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Power in vulnerability: widows and priest holes in the early modern English Catholic community

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Catholics in post-Reformation England faced new challenges in their resolution to remain faithful to Rome following the passage of anti-Catholic laws in the 1580s. These legislative attempts to root out Catholicism resulted in the creation of a clandestine community where private households became essential sites for the survival of Catholic worship. This article extends prior studies of the role of women in the English Catholic community by considering how marital status affected an individual's ability to protect the 'old faith'. By merging the study of widowhood with spatial analyses of Catholic households, I argue that early modern patriarchal structures provided specific opportunities inherent in widowhood that were unavailable to other men and women, whether married or single. While widowhood, in history and historiography, is frequently considered a weak, liminal, or potentially threatening status for women, in the harsh realities of a clandestine religious minority community, these weaknesses became catalysts for successful subversion of Protestant authority. Assisted by their legal autonomy, economic independence, and the manipulation of gendered cultural stereotypes, many Catholic widows used their households to harbour priests and outmanoeuvre searchers. This argument maintains that a broader interpretation of the role of women and marital status is essential to understanding the gendered nature of post-Reformation England.

Keywords: gender, widows, Catholics, priest-harbouring, England

In 1592, famed priest hunter and torturer Richard Topcliffe wrote a letter to William Cecil, Lord Burghley, pleading for Elizabeth I's chief advisor to recognize the dangers posed by Catholic women to the religious uniformity of the realm. Topcliffe had spent the last decade hunting English Catholics who feigned or forfeited allegiance to the Elizabethan religious settlement. Based on his experience, he asserted, 'Whether she be wife, widow, maid or whatever . . . far greater is the fever of a woman once resolved to evil than the rage of man, I humbly beseech your Lordship that the sex of women be not overlooked.' He continued by stating that such Catholic women were frequently 'furnished of a lusty priest harboured in her closet' in attempts

to 'harbour, receive, and relieve priests' or other 'lusty Catholic champion[s].' For this reason, he argued that women, married as well as widows, were 'needful to be shut up as much as men.'[1]

Sixteenth- and seventeenth-century correspondence, biographies, state papers, and arrest warrants suggest that Topcliffe's assertion was correct. Since legislative attempts to root out Catholicism resulted in the creation of a clandestine community dependent on private households, the responsibility for the maintenance and practice of Catholic rites often fell into the feminine sphere.[2] In fact, numerous studies of the post-Reformation English Catholic community have shown that women played an important role in maintaining the old faith.[3] A recurrent theme in these studies suggests that female agency was due in large part to the *femme couverte* legal status of wives, since married women in England benefited from a legal coverture from their husbands that protected their religious deviance.[4] However, such an argument neglects the fact that sources also attest to the prominent role of widows as priest harbourers, despite their *femme sole* status.[5] This

[1] A discourse of an unnamed person, but most probably Richard Topclyffe, concerning Papists, &c. and the best method of dealing with them, 1592, The British Library, London (hereafter BL) Lansdowne MS 72/48.

[2] Christine Newman, 'The Role of Women in Early Yorkshire Recusancy: A Reappraisal', *Northern Catholic History* 30 (1989): 10. Also, see Lisa McClain, *Lest We Be Damned: Practical Innovation and Lived Experience among Catholics in Protestant England 1559–1642* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

[3] John Bossy argued in 1975 that the Catholic gentlewoman 'played an abnormally important part' in the history of the English Catholic community in *The English Catholic Community* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1975), 158. Scholars have shown that women, both lay and religious, upset gendered roles and actively participated and shaped the English Catholic community. Some of these studies include Sister Joseph Damien Hanlon, 'These be but women', in Charles Howard Carter, ed. *From Renaissance to the Counter-Reformation: Essays in Honor of Garrett Mattingly* (New York: Random House, 1965); Marie B. Rowlands, 'Recusant Women 1560-1640', in Mary Prior, ed. *Women in English Society 1500–1800* (London: Methuen, 1985); Patrick McGrath and Joy Rowe, 'The Elizabethan Priests: the Harbourers and Helpers', *Recusant History* 19, 3 (1989): 209–34; Sarah Bastow, 'Worth Nothing, but very Wilful': Catholic Recusant Women of Yorkshire, 1536–1642', *Recusant History* 25, 4 (2001): 591–603; Emma Watson, 'Disciplined Disobedience? Women and the Survival of Catholicism in the North York Moors in the Reign of Elizabeth I', in Kate Cooper and Jeremy Gregory, eds. *Discipline and Divinity: Studies in Church History Volume 43* (Woodbridge: Ecclesiastical History Society/Boydell Press, 2007), 295–306; and Marie Rowlands, 'Harbourers and Housekeepers: Catholic women in England 1570–1720', in Benjamin Kaplan, Bob Moore, Henk van Nierop and Judith Pollmann, eds. *Catholic Communities in Protestant States: Britain and the Netherlands, c. 1570–1720* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), 200–215. More recently, Lisa McClain investigated the changing gender roles of both Catholic men and women in *Divided Loyalties? Pushing the Boundaries of Gender and Lay Roles in the Catholic Church, 1534–1829* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018). Also, see Alexandra Walsham, *Catholic Reformation in Protestant Britain* (London: Routledge, 2016) and James E. Kelly and Susan Royal, eds. *Early Modern English Catholicism: Identity, Memory and Counter-Reformation* (Leiden: Brill, 2017) for recent summaries of the field.

[4] Alexandra Walsham, *Church Papists: Catholicism, Conformity and Confessional Polemic in Early Modern England* (Suffolk: Boydell Press, 1993), 79–81.

[5] While married women in some parts of continental Europe experienced a degree of independence from husbands, in England, under common law, a wife was a *femme couverte* meaning she did not enjoy her own legal rights, but instead was covered by her husband.

article explores the intersection of religion, gender, class, and household space and addresses the complexities of female identity by focusing on the perception and actions of Catholic widows in the English Catholic community. Widowhood, in history and historiography, has frequently been considered a weak, liminal, or potentially threatening status for women. Most histories of widows either examine them in the context of their economic status or social vulnerability, or include them within the broader category of 'women' without distinguishing widows' privileges and challenges from those of married and never-married women.[6] In contrast, this article follows a more recent and welcomed trend of uncovering how widows negotiated opportunities for themselves amidst common patriarchal assumptions of weakness.[7] In the harsh realities of a clandestine religious minority community, these weaknesses became catalysts for subversion of Protestant authority. This study identifies power in the social, economic, and legal status of widowhood, and argues that there was a strategy on the part of Catholic widows to manipulate their liminal position in society in order to use their households as priest harbouring sites and Jesuit meeting places; a strategy recognized by contemporary Protestants and Catholics alike. While Catholic widows such as Dorothy Lawson, Elizabeth Cary, Lady Magdalen Montague, Anne Dacre Howard, Anne Line, and Elizabeth Vaux feature prominently in studies that

For an analysis of how Catholic wives used this as a criminal defence, see Frances E. Dolan, *Whores of Babylon: Catholicism, Gender, and Seventeenth-Century Print Culture* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999), 196–97, 206.

[6] For example, see the following studies of widowhood: Vivian Brodsky, 'Widows in Late Elizabethan London: Remarriage, Economic Opportunity and Family Orientation', in Lloyd Bonfeld, ed. *The World We Have Gained: Histories of Population and Social Structure* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 122–54; Barbara Todd, 'Demographic determinism and female agency: the remarrying widow reconsidered . . . again', *Continuity and Change* 9 (1994): 421–450; Jane Whittle, 'Inheritance, marriage, widowhood and remarriage: a comparative perspective on women and landholding in north-east Norfolk, 1440–1580', *Continuity and Change* 11 (1998): 33–72; Tim Stretton, 'Widows at law in Tudor and Stuart England', in Sandra Cavallo and Lyndan Warner, eds. *Widowhood in Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (New York: Longman, 1999), 103–208; Lynn Botelho, '"The Old Woman's Wish": Widows by the Family Fire?: Widows' old age provision in rural England, 1500–1700', *The History of the Family* 7, 1 (2002): 59–78; Laura Van Aert, 'The legal possibilities of Antwerp widows in the late sixteenth century', *History of the Family* 12, 4 (2007): 282–295; and Robert Kalas, 'Noble Widows and Estate Management during the French Wars of Religion', *Sixteenth Century Journal* 39, 2 (2008): 357–370.

