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CATHOLIC COMMUNITIES AND KINSHIP NETWORKS OF THE ELIZABETHAN MIDLANDS

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ABSTRACT. An integral method of keeping a non-conforming community functioning is the construction and up keep of networks, as this web of connections provided security and protection with other non-conformists against the persecuting authorities. The non-conforming Catholic community of Elizabethan England (1558-1603) established various networks within England and abroad. This article is based on research that examines the network of Catholics in the Elizabethan Midlands in order to understand both its effectiveness and the relationship of the local and extended Catholic community with one another. The construction, function and result of these networks will be surveyed over several categories of networks, such as local, underground, clerical and exile. Members of the Midland Catholic community travelled to others areas of the British Isles and Europe to gather spiritual and material support for their faith, sent their children abroad for religious education, and resettled abroad creating in this wake a larger and complex international network. The main objective of this exercise is to show the dynamic and function of the network, and understand the impact it had at the local level for Midland Catholics.

KEY WORDS: Network, Patronage, Community, Catholic, Midlands

Introduction

In post-Reformation England, Catholic gentry and laity employed networks to alleviate the consequences of the Religious Settlement against non-conformists. When the Catholic Church structure collapsed with the Reformation, the formation and maintenance of a network of family, friends and patronage sustained the church. This network was significant for its role in keeping Catholics connected with one another, and for the patronage relationships that allowed Catholics to exercise some power and authority at both the local and national levels. Essentially, the network became a substitute for a parish church and community.

The Catholic community used kin and family networks along with neighbours and patrons as a means to maintain their religious non-conformity.

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This is prominent and obvious among gentry and noble families, though evidence is less clear about the methods employed by non-gentry laity to include themselves in the network or as clients. For the gentry, however, involvement in the network is clearer. They used the network not only for protection but also as a means to continue in the socio-political role to which they were accustomed before the Reformation. Thus, Catholic networks are an interesting and important model of research, as they were a customary aspect of early modern society that continued throughout the Reformation, especially among the gentry and aristocracy. After the reformation of Elizabeth's Religious Settlement in England, Catholics continued the practice of utilising networks of friends, community and patron-client relationships. In this way, English Catholics of the Midlands were able to exercise power and prestige within their own communities and at times in the larger local or national framework.

Various levels of the Catholic network overlapped each other, but none were independent of the others. Indeed, at times it appears that the network was not fuelled primarily by religion, but dependant upon kin and community as well. Also, scholars of English Catholicism now suggest that the subject matter of networks must be understood with a broad geography, not only within the British Isles, as English Catholicism was not insular. While some Midland Catholics did travel abroad, the full extent of a wider European network and community is outside the scope of this research, though mention will be made of several Midland Catholics who chose to leave their local community for short or longer periods of time, and some attention will be paid to links with exile communities in the Netherlands and France (Gibbons 2006: 496).

The goal of this article is to explore the dynamic and function of the Catholic network of kinship and patronage to understand the impact it had at the local level. It is especially interesting to understand how some Midland Catholics used the network to demonstrate non-violent political resistance. There was no unanimity among Catholics in the encouragement of violent tactics against the queen and government. Small pockets of aggressive Catholics, including some from the Midlands, flocked together to support foreign Catholic forces such as Spain, and thanks to these militants other Catholics of a non-threatening nature were sometimes imagined to be a formidable force. Many paid dearly for it.

Opposed to the militant minority, the majority of Catholics hoped that by conforming to the demands of the state, showing loyalty to the crown and disregarding violence, they would eventually distance themselves from their more extreme co-religionists (Edwards 2002: 74-75). When this is shown alongside the well-known anecdotes of Catholic militant defiance, it becomes clear that sixteenth century Catholics were not a unified band of brothers.

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After all, one cannot research early modern Midland Catholicism without stumbling over the Gunpowder Plot, the exemplar of Catholic frustration. But with the addition of the predominantly loyal Catholic community, we can understand the network as it evolved without direction—incorporating the entire community.

