such as a gimmel ring, could be multitudinous. Firstly, at the time of sitting for the portrait Catherine was a widow and therefore it may not have been deemed necessary to still wear a ring. It may however attest to some sense of disdain or disillusionment within her marriage. Her husband, John Constable, despite reported Catholic sympathies, had refused to join his brother-in-law during the Northern Rebellion. Sir Constable received patronage under Mary I and was put on the commission of the peace in 1555 to fortify the Scottish borders. Despite being omitted from this role in 1562, he was later appointed to the Council of the North by the Protestant Archbishop of York in 1566 through which he gained a place on the succession committee, and later a position as a Member of Parliament.²³ Such outward sympathy with Elizabeth's settlement, and not simply conformity but imposition of it, could have caused tension between Constable and his recusant wife. The fact that Catherine opted in her will to be buried near her grandmothers and godmothers is significant in that it was near the particular members of her kinship group that she would claim on the Day of Judgement.²⁴ This could therefore suggest some religious or theological disagreement between herself and her husband. Furthermore her lack of wedding ring following the death of her husband could once again signal her willingness to live in a convent-like existence, with a marriage only to God.

The final notable aspect of Catherine Neville's portrait is the small book held in her hands. The book shows no inscription but some decoration and could reasonably be assumed to be some religious text or prayer book. Such an object speaks to the motivations of the 1569 rebellion, as destruction of the Book of Common Prayer was widespread in response to the burning of traditional images and books which had been seen as humiliating public penance.²⁵ Holding what is possibly a surviving Catholic text could attest

²² P. McGrath & J. Rowe, 'The Imprisonment of Catholics for Religion under Elizabeth I', *Recusant History*, 20(4), (1991), pp. 415-435.

²³ 'Biography of Sir John Constable', in *The History of Parliament: the House of Commons 1558-1603*, ed. P.W. Hasler (London, 1981) <http://www.histparl.ac.uk/volume/1558-1603/member/constable-sir-john-1526-79> [accessed 16 February 2020].

²⁴ Susan James, *Women's Voices in Tudor Wills, 1485-1603: Authority, Influence and Material Culture* (London: Ashgate, 2015).

²⁵ Watson, 'Aspects of religious change, regional culture and resistance in Yorkshire, c.1530-1580.'

to Catherine's and the recusants' hopes that Protestantism would be short-lived. Furthermore, the symbolism of a book attests to the wider idea of noble Tudor women using books as a way to manifest their own power and influence.²⁶ The book-owning tradition of powerful Northern Catholic families is well documented and in particular the women, originating from Joan Beaufort and her daughters Anne and Cecily, who bequeathed and dedicated books to other powerful noble women.²⁷ Such book-owning tendencies was seen as a specific danger of recusant women since the authorities feared their influence over their households and children in terms of providing religious education.²⁸ Within a domestic setting women could teach their households their own particular religious beliefs, as seen with the Lollard women.²⁹ Many of the recusant women who were imprisoned faced charges of educating children in Catholicism.³⁰ The image of Catherine holding a book could attest to her involvement with such activities amongst the recusant networks in the North.

Conclusions

From the scant surviving written and material evidence regarding the life of Catherine it is difficult to conclude anything decisively about her everyday life as a recusant woman. The role and importance of females in the recusancy movement can be established from the Earl of Northumberland's Confession, yet from her portrait much more can be inferred about their lifestyles and activities. The portrait speaks of Catherine's interpersonal relationships both with recusant networks across the North, her family and her husband. Furthermore, it references her moral and religious conservatism and non-conformity during Elizabeth's Protestant religious settlement. It could also suggest her uniquely female role in hiding Catholic priests and relics, whilst possibly educating and inducting the next generation into the Catholic faith.

Acknowledgements

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²⁶ Sharon Michalove, 'Women as book collectors and disseminators of culture in late medieval England and Burgundy', in *Reputation and Representation in Fifteenth-Century Europe*, ed. by Douglas Biggs, Sharon Michalove and Compton Reeves (Boston: Brill, 2004), pp. 57-79.

²⁷ A. Edwards, 'Northern Magnates and their Books', *Textual Cultures*, 7(1), (2012), pp. 176-186.

²⁸ Hilton, 'Catholicism in Elizabethan Durham'.

²⁹ Candace Gregory, 'Raising the Good Wife: Mothers and Daughters in Fifteenth Century England' in *Reputation and Representation in Fifteenth-Century Europe*, ed. by Douglas Biggs, Sharon Michalove and Compton Reeves (Boston: Brill, 2004), pp. 145-167.

³⁰ Watson, 'Aspects of religious change'.

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