[7] For studies on the opportunities inherent in widowhood, see Sandra Cavallo and Lyndan Warner, eds. *Widowhood in Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (Essex: Pearson Education Limited, 1999). Rosemary O'Day examines powerful widows in *Women's Agency in Early Modern Britain and the American Colonies: Patriarchy, Partnership, and Patronage* (London: Pearson Longman, 2007). See also Stephanie Fink DeBacker, *Widowhood in Early Modern Spain: Protectors, Proprietors, and Patrons* (Leiden: Brill, 2010) and Katherine Clark Walter, *The Profession of Widowhood: Widows, Pastoral Care & Medieval Models of Holiness* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2018). Nadine Akkerman's recent study of she-intelligencers in seventeenth-century Britain also highlights that women could become more active in subversion upon widowhood, *Invisible Agents: Women and Espionage in Seventeenth-Century Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 11.

have emerged in the last forty years on English Catholic women, widowhood itself as a unit of analysis and catalyst for agency has yet to be fully identified in the context of the English Catholic community.[8]

In order to show how the status of widowhood generated both the opportunity and protection for priest harbouring, this study offers a prosopographic approach by examining the experience of individual Catholic widows and exploring how financial and social independence upon widowhood facilitated the means to create and manipulate domestic space in a way that made wealthy widows of the nobility and gentry distinctively adept at harbouring priests. Next, it suggests that cultural stereotypes of piety and vulnerability surrounding widowhood created a sort of cultural camouflage for Catholic widows' illegal actions. Together, these interrelated social, economic, and cultural frameworks of widowhood granted a greater degree of autonomy to widows in their use of time, resources, and domestic space, particularly when compared to married women encumbered with spousal expectations or familial duties.[9] It is not the intent to argue that widows were the largest or most effective demographic of priest harbourers. Instead, the purpose of this study is to highlight the variety of opportunities and limitations brought on by widowhood that were unavailable to other Catholics within early modern England. In effect, patriarchal frameworks, for better or worse, empowered widows to control and maintain Catholic households.

It is worth noting that the source base for the activities of early modern English Catholic women partially arises from the writings of Jesuit priests and Catholic confessors, some of whom wrote biographies of Catholic women with the intent to describe individuals to be emulated and revered. These sources are precipitously placed in a genre that borders fact and fanfare. The accuracy of such sources, together with the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century compilations of Catholic documents, is questionable. For this reason, it is important to acknowledge the potential limitations of sources created and maintained by Catholics, their families, and sympathizers, and to corroborate such narratives with alternate sources, such as state papers, arrest warrants, and correspondence from Protestant authorities. Thus, sources have been read with such limitations in mind. Yet despite omissions, inaccuracies,

[8] Jan Broadway's work on the Catholic widow Agnes Throckmorton considers the disadvantages of widowhood when it came to asserting maternal authority over her son. Broadway does detail Throckmorton's seditious activities, such as harbouring, although the focus is on her entanglements regarding maternal authority. Jan Broadway, 'Agnes Throckmorton: A Jacobean Recusant Widow', in Peter Marshall and Geoffrey Scott, eds. *Catholic Gentry in English Society: The Throckmortons of Coughton from Reformation to Emancipation* (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing, 2009), 131–32. Previous studies of female priest harborers have included widows in their analysis, although an engagement with how that marital status impacted efforts to preserve the English Catholic community is absent.

[9] The power a widow could yield was substantially influenced by their wealth and social status, as argued by Rosemary O'Day in *Women's Agency*, 309.

and hagiographic sentiments, Catholic biographies provide a rare glimpse of early modern widowhood, including daily habits, insight into social, legal, and economic milieus of widowhood, and an opportunity to interpret the experience of English Catholics. This article examines such sources for patterns outside of the hagiographic rhetoric, and weaves corroboration from other sources in order to build a narrative around a historiographically marginalized demographic.

Physical boundaries: The creation and adaptation of harbouring households

Richard Topcliffe's unease regarding 'evil' Catholic women came at a time when English men and women witnessed a multitude of political, religious, and economic tensions that affected the position of Catholics in the realm. As a reaction to Catholic rebellions and plots, both real and imagined, Queen Elizabeth I and her Privy Council created several laws that penalized the practice of Catholicism. The 'Act to Retain the Queen's Majesty's Subjects in Their True Obedience' in 1581 made it treasonous for the newly arrived missionary priests from the Continent to draw English subjects away from loyalty to the queen, while increasing fines for nonattendance at parish churches and threatening fines or imprisonment for those who celebrated or attended Mass. The 'Act against Jesuits, Seminary Priests, and such Other like Disobedient Persons' in 1585 declared it treason to shelter priests in England or go abroad to seminaries or convents. Despite the laws, missionary priests continued to roam the English countryside, having to disguise themselves and hide with trusted Catholic families. The use and construction of priest holes emerged in rudimentary forms in the 1580s and experienced a surge following the 1585 Act.[10] Either adapted from natural gaps in existing architecture, or cleverly designed and created in new construction, these hides harboured priests between floors, within fireplaces, amidst roof rafters, and between walls. Despite the ingenuity, between 1585 and 1601, 143 Catholics were executed for harbouring priests or for similar crimes; three of whom were women.[11]

[10] This rise in the construction of priest holes was primarily the work of Nicholas Owen, nicknamed 'Little John', the chief architect of priest holes in Elizabethan England. Nicholas Owen travelled with the Jesuit Henry Garnet for eighteen years constructing hides in various Catholic houses throughout England. Outside of Catholic sources, it is difficult to piece together how many hides Owen built. Michael Hodgetts attributes the best constructed hides to Owen. He maintains that most known priest holes were created in the 1590s and the first decade of the 1600s, which corresponds with the dates of Owen's activity until his execution in 1606. Michael Hodgetts, 'Elizabethan Priest-Holes I: Dating and Chronology', *Recusant History* 11 (1972): 292.

[11] The three women executed were Margaret Clitherow, executed in 1586 for refusing to plead, although she was also a priest harbourer; Margaret Ward, executed in 1588 for helping a priest escape from prison; and the widow Anne Line, charged with harbouring priests and executed in 1601. See Patrick McGrath and Joy Rowe, 'The Elizabethan Priests', 209–34.

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The fact that women made up only two percent of Catholics executed could suggest that either Topcliffe was wrong in his assertion regarding the threat of women, or that considerations of gender influenced the prosecution and punishment of women.

While this article does not further an argument of female exceptionalism within the English Catholic community, it does purport that gender, marital status, and class could and did provide different opportunities for subversion in the Catholic community, due to the various legal, economic, and social statuses that accompanied the early modern female experience.[12] This section will argue that widowhood provided a greater degree of economic and social autonomy, different from that of married women, which some widows used to adapt or create new households in which to harbour priests. In regards to economic independence, for the general population in early modern England, ecclesiastical law of intestate inheritance (in place for when husbands died without making a will) maintained that widows were entitled to one-third of the husbands' personal property.[13] Amy Erickson found that women whose husbands left a will generally received more than their allotted one-third of the estate required by ecclesiastical law. In addition, in a study that compared wills from fourteen English locations from the fourteenth to the early eighteenth centuries, Erickson showed that one quarter of the wills specifically mention the dwelling house, and she suggests that the widows of the 75 percent of men who do not mention houses still occupied the original house.[14] Thus, most early modern widows occupied and controlled a house after the death of their husbands.

In addition to economic autonomy, social independence from a male-controlled household was also unique to widowhood. Wealthy widows, more than single women, had the legal status and economic means to maintain a private household. In fact, Amy Froide shows that widows headed 12.9 percent of households in early modern England while single women only headed 1.1 percent, yet there were twice as many single women in England than widows.[15] Widows

[12] Scholarship has recently turned to examining the multi-faceted activities of female Catholics in the English community, as discussed by Laurence Lux-Sterritt, '"Virgo becomes Virago": Women in Accounts of Seventeenth-Century English Catholic Missionaries', *Recusant History* 30, 4 (2011): 537–553, at 537.