Impact at the Local Level

In August 1580 Ralph Sheldon, a Worcestershire Catholic, was summoned to appear before the Privy Council. Standing at his side and also under suspicion was a Midland Catholic cohort made up of his friends and relatives: the Lords Paget, Compton and Vaux, and Sirs Thomas Tresham, William Catesby, John Arundel, and Thomas Throckmorton (APC xii: 166, 254, 301-302). Sheldon was questioned about his religion, and his agreement in January 1581 to outwardly conform to the Religious Settlement was expedient.

He was then released from the Marshalsea, as he had court connections, including the Dudley brothers through his father's marriage, and his local influence through business and land holding was considerable. Sheldon was believed to have been above political disloyalty by the Privy Council, despite the fact that he maintained, by purposefully cultivating Catholic relationships, a Catholic network. Neither embarrassed nor disheartened, he lived a public life that included high-ranking connections of both Catholics and protestants. Sheldon, in contrast with more anti-protestant recusants, gives a nuanced view of 'loyalist non-conformity'. He, along with other locally prominent Catholic acquaintances, was in a politically sensitive situation, and he and his friends manoeuvred within the circumstances using various methods.

Although Sheldon promised on his release form prison in 1581 that he would 'yield himself dutiful and to repair to church', he evidently only conformed outwardly, as he was accused of being a recusant for the rest of his life. The priest Hugh Hall confessed to saying Mass at Sheldon's house during interrogations regarding his involvement in the Somerville Plot of 1583 (SP 12/164, f.141; CRS Misc. II 1906: 27; CRS Misc. IV 1907: 5). In 1585 John Russell attempted to divorce Sheldon's daughter on account of his recusancy, but in a Star Chamber court session, Sheldon claimed that he was not ashamed of his beliefs and that he was as good a man as any (STAC 5/R12/34; STAC 5/S15/38; STAC 5/R41/32). In 1587 he was examined by the Grand Jury of Worcestershire and indicted. In this instance Bishop Whitgift gave surety for his conformity (SP 12/206, f.175).

These brushes with the law seem minor when compared with the accusation in 1594 that he may have, or was at least willing to, finance a plot against the queen's life. This information came from the confessions of Richard Williams and Edmund York, both soldiers in the army based in the Netherlands,

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and Henry Young. They claimed that Sheldon and William Allen shared correspondence, and had planned to put William Stanley, Earl of Derby, who was a descendant of Henry VIII's sister Mary, on the throne after the assassination of the queen. Sheldon's house was searched and he was interrogated (SP 12/249, f.217). It is possible that Sheldon escaped penalty through the patronage of Christopher Hatton, who claimed he had seen Sheldon at church in London, along with others in his network such as Mr Thimbelby (possibly his son-in-law), and Thomas Throckmorton. Young confessed that the Lord Chancellor claimed that Sheldon 'was at churche at his Chappell at London', but Young continued, 'when in truthe… he was not at London at that tyme' (SP 12/249, f.152). The outcome is unknown, but thereafter Sheldon appeared infrequently in records, and kept himself from trouble. The peace in which he spent the last decade of his life may have come from the patronage of Robert Cecil, whom Sheldon thanked in 1603 for support (HMC Hatfield, XV: 60).

For Elizabethan recusants, family and kinship groups were the first thread woven into the network. From there the network becomes more complex, and also more difficult to trace. Theoretically speaking, there are two broad types of networks, relational and functional. A relational network can be conspirative, made within an institution such as a prison or university, between friends or family members, 'in the world' kind of connections such as between a writer and printer, the exiled community, and finally female networks, since it was frequently women who harboured priests. Functional networks were more abstract, but could be created through the delivery of letters, political resistance, direct financial support, the underground community, advisors, propaganda and recommendations of contact. Examples of the above classes of networks will be made for the Midlands below.