[13] Amy Louise Erickson, 'Property and Widowhood in England 1660–1840', in Sandra Cavallo and Lyndan Warner, eds. *Widowhood in Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (Essex: Pearson Education Limited, 1999), 145–63 at 152. Erickson's study of wills in seventeenth century England finds that approximately 70 percent of people died without making a will.

[14] Amy Louise Erickson, *Women and Property in Early Modern England* (London: Routledge, 1993), 163.

[15] Amy M. Froide, 'Marital Status as a Category of Difference: Singlewomen and Widows in Early Modern England', in Judith M. Bennett and Amy M. Froide, eds. *Singlewomen in the European Past*, 1250–1800 (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 236–69 at 239.

enjoyed financial security and domestic autonomy, and they functioned as heads of households in the absence of their husbands. In fact, widows were the only women in early modern England who could maintain economic independence without formal male supervision.[16] By dimming the focus on generic statistics regarding widowhood and property acquisition and instead highlighting the experiences of individual Catholic widows, it does appear that widowhood provided a unique degree of independence, which some widows used to create and adapt houses or rooms for the purpose of priest harbouring – a tangible, physical benefit gender and marital status afforded to widows.

The individual widows in this study maintained houses that shared similar traits, suggesting a pattern in priest-harbouring locations that could be accommodated through widows' financial and social autonomy. These houses had a size and design beneficial to harbouring priests, and they were solitary in their location, oftentimes protected by riverbends and vegetation. It must be conceded that while the freedom to control domestic space in such a way was a condition specific to widowhood, it was not a universal guarantee. Aristocratic and country gentry are almost exclusively featured here, due to the economic means, social status, and corroborating sources that accompany such individuals. But while wealth, sex, and social status have all been recognized by previous historians, it is the remarkable prominence of marital status as a factor that is highlighted here.

Consider the exploits of Elizabeth Vaux and her harbouring house at Harrowden. In 1600, Elizabeth Vaux, the widow of George Vaux and sister-in-law to the harbouring female duo Anne Vaux and the widow Eleanor Brooksby, used her wealth and independence to have a new three-story addition built at Harrowden Hall for the use of priests John Percy and John Gerard.[17] Harrowden became a sort of 'Mission Headquarters', used as both a Catholic school and meeting place for Jesuit priests. Vaux commissioned Nicholas Owen to build a priest hole in the original building, further solidifying Harrowden as a hub of Catholic activity.[18]

[16] At this point in time, the option of maintaining independence as a nun was unavailable to English women. Following the dissolution of the monasteries by Henry VIII beginning in 1536, and the accession of Elizabeth I in 1558, English nuns had two choices: enter secular life or join convents on the continent. Most Catholic women desirous of living an enclosed life travelled to the continent. By the end of the seventeenth century, the English convent community in exile was comprised of 22 enclosed convents with more than 1,950 members in Flanders and France. Caroline Bowden, 'Community Space and Cultural Transmission: Formation and Schooling in English Enclosed Convents in the Seventeenth Century', *History of Education* 34, 4 (2005): 365–86 at 366.

[17] Michael Hodgetts, 'A Topographical Index of Hiding-Places, III', *Recusant History* 27, 4 (2005): 476.

[18] Apart from Vaux's presence in Jesuit writings, state papers also corroborate her role as a priest harbourer. See a recounting of the priests associated with Elizabeth Vaux in SP 14/216/1 f. 22, the National Archives, London (hereafter TNA).

The creation and adaptation of Harrowden as a Catholic refuge came on the heels of numerous manoeuvres by Elizabeth Vaux, each one contingent on her economic and social status as a widow. According to the Jesuit John Gerard, once Elizabeth's husband died, she vowed to remain a widow and devoted her material wealth to the Catholic cause.[19] Upon her widowhood, she settled at Irthlingborough. Gerard remarked that the house was poorly appointed and unsuited for their plans to create a Catholic centre. Harrowden, also a family seat, sat three miles from Irthlingborough, although at this point it was also in poor condition. Gerard described Elizabeth's motivations and aspirations for a Catholic house in his *Autobiography* and in doing so, gives a set of requirements for such a building. He maintained:

> [Harrowden] had been neglected, and in many parts it was quite dilapidated, almost in fact a ruin. Certainly it was no place where she could give hospitality, as she intended, to all the Catholic gentlemen who would come to see me for spiritual comfort and consolation, for these were the only guests she wanted. Moreover, it was ill-suited for defense against the sudden incursions and raids of the pursuivants, and consequently, she would never be as free as she wished to be. What she desired, in fact, was a house where life could go on in as nearly the same way as in our colleges, and this she achieved in the end.[20]

Gerard's misgivings about Harrowden suggests that his idea of an effective Catholic household required seclusion and protection away from prying eyes and invasive searches. It needed to be well appointed, so that it could receive numerous visitors in an appropriate fashion. The house also needed to be large enough to accommodate priests and provide ample space to perform necessary worship and instruction. Thus, location, size, and level of privacy were vital characteristics for a successful Catholic house.

Elizabeth Vaux tried to rent such a house in London, although her proximity to the Privy Council and the lack of privacy afforded in the city drove Vaux to the countryside. Gerard wrote, 'A house in or near

[19] Evidence suggests that most widows in this study chose to remain single. In the biography of Dorothy Lawson, author William Palmes writes, 'She intended to expend the rest of her life like a solitary sparrow in the holes of a rock, or morning turtle, that never had mate but one, and vow'd never to know another,' William Palmes, *The Life of Mrs. Dorothy Lawson of St. Antony's Near Newcastle-on-Tyne* (London: Charles Dolman, 1855), 23. Similarly, the biography of Lady Magdalen Montague states, 'For her husband being dead, the Lord Cobham, a man of great estate, honour, and authority in the realm, did most earnestly seek her in marriage . . . but she gave him a resolute denial, that thenceforward she was no more solicited by suitors,' Richard Smith, *An Elizabethan Recusant House*, ed. A.C. Southern (London: Sands & Co., 1954), 32. In addition, Anne Dacre Howard refused to remarry after her husband's death in the Tower. Her biographer wrote, 'She had made a constant resolution to live and die a widow,' *The Lives of Philip Howard, Earl of Arundel, and of Anne Dacres, his wife*, edited from the original manuscript by The Duke of Norfolk, E.M. (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1857), 199. Not only did Howard keep this vow, but she renewed it several times every year, in the same fashion as some religious men.

[20] John Gerard, *The Autobiography of a Hunted Priest*, trans. Philip Caraman (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 186.

London, of course, had the great advantage that it would be much better placed for apostolic work, but, on the other hand, London was too dangerous for me at the moment. In any case, she would have no privacy there, and it would be unsafe for her.'[21] It appears that accessibility was deemed important for the spread and strengthening of Catholicism, but not as vital as the protection afforded by a secluded location. Elizabeth Vaux's public interactions with officials and bailiffs as the manager of her minor son's estate meant that Vaux had to remain accessible and visible. Unlike the childless widow Anne Line, who Gerard commissioned to maintain a secret household in London, Elizabeth Vaux could not disappear into the city under the cover of a pseudonym. Though she needed to remain in the public eye, she also needed to be cautious. As a known Catholic, she was under careful watch by the Lords of the Council.

While a country location for Vaux lessened accessibility for other Catholics, it did provide the necessary protection required for priest harbouring. Gerard wrote, 'We searched everywhere for the perfect house, looking over many in this county, but they all had some feature that made them not quite suitable for our purpose.'[22] The time and care Vaux, with perhaps the help of her Jesuit confessor, took in choosing a house reveals the importance of both location and structure. Vaux's social autonomy and economic independence meant she had both the time and resources to find a house that met her needs. Eventually Vaux chose Kirby Hall, a large house in Northamptonshire that 'stood remote from other dwellings, surrounded by fine orchards and gardens – people could come and go without anyone noticing them.'[23] Thus, privacy in movement took precedence over ease of movement.

Elizabeth Vaux enlisted the help of Thomas Mulsho, one of the trustees for her son, to rent Kirby Hall in his name in April 1599. With a payment of £1,500, Vaux began altering the building to better suit her needs, which included contracting Nicholas Owen to build priest holes so that she could better hide the religious outlaws. However, loose-lipped servants and a wary local community ensured that Vaux's stay at Kirby Hall was short lived. Gerard stated, 'Already there was talk in the whole county that she had taken this splendid mansion because it was a remote place where she could entertain priests freely and in large numbers. This gossip had some foundation.'[24] As a result, in July 1599, authorities unsuccessfully searched the house. While Owen escaped capture, and Vaux avoided prosecution, Kirby Hall was no longer a safe refuge since it was

[21] Gerard, *Autobiography*, 185.
[22] *Ibid.*, 186.
[23] *Ibid.*, 187.
[24] *Ibid.*, 198.

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situated in a county where numerous justices and residents were Puritans, eager to push Vaux from Kirby.[25]

Kirby Hall had met the desired requirements for a Catholic house. It was private, secluded, protected, and large enough to accommodate and hide numerous priests. However, the house was situated in a community that was hostile towards Catholics. Gerard wrote, 'Though they frustrated the move, she did not give up her purpose, and started at once to adapt her present house [Harrowden].'[26] Elizabeth Vaux had a new three-story wing built at Harrowden to provide ample privacy; so much that Gerard boasted that they could step out into a private garden and take walks in nearby fields without observation.[27] It appears that the community surrounding Harrowden was either more amenable, or Harrowden provided more seclusion than Kirby Hall, since the house became a centre of operations, housed numerous Jesuits, provided education for Catholic boys, and kept an elaborate altar and vestments for Mass. However, the protection afforded by Harrowden was short-lived. In November 1605, a letter incriminated Vaux in the Gunpowder Plot, which led to a brief arrest. In April 1606, Vaux was able to return to Harrowden until another arrest in 1616, which resulted in crippling fines and the eventual abandonment of the house.[28]

Dorothy Lawson is another example of a woman who used her widowhood, financial independence, and social status to create an effective harbouring house. On 10 March 1597, Dorothy Constable married the lawyer Roger Lawson, esquire, the Protestant son and heir to Ralph Lawson of Brough Hall. His estate was worth 3,000 pounds a year, thereby ensuring Dorothy Lawson a comfortable life in the north of England.[29] Her seventeen-year marriage to Roger ended with his death in 1614. Left with fifteen children and her house at Heaton, Lawson became a widow with inherited property.[30] Lawson's Jesuit chaplain of seven years, William Palmes, recounted in her biography that in 1623, Lawson's father-in-law, Sir Ralph Lawson, wanted to sell Heaton, but he was unable to do so without Dorothy's permission. Eventually, Lawson granted permission, and she moved to Newcastle-on-Tyne where she had the means to build a new house called

[25] Godfrey Anstruther, *Vaux of Harrowden: A Recusant Family* (Monmouthshire: R. H. Johns Limited, 1953), 243.
[26] Gerard, *Autobiography*, 201.
[27] Anstruther, *Vaux of Harrowden*, 243.
[28] Like Elizabeth Vaux, Elizabeth Stapleton, the widow of Brian Stapleton, commissioned a priest hole at Carlton Towers in 1614 during a remodel of the house. The hide is in a space between chimneystacks and underneath the floor. Access to the priest hole is through a trap door in the floor of a closet. John Martin Robinson, *Carlton Towers: The Yorkshire Home of the Duke of Norfolk* (Derby: English Life Publications, Ltd., 1991), 11.
[29] Palmes, *Life of Mrs. Dorothy Lawson*, 8.
[30] Lawson's number of children varies in sources, listing anywhere between twelve and nineteen. Fifteen is the number most accepted. See Hanlon, 'These be but women', 378.

St. Antony's.[31] Here she employed Catholic servants, harboured priests, and held Catholic services in her house, converting family members and neighbours to the Catholic faith. Lawson lived at St. Antony's for fifteen years until her death on 26 March 1632 at the age of 52.[32]

The location of St. Antony's was arguably one of its greatest assets. The house was relatively secluded, and sat on the banks of the Tyne River, which provided easy access to merchants and missionaries from the continent. A lease dated 21 April 1623 between Robert Riddell, a merchant in Newcastle-on-Tyne, and Dorothy Lawson gives a hint as to the exact location of St. Antony's, since the building does not exist today. It appears that at this time, Riddell was leasing one-third of his land holdings to Lawson, who paid 4 d. per annum, and paid one-third of the charges in building wharves, houses, and hedges along this portion of the Tyne.[33] In the lease, she is already referred to as 'Dorothy Lawson of St. Anthony's', and the lease shows joint control of land along the Tyne river at the low-water mark in the lordship of Byker in an area called the Salt Grasse. Next to the electoral ward of Byker in Newcastle today is a suburban area named St. Anthony's, near the banks of the Tyne. This location is indeed at a sharp bend of the river, as described by Palmes, roughly eight miles from where the mouth of the river opens to the North Sea. By comparing Palmes' description with these modern divisions of Newcastle, it appears that St. Antony's did indeed sit at an easy access point, relatively secluded around the bend of a river.

Not only was its location significant, but Palmes states that Lawson outfitted the house to be a beacon to passing Catholics. She had 'JESUS' written in large letters on the end of the house that faced the water, so mariners and missionaries would know that hers was a house where Catholics could gather in privacy.[34] While authorities could not reasonably punish Lawson for posting Jesus' name, as this

[31] Palmes, *Life of Mrs. Dorothy Lawson*, 29. Upon widowhood, Lawson was in financial difficulties due to her husband's debt. A settlement for the payment of debts between Roger's father, Sir Ralph Lawson of Brough and Sir Thomas Fairfax of Gilling suggest that by 1614, the debt was finally cleared by money from the manor of Heaton, the mansion house of Heaton, and part of the manor of Byker. Settlement for payment of debts and portions, 4 Sept. 1614, North Yorkshire Record Office, ZRL 8/21 1-2. By 1623, the date Dorothy Lawson moved to St. Antony's, she appears to have been in a stronger financial situation thanks to her father-in-law, unencumbered by her husband's debts.

[32] Hanlon, 'These Be But Women', 372, 391. Hanlon argues that it was leniency in the enforcement of laws that allowed for Dorothy Lawson's recusant actions.

[33] Assignment of lease, 21 April 1623, North Yorkshire Record Office, ZRL 6/54.

[34] An argument made by William Palmes, *Life of Mrs. Dorothy Lawson*, 31. See Davidson, 'Recusant Catholic Spaces in Early Modern England', in Ronald Corthell, Frances E. Dolan, Christopher Highley, and Arthur F. Marotti, eds. *Catholic Culture in Early Modern England* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 20, for a discussion of how early modern English churches and houses communicated a recusant Catholic identity through symbolically articulated spaces.

would not have been an exclusively Catholic sign, the writing could have signalled the presence of the Society of Jesus at the house to knowing individuals, a sort of dual-meaning protection while proclaiming the location of a Catholic refuge. Due to its secluded yet accessible location, Jesuits frequently used Lawson's house as a meeting place. Palmes writes that once a year, members of the Society of Jesus met for eight days to discuss the mission in England.[35] Elizabeth Vaux and Dorothy Lawson present two examples of solitary widows who capitalized on their newfound economic independence, and autonomy in the eyes of society and law, to create new domestic space for maintaining priests.

Not only did widowhood provide the financial opportunity to create harbouring space in the household without interference, but also it gave a culturally acceptable reason for women to live in solitude; a lifestyle well-suited to harbouring priests. The purpose of dower houses, for instance, was that they be used by widows to remove themselves from the main house to make room for the heir and his family. These socially isolated, independent dwellings were in fact perfect for the use of priests desirous to avoid the public eye.[36] Jane Wiseman of Essex capitalized on the social solitude that accompanied widowhood and established a dower house designed to harbour priests. Wiseman was known by Protestant authorities to be 'a great harbourer of priests and other bad persons,' in her house at Northend in Essex.[37] John Gerard encouraged Wiseman to retire to her dower house, away from her son and his estate, presumably in order to capitalize on her social solitude. Anne Dacre Howard, the widow of the now sainted Philip Howard, moved four times between 1616 and her death in 1630.[38] She spent her final two years at a secluded manor house at Shifnal, Shropshire. In this house covered by trees, Anne hosted Mass, kept priests, and provided charity to the poor. The widow Lady Magdalen Montague had control of three houses upon her widowhood: Montague House in London, Cowdray House in West Sussex, and Battle Abbey in East Sussex. She spent most of her time at Battle, the house furthest from London and protected by rolling hills and trees. While Montague's house in London was searched numerous times by authorities, her house at Battle was searched only once, and she lived in relative peace and seclusion even though her house was

[35] Palmes, *Life of Mrs. Dorothy Lawson*, 47.
[36] The use of dower houses for harbouring continued late into the Stuart reign. Consider the example of Lady Dowager of Worcester in whose house a raid uncovered numerous papists and priests in 1679. Newsletter to Francis Pye at Morpeth, 12 February 1679, Vol. 21: Charles II, Entry 342, p. 81, TNA.
[37] List by Rich. Young of seven recusant servants found in Mr. Wiseman's house, 1594, SP 12/248 f. 160, TNA.
[38] Anne Dacre Howard's unnamed biographer states that he stayed with Anne for fourteen years and that she moved four times during his stay. *Lives*, 202, 209.

known as 'little Rome.'[39] Here, in the house four miles from Hastings, Montague built a chapel, kept three priests, and hosted Mass. According to John Ellys, a tailor in Dorset, a widow called Mrs. Jesope had nine priests at one time in her house in East Chickerell, because the structure 'hath conveiances in it to hide the priests and massing priests in,' and it sat 'solitary by itself.'[40] While not much else is known about Mrs. Jesope, it is notable that Ellys attributes Jesope's success to the location and structure of her house. Its apparent location away from other buildings no doubt added an element of security and secrecy, while the house itself must have included a variety of spaces to conceal priests.

The physical and social seclusion from male authority enjoyed by widows, together with the availability of monetary resources, are perhaps why widows are prominent not only in Jesuit biographies, as shown above, but also in confessions, witness statements, arrest warrants, and state papers, since some widows were able to use and create households for harbouring without interference or competing allegiances. For example, a servant's statement revealed that after the death of her husband Sir John Stourton, Lady Stourton moved to Chideock in Dorset, further isolating herself. Priests followed her there and stayed for more than a year.[41] Edmund Campion's confession in 1580, as recorded by Lord Burghley, lists an immense network of harbourers in which gentlemen feature prominently, although seven women are listed as well. Three were known widows, while the marital status of the other four is unknown.[42] In 1581, a servant betrayed the location of seminary priest John Payne at the house of the widow Lady Petre, which resulted in his arrest.[43] Authorities charged Payne with high treason and executed him in 1582, yet available documentation suggests that the punishment imposed on Lady Petre was minimal. The widow Eleanor Hunt harboured the priest Christopher Wharton until authorities apprehended, tried, and executed him in 1600.[44] Eleanor

[39] Smith, *An Elizabethan Recusant House*, 41–42, 55.

[40] 'Conveyance' was the Elizabethan term for priest hole. Declaration of John Ellys, of Bradmayne, Dorset, tailor, 11 September 1602, at Hatfield House, Hertfordshire Vol. 12: 1602 [795], 366. Mrs. Jesope represents an example of a widow who was arguably not part of the aristocracy or gentry. Arrest warrants, lists from magistrates, and correspondence within state papers present an opportunity to mine for individuals whose actions would otherwise be lost. However, these sources only tell part of the story, as those featured in such sources were caught. Those individuals, with social situations and harbouring exploits that left little evidence, continue to remain hidden.

[41] Examination of Wm. Holmes, late servant to Lady Stourton, before Sir Geo. Trenchard, Sir Ralph Horsey, and John Williams, 21 April 1594, SP 12/248 f.170, TNA.

[42] More than thirty individuals are listed in as keeping Campion in his confession. Campion's 'confession of his being entertained at the houses of Lord Vaux, Sir Thomas Tresham, Sir Wm. Catesby, &c. with some notes by Lord Burghley, 1580, Lansdowne MS 30, Fol. 78, BL.

[43] Henry Foley, *Records of the English Province of the Society of Jesus*, 7 vols (London: Burns and Oates, 1875–1883), 3:551.

[44] Foley, *Records*, 216.

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herself avoided execution, although she was imprisoned in York Castle for harbouring a priest.[45] A 1605 letter from Thomas Wilson to the Earl of Salisbury lists thirty-one priest harbourers, of which ten were women. Of those ten, seven were widows.[46] The prominence of widows in these sources suggests that priests frequently trusted and used widows' houses as sites of refuge.

Widowhood provided autonomous control over money, time, and domestic space in a way unavailable to most married and single women in early modern England. These financial resources and accompanying spatial autonomy provided at the death of husbands resulted in a variety of responses from Catholic widows intent on harbouring priests. Some, like Dorothy Lawson, created new spaces, built with the specific aim to harbour priests. Others adapted old places, such as the widow Jesope and Elizabeth Vaux. The level of privacy and seclusion, combined with accessibility, found in the above examples suggests that the creation and placement of such spaces itself was intentional. Dorothy Lawson chose to build St. Antony's around the bend of the river – a location that was both private and accessible. Elizabeth Vaux searched for the ideal house and eventually settled on creating one from the remnants of the existing Harrowden. The bricks and mortar of place depended on the funds, planning, and execution of such women; factors that were in turn dependent on the societal structures that accompanied widowhood. In this way, gender, marital status, and class influenced the creation and use of households as centres for harbouring priests.

Cognitive boundaries: The cover of vulnerability

The physical boundaries of protection afforded by the location and structure of households present only part of this analysis on the opportunities for subversion inherent in widowhood. This section investigates an additional layer of privacy connected to widows' households in particular; one based on cognitive boundaries. Such boundaries were not dependent on social or economic independence or the physicality of priest holes and houses, but instead on the accepted cultural stereotypes associated with widowhood; most notably that of vulnerability and piety. These gendered stereotypes provided widows with a certain degree of invisibility while harbouring priests, since the perception of widows appears to have influenced the actions of priest hunters and Protestant authorities. This study's understanding of gendered stereotypes relies on extant early modern English texts. When analysing the use of the word

[45] Trewe Storie of the Catholicke Prisoners in Yorke Castle, c. 1599, Add MS 34250, BL.
[46] Thomas Wilson to the Earl of Salisbury, 20 November 1605, Hatfield House, Calendar of the manuscripts of the most Hon. The Marquis of Salisbury, Vol 17 [988].

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widow in texts within the Early English Books Online database (EEBO), the two words most commonly associated with the term *widow* are *fatherless* and *poor*.[47] This suggests that the rhetorical language associated with widows in early modern literary conventions in large part invokes an image of destitution and isolation from male support. This frequent stereotype of widowhood exists largely in Biblical commentaries and literary representations, which generally depicted widows as vulnerable. Another common stereotype of widowhood is the 'ideal widow', as reflected in conduct books, sermons, and other prescriptive literature. Early modern English authors depicted the ideal widow as a woman who exhibited self-control, chastity, and obedience to God in her solitude. For example, the terms most associated with the word *widowhood* in EEBO are *virginity*, *perpetual*, *chaste*, and *vow*, which shows that the theme most often associated with the state of widowhood was that of sexual control. By prescribing how a widow should or should not act, male authors attempted to assert control over a female demographic that was socially and economically autonomous – an inversion of the desired gendered hierarchy. A third popular stereotype portrays the lusty widow, commonly featured in comedic representations such as ballads, broadsides, and plays. Contemporary portrayals of the lusty widow depict a rich, independent, and worldly woman with an insatiable sexual appetite who preyed on young men.[48] Such widows were the antithesis of the pious widow. They were out of control, threatened the patriarchal hierarchy of society, and led God-fearing men to sin.[49]

[47] Collocates for the terms 'widow' and 'widowhood' were created using EEBO-TCP, through a corpus query textual analysis software created by the University of Lancashire, UK. https://cqpweb.lancs.ac.uk/. I am grateful for the assistance from both Andrew Hardie and Mark Knights in utilizing this tool. The database Early English Books Online (EEBO) was chosen to create a sketch of the treatment of widows in extant early modern English texts because it contains one of the largest and most diverse digital collections of English writings. Biblical associations between widows and orphans, together with the stories of the widow's mite and the parable of the persistent widow overwhelm discussions of widows in early modern literature. Biblical discussions of widows include, but are not limited to, Exodus 22:22, Deuteronomy 10:18, James 1:27, 1 Corinthians 7:8, and 1 Timothy 5:6–14. For the story of the widow's mite, see Mark 12:42 and Luke 21:2. For the parable of the persistent widow, see Luke 18:1–8.

[48] Cavallo and Warner, *Widowhood*, 9.

[49] The perceived threat of widows was also associated with witchcraft. Merry Wiesner-Hanks argues that most persons in isolated cases of witchcraft fit the stereotype of old, widowed women who were poor, looked odd, and behaved badly, *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 266. See also Lyndal Roper, *Oedipus and the Devil: Witchcraft, Sexuality and Religion in Early Modern Europe* (New York: Routledge, 1994). However, Alison Rowlands has argued, along with Robin Briggs, that widows have been overrepresented in studies of witchcraft and that external religious, social and economic factors contributed more towards witchcraft accusations than gender, old age, and marital status. Rowlands maintains that less than half of accused women were widows. Alison Rowlands, 'Witchcraft and Old Women in Early Modern Germany', *Past & Present* 173 (2001): 50–89 at 62–63. See also Robin Briggs, *Witches and Neighbors: The Social and Cultural Context of European Witchcraft* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2002).

Yet, despite the popularity of the lusty widow on the stage, the stereotype of threatening widows appears to have had little impact on the view of individual widows in reality. Instead, sources suggest that a perception of vulnerability followed widowhood, and acted as a cover for subversive action, rather than an advertisement for culpability.[50] The Catholic widows in this study exemplified the common stereotypes of piety and vulnerability and avoided the trope of the 'lusty widow', which eased anxieties surrounding the power and authority inherent in their marital status. They vowed to remain widows, built or adapted dower houses in solitary locations, gave money to the poor, fed the hungry, and devoted themselves to God. In this way, they stayed within the parameters of the existing patriarchal society and thereby avoided or hindered detection from authorities. Ironically, patriarchal stereotypes of widows provided a sort of cultural camouflage over subversive actions.

While widowhood was not a veil that completely protected a house from authorities, state papers and correspondence suggest that it was a culturally understood taboo to infiltrate a widow's privacy. At the very least, widows expected a sense of decorum from the men who approached their doorstep. Consider the search of Baddesley Clinton, as narrated in the autobiography of Jesuit John Gerard. At the time of the search in October 1591, five Jesuits and two seminary priests were meeting at Baddesley Clinton over the span of a few days under the protection of the widow Eleanor Brooksby and her sister, Anne Vaux, when at five o'clock in the morning, four priest-hunters approached the door. Gerard recounts that the pursuivants took the priests by surprise, and so they quickly stripped the altar, gathered personal items, and turned their beds over so they would not be warm to the touch of the searchers. They also had to hide their boots and swords since it would have aroused suspicion had the searchers found such articles without the presence of men.[51] While Gerard only details his own haste, Brooksby and Vaux could have had their own items to hide in the hurried moments before the searchers crossed the threshold. A list of items belonging to the two sisters from 1606 details numerous Catholic items, from reliquaries, pictures, vestments, crucifixes, and various relics such as Mr. Robert Sutton's thumb, St. Stephen's jawbone in gold and crystal, and a piece of hair shirt from St. Thomas

[50] Victoria Christman found that widowed Catholic book publishers in Antwerp similarly benefited from the vulnerability associated with their marital status, as they were 'practically invisible to imperial officials, thereby enabling them to continue their illicit production unimpeded by judicial censure.' Christman, 'The Coverture of Widowhood: Heterodox Female Publishers in Antwerp 1530–1580', *Sixteenth Century Journal* 42, 1 (2011): 77–97 at 91.

[51] Gerard, *Autobiography*, 51. Anne Vaux and Eleanor Brooksby were already a well-known harbouring duo, even to the authorities. They were listed by George Snape as harbourers of seminary priests in Warwickshire. Confession of George Snape of the names of Seminary Priests and the places of their abode, 1589, SP 12/229 f. 136, TNA.

of Canterbury.[52] Gathering items, flipping beds, stripping altars, and fitting seven men into a hide would have taken some time, especially since they were presumably still in their beds when the searchers approached the door. Gerard's account gives a clue to the strategy used to keep the searchers at bay in order to provide more time for the priests to conceal themselves. He writes, 'Outside the ruffians were bawling and yelling, but the servants held the door fast. They said the mistress of the house, a widow, was not up yet, but was coming down at once to answer them. This gave us enough time to stow ourselves and all our belongings into a very cleverly built sort of cave'.[53]

A letter written by Jesuit Henry Garnet in 1593 recounts that the unmarried sister, Anne Vaux, then met the searchers pretending to be Eleanor, the widow and mistress of the house. Eleanor Brooksby is said to have been timid and found it difficult to deal with authorities, so she frequently hid in a separate hiding place and left Anne to talk to searchers.[54] Garnet states that when Anne met the searchers, she said, 'Do you think it right and proper that you should be admitted to a widow's house before she or her servants or children are out of bed? Why this lack of good manners? Why come so early? Why keep coming to my house in this hostile manner? Have you ever found me unwilling to open the door to you as soon as you knocked?'[55] While Anne Vaux's chastisement of the affront to a widow's house might bring the reader to assume that she was a feeble, old woman, Eleanor Brooksby was in fact thirty-one at the time of the search, and twenty-one when widowed.

The case of Eleanor Brooksby shows that old age and widowhood did not always go hand in hand, and it was the vulnerability associated with widowhood itself that contributed towards this cultural camouflage.[56] In addition, searchers were often social inferiors, and displays of hesitation or deference as they entered the house would not be uncommon. They also could have paused before searching the house to avoid endangering the widow's honour.[57] Whatever the reason, Anne's authority in reprimanding the searchers, posing as mistress

[52] List of relics, church stuff, &c. belonging to Mrs. Brookesby and Mrs. Anne [Vaux], March 1606, SP 14/19 f. 136, TNA. Robert Sutton was a seminary priest who was executed at Stafford in July 1588.
[53] Gerard, *Autobiography*, 51.
[54] Anstruther, *Vaux of Harrowden*, 188.
[55] As quoted in Anstruther, *Vaux of Harrowden*, 188. The letter Anstruther is referring to was written by Henry Garnet to the Jesuit General in March 1593.
[56] Some works have incorporated age as a theme in analyses. See Bill Sheils, 'Household, Age, and Gender among Jacobean Yorkshire Recusants', in *English Catholics of Parish and Town, 1558–1778* (Catholic Record Society, 1999); Robert Jütte, 'Aging and the body images in the sixteenth century', *European History Quarterly* 18 (1988): 259–290; George Minois, *History of Old Age: From Antiquity to the Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989); and Susannah R. Ottoway, *The Decline of Life: Old Age in Eighteenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).
[57] For a study of hospitality, see Felicity Heal, *Hospitality in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990).

of the house, and questioning their disrespect to a widow's house signals a potential benefit to widow priest-harbourers. Instead of breaking through, the searchers waited for the 'vulnerable' widow, and this action cost them. After four hours of searching, they left the house empty handed.[58]

The search of Kirby Hall in July 1599 likewise featured a group of searchers delayed by gendered cultural conventions. Yet again, John Gerard, one of the priests in hiding, reported, 'There they were, straining and shouting to get through and search the house, yet they halted behind in an unlocked room just long enough to allow us time to reach the hiding-place and shut ourselves safely in.'[59] Gerard does not provide a reason why the searchers remained in the room, apart from God's protection. Separate from divine intervention, the fact of the matter is a group of searchers waited impatiently in a known harbouring house. The place they waited was a room that did not have a physical barrier to the rest of the house. This odd delay was likely due to them waiting for something, or someone. At the time the pursuivants arrived, the widow Elizabeth Vaux, the mistress of the house, was ill and in bed. Eventually, the searchers did tear through the house, even into Vaux's room, but first, they waited. Perhaps, like the search at Baddesley Clinton, the searchers were waiting for the mistress to appear before conducting their search – a courtesy absent in descriptions of other searches with pursuivants who tore through 'every corner – even womens beds and bosomes' with such insolence that their villanies were "halfe a Martyrdome".[60] Potentially, cultural convention, based on gender and a respect for a vulnerable widow, created a cognitive boundary between searchers and the rest of the household.

[58] Baddesley Clinton is open to the public. https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/baddesley-clinton. It has long been acknowledged that Baddesley Clinton housed three priest holes. One ran along the roof in an attic space, although this hide was probably not used because any noise made in the ceiling would betray the hidden priests and burning candles would have shown through the boards. However, it could have played a role as a diversion hide that would be shown to authorities, proving that there were no priests hiding in the house. A second hide is now visible from the kitchen through a pane of glass and is purported to have been the hide used during this search. It is large enough to hide seven adults and it is positioned below the waterline of the moat surrounding the house, consistent with John Gerard's description. Gerard, *Autobiography*, 52. The alleged third hide is between the walls and was supposed to have been accessed by the fireplace in the Great Parlour, although following a rewiring project in 2016 it was proved that the space could not have been accessed from the fireplace, due to its location within the walls. It is possible that the 'priest hole' could have been accessed from the Library, however when lifting the floorboards during the 2016 work, no signs of an opening were discovered. In addition, its size and location next to the flue would have made it very hot and uncomfortable. As a result, the identification of this space as a priest hole is in question. I am grateful to Ellie Fisher, Senior House Steward of Baddesley Clinton, for her knowledge and assistance with the question of the third hide.

[59] Gerard, *Autobiography*, 201.

[60] Anthony G. Petti, ed. *The Letters and Dispatches of Richard Verstegan (c.1550–1640)*, Publications of the Catholic Record Society, 52, (London: Catholic Record Society, 1959) 7, as quoted in Alexandra Walsham, '"Domme Preachers"? Post-Reformation English Catholicism and the Culture of Print', *Past and Present*, 168, 1 (2000): 72–123 at 88.

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The hypothesis that the infirmity of the household's owner potentially delayed searchers is strengthened when considering that Elizabeth Vaux either feigned or truly fell ill a second time during a search of Harrowden in 1605. According to a letter dated 13 November, just days after the foiled Gunpowder Plot, William Tate, the Justice in charge of the search, recounted to the Earl of Salisbury:

> I have used all possible expedition for my repair to Mrs. Vaux, her house at Harrowden, whither I came with as much secrecy as could be on Tuesday, the 12th of this instant month, between twelve and one of the clock of the same day . . . as we approached to the gates, having first set a guard about the house to prevent all escapes, we encountered the Lord Vaux . . . with whom we presently entered, making no stay in any place until we came unto his mother, whom we found retired in her chamber through some indisposition of health, and after a general notice given her of your Lordship's commandment, I required the keys of her closet, cabinet, trunks, coffers, and back doors of her lodgings, which without any delay she delivered unto me.[61]

Two points of interest arise in this letter. First, although searchers arrived at the house with Elizabeth Vaux's son who was returning to the house 'from town' – this is presumably Edward Vaux, 4th Baron of Harrowden (b. 1588) – the searchers deferred to Elizabeth as the authority in the household as the matriarch of Harrowden. Second, Vaux used illness for a second time to delay searchers. Vaux may have suffered from a chronic health condition, or perhaps she used the perception of vulnerability as a tactic to delay the men. Either way, the Jesuit John Gerard had time to successfully stow away for what would become a nine-day search.

Elizabeth Vaux's household authority, due to her widowhood, and the potential manipulation of her vulnerability influenced the first pivotal moments of the house search. A letter from Anne Lady Markham to the Earl of Salisbury in January 1606, less than two months after the search, argues that had the watch continued at Harrowden for two more days, John Gerard would have been apprehended. In return, the Earl of Salisbury sent a blank warrant to Lady Markham for Gerard's capture, should she have opportunity.[62] Lady Markham would never have the chance, as John Gerard successfully fled for the continent just a couple months later with financial assistance from Elizabeth Vaux.

Cultural perceptions of both gender and widowhood not only moulded pursuivants' actions upon entering widows' houses, but they also influenced the prosecution of widows. At times, widows used pre-

[61] Wm. Tate to Salisbury, 13 Nov. 1605, SP 14/216/1 f.140, TNA.
[62] Anne Lady Markham to Salisbury, 3 Jan. 1606, SP 14/18 f.6, TNA and Earl of Salisbury to Lady Markham, 15 Jan. 1606, SP 14/18 f. 23, TNA.

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vailing cultural perceptions of women and widowhood as vulnerable and weak as a defence against accusations. After Elizabeth Vaux was arrested for her implication in the Gunpowder Plot, she wrote a letter to the Earl of Salisbury pleading her innocence. After denying her intimate knowledge of the suspects, she leans on her weakness as a woman and wrote, 'For your further satisfaction I assure you there are many that will receive such persons that will not put their lives and estates in the power and secrecy of a woman.'[63] A letter written by the widow Jane Lovell to the Earl of Salisbury complains about a house search and asks for Salisbury's protection 'in the future as a gentlewoman of quality.'[64] She complained that the searchers claimed she was hiding priests, and they took away pictures and books while searching through her belongings. While the searchers did not find a priest on that occasion, an examination of Mrs. Anne Percye, a servant of Lovell, reports that three priests on separate occasions were in the house.[65] Yet, when confronted about these charges, Lovell immediately reverts to her gender to affront the charges. She promotes her vulnerability when she asks that she as a 'poor gentlewoman' not be 'subject to every base constable to examine, search, and apprehend the friends that come to her and her servants.'[66]

While utilizing the rhetoric of vulnerability appears to be a frequent tactic used by female harbourers, it was not always successful. In a 1581 letter from Henry Earl of Huntingdon to Secretary Walsingham, Huntingdon recounted a recent search at a widow's house. He wrote:

> I suddenly rode 20 miles west from this town, having heard from one of my spies that Windsor was in Arthington House, but when I got there he had gone. It is such a house to hide persons in as I have not seen before; I was assured that there are vaults underground, but where to find them I could not learn. Therefore, after I had examined the widow, who was or feigned to be sick in bed, and had sent her with the rest to prison, I had a mind to have plucked up the boards.[67]

The explicit depiction of the widow as frail denotes a stigma attached to widows and goes hand in hand with Vaux's multiple uses of illness to distract searchers. While it did not deter Huntingdon, as he arrested her anyway, the example of the widow at Arthington falls into a prevailing pattern of manipulated vulnerability.

[63] Elizabeth Vaux to the Earl of Salisbury, 1605, at Hatfield House, Calendar of the manuscripts of the most Hon. The Marquis of Salisbury, Vol 17 [1322].
[64] Jane, Lady Lovell to the Earl of Salisbury, 1605, at Hatfield House, Calendar of the manuscripts of the most Hon. The Marquis of Salisbury, Vol 17 [1256].
[65] Salisbury documents on the Examination of Lady Lovell, at Hatfield House, Calendar of the manuscripts of the most Hon. The Marquis of Salisbury, Vol. 17 [985].
[66] Jane, Lady Lovell to the Earl of Salisbury, 1605, at Hatfield House, Calendar of the manuscripts of the most Hon. The Marquis of Salisbury, Vol 17 [1256].
[67] Henry Earl of Huntingdon to Sec. Walsingham, 1581, SP 15/27/1 f. 40, TNA.

The use of prevailing stereotypes of widowhood as a cover for subversive actions could explain why Thomas Longe chose to harbour papists and priests in his widowed mother's house at Ashley in Wiltshire. The mother and widow, Alice Longe, a 'simple oulde woman', submitted a complaint and swore that she was not acquainted with the practices of her son, and was therefore not responsible for the priests, books, and popish items found in her house.[68] In this instance, a harbourer took advantage of his widowed mother and chose her house as a location to hide away illegal objects and individuals. The fact that she filed an official complaint against her son suggests that she was not part of the scheme. However, what this shows is that yet again, a widow's house seemed a beneficial place to hide people and items, even without her knowledge. It could be argued that the widow's house itself maintained a certain character that had benefits unattached to other spaces. Presumably, the son Thomas had his own dwelling, yet he chose to use the house of a 'simple oulde woman'.

Perceptions of the age and frailty of the owner could act as a cover over domestic space, suggesting that houses adopted the stereotypes of isolation and vulnerability associated with widowed owners.[69] There are numerous examples in the *Records of the English Province of the Society of Jesus* of priests using widows' houses, even when there were other options available. Seminary priest James Brushford arrived in England in 1585, the same year as the statute against priests and their harbourers. He stated, 'I found every body so fearful as none would receive me into their houses.'[70] He and another priest, John Taddy, maintained their own place in the woods, and then moved to the house of Mrs. Tempest, a widow. Tempest was also known to have harboured Father Weston.[71] In 1599, Priest Henry Chaderdon described that while he took refuge with the widow of Sir Thomas Gillorde, she offered to place him into the service of Catholic noblemen, 'where I could freely live according to the Catholic faith.'[72] She offered four choices: her brother, her son, William Shelley, and Viscount Montague. After the imprisonment of his friend and a foiled plan to travel to Rome, Chaderdon decided to remain with the widow for two years.[73] He left the widow's house one year after she remarried.[74] Amidst other choices, Chaderdon chose a widow. While his stated

[68] Note of misdemeanours, 5 February 1584, SP 12/168 f. 13, TNA.
[69] Although, as noted earlier, old age was not a prerequisite for widowhood. Eleanor Brooksby was 21 when widowed. Likewise, Anne Line was known as a 'young widow'. The state of widowhood, not old age or gender alone, provided the combination of social solitude, stereotypes of vulnerability, and financial independence used by these widow priest-harbourers.
[70] Foley, *Records*, 3:276.
[71] *Ibid*., 277.
[72] *Ibid*., 548.
[73] *Ibid*., 549.
[74] *Ibid*., 550.

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reasons to stay with widow Gillorde included a desire to remain with the woman who had been so kind to him, it can be assumed that her house also met a necessary degree of safety and protection.[75]

As shown in the above examples of house searches, widowhood did not protect a house from being searched, although it is apparent that respect for the vulnerable and weak demographic did influence the manner and speed of searches and could contribute towards a reticence to prosecute. Negotiable boundaries of penal enforcement are represented in the account that the widow Anne Dacre Howard reportedly sent a venison pie to a particular watchman every Christmas in gratitude for allowing a priest to escape her house while he was posted on guard.[76] Gendered conventions along with bribes, baked goods, blind eyes, and lenient local magistrates all contributed towards the invisibility of some widows' activities to authorities. Previous historians have claimed that the coverture Catholic wives enjoyed created a legal loophole against anti-Catholic legislation, which gave them an advantage unavailable to other women. Married women were part of a duplicitous pair; while husbands outwardly conformed, wives privately supported other Catholics or priests.[77] Yet, it appears that widows had a sort of cultural, social, and economic coverture of their own.

Conclusion

Sources reveal that Richard Topcliffe's warning regarding the threat of women was well grounded since women were indeed active participants in the clandestine Catholic community. Yet what escapes both Topcliffe's and some historians' assertions about the role of women is the complexity that accompanied the experience of women in early modern England. In a society in which marital status had a significant impact on the life cycle of a woman, it is necessary to think more deeply about the relationship between marital status and female power in a patriarchal society. As a comparison, consider the social freedom and isolation of widows described above alongside the experience of Margaret Clitherow, the famed priest harbourer of Yorkshire. Married to a conformist, Clitherow's daily responsibilities as a wife hindered her devotions, at least as related by her biographer and confessor John Mush.[78] Mush remarked that Clitherow would attend a

[75] *Ibid*., 549.
[76] *Lives*, 216–17.
[77] Walsham, *Church Papists*, 79–81.
[78] While there are numerous printings of the biography, the most used is John Mush's 'A True Report of the Life and Martyrdom of Mrs. Margaret Clitherow', in John Morris, *The Troubles of our Catholic Forefathers*, 3 vols. (London, 1877), 3. For a history of Clitherow's life, see Peter Lake and Michael Questier, *The Trials of Margaret Clitherow: Persecution, Martyrdom and the Politics of Sanctity in Elizabethan England* (London: Continuum International, 2011).

service in the morning 'if her husband or some importunate business letted her not,' and her daily devotions were dependent on when 'she could get leisure; which almost she never had until four of the clock in the afternoon.'[79] Mush continues the well-worn trope of domestic duties hindering female piety as he describes how Clitherow struggled to balance her duty to God and duty to her husband.[80] In order to undertake a pilgrimage to the place where Catholics were executed in York, she had to go 'at such time as her husband was from home.'[81] According to Mush, Clitherow was secretive and manipulative in order to protect her husband from knowledge of her actions. Hugh Aveling concedes that Clitherow was hindered by 'the duties of a housewife of a Protestant family' and notes that 'John Mush, her biographer, could only presume that she aspired someday, as a widow, to go abroad into a convent as a laysister.'[82] Mush reports that Clitherow herself once stated, 'Would to God, if it might stand with the duty to my husband and my house, that I were in prison again, where I might (being delivered from the disquietness and cares of this world) attend wholly to the service of my God.'[83]

While Mush's account of Clitherow's life is admittedly hagiographic in nature, his discussion of her status as a wife, and the ensuing limitations such a bond to a Protestant husband posed to both her time and actions, suggests that domestic duties and allegiances of married women could create restrictions oftentimes absent in the lives of solitary widows. Clitherow had to consider how her actions would impact her Protestant husband. The widowed Dorothy Lawson could host Jesuit meeting without answering to male authority. Clitherow had to manoeuvre in secret; Lawson had a new house built and designed with the intention to assist Catholic priests. Clitherow longed for solitude; Lawson embraced it. On paper, the two women look similar. Both women lived in the north of England, both were married to Protestant husbands, and both maintained their Catholic faith. However, when comparing their power and opportunity to assist the Catholic cause, Lawson had exponentially more time and resources than Clitherow, due in large part to her status as a widow.

Early modern society distinguished widows from other women legally, economically, and socially. Widows of the nobility and gentry, in particular, were autonomous according to the law and oftentimes gained property and resources from their husbands' wills. The

[79] Mush, 'Life of Margaret Clitherow', 390–2.
[80] *Ibid*., 381–82.
[81] *Ibid*., 395.
[82] Hugh Aveling, 'Catholic Households in Yorkshire, 1580-1603', *Northern History* 16 (1980): 85–101 at 99. More recently, Lisa McClain has provided a gendered analysis of Clitherow's conflicting loyalties and her dual qualities of piety and deception in *Divided Loyalties*, 139–46.
[83] Mush, 'Life of Margaret Clitherow', 371.

household, a space where widows experienced more freedom and autonomy than other women, was at the nexus of these social identities. Viewing the history of priest harbouring from the vantage point of widows and their households offers a change in perspective from previous analyses. It reveals that individuals who created, adapted, and maintained households not only controlled the physical attributes of place, but also transmitted cultural and psychological meaning onto space. There are additional layers of privacy within the history of priest harbouring outside the structure of the physical priest hole itself. Location, structure of the house, and the cultural meanings attributed to the space and the inhabitants within all contributed towards choosing and maintaining a harbouring household. Therefore, while indeed 'the sex of women should not be overlooked,' marital status should not either. A broader, multidimensional interpretation of the role of women, one that includes an analysis of marital status, is essential to understanding the gendered nature of the early modern English Catholic community.

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