Rather than being confined to isolated pockets of Catholics within a parish or county, a network enabled interaction, straightforward or indirect, with other Catholics in neighbouring counties, different social circles, or even abroad. Most of the networks that were relevant to Midland Catholics were informal, such as kin, neighbours and friends, although there were also formal associations possible through business, education and local government, since Catholics remained active members of society. These informal networks played a crucial role in maintaining the Catholic community, and gave nonconformists a common purpose (Corens 2012: 122). Late in Elizabeth's reign, the Bishop of Worcester wrote to Robert Cecil about the impact that powerful local Catholic families had had in the area:

> I have viewed the state of Worcester diocese, and find it, as may somewhat appear by the particulars here enclosed, for the quantity as dangerous as any place that I know. In that small circuit there are nine score recusants of note, besides retainers, wanderers, and secret larkers, dispersed in forty several parishes, and six score

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> and ten households, whereof about forty are families of gentlemen that themselves or their wives refrain the church, and many of them not only of good wealth but of great alliance, as the Windsors, Talbots, Throgmortons, Abingtons and others, and in either respect, if they may have their forth, able to prevail much with the simpler sort (Bilson 1596: 265).

Bilson was evidently aware that the network had given strength to the community:

> How weak ordinary authority is to do any good on either sort long experience hath taught me, excommunication being the only bridle the law yieldeth to a bishop, and either side utterly despising that course of correction, as men that gladly and of their own accord refuse the communion of the church both in sacraments and prayers (Bilson 1596: 265).

Looking at the Catholic community through the angle of networks skews our natural sense of community as geographically defined, as an entity that can be placed physically in a specific area (Corens 2102: 122). A parish map of Warwickshire created from the data extracted from a commissioners' report of recusants in 1592 shows where known recusants, recusant priests and conformed recusants lived in the county according to parish (SP 12/243, f.202). With this evidence, it seems that the natural landscape had an impact on the preservation of Catholicism in Warwickshire, and perhaps the network along with it. Most pockets of Catholics in Warwickshire lived either in the Forest of Arden, a forest that was dense and lacked easily traversable roads, or near the borders of Oxfordshire and Worcestershire, counties known for their conservatism and networks of missionary priests. Near the border of Worcestershire, more than thirty Catholics lived in the parish of Tanworth in 1592.

The landscape may have offered religious sanctuary to some of the Catholic community. That some natural factor, such as landscape, impacted the survival of Catholicism by physically protecting the community and therefore hindering the efforts of the state is extraordinarily significant. Vincent Burke has found a similar phenomenon in Elizabethan Worcestershire, but this may be unique to only some Midland counties (Burke 1972: 4). Indeed, Wendy Brogden's recent research has found this to not be the case for Herefordshire, where, while recusants lived on the border of Monmouthshire, many lived in parishes around the city of Hereford.[1]

The creation of the network resulted in more than protection—it built a sustainable medium for intellectual and polemical debate, especially with the gentry families and clergy. This could include links with seminaries and convents on the continent, where Midland Catholics sent their children for religious training, such as Francis Tresham's daughter, Lucy, who lived at St

1 I am grateful to Wendy Brogden for this information.

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Monica's in Louvain and took the name Mother Winifred, possible in remembrance of the pilgrimage her father's friends had taken to St Winifred's Well leading up to The Gunpowder Plot. This makes the important argument that there was no single point of view among Catholics, and that variation and indeed disagreement were common, and had to be negotiated within Catholic networks. For example, Robert Brookesby of Shoby sat in Parliament for Leicester in the 1560s, when he was described at 'earnest in religion', but in the 1570s he had been absent from reformed services so frequently as to draw the suspicion of Edmund Scambler, Bishop of Peterborough (Hasler 1981: 488). He was reported to the Privy Council as an absentee in 1577, and in 1581 Scambler was of the opinion that Brokesby was a committed Catholic (Hasler 1981: 488). This spread from parishes to counties, and into Europe among the exiled community. Indeed the network makes little sense unless it could cross county and even national boundaries, as the Midland network did.

Local networks were naturally small and had some geographical limits; at the same time, however, these networks could offer protection to Catholics in counties not their own and further afield than the Midlands. We know that Midland Catholics were able to rely on the network and avoid being fined and imprisoned because they were often recorded as absent from their home when authorities came in search of them. If possible, individuals and families would cross parish boundaries in order to be absent when searches in their home parish took place. In this case, it seems that most Midland Catholics resorted to other Midland counties, or parishes within their own county, but there are records of others venturing further afield.

Alternatively, Lancashire recusant William Blundell sought protection in the Midland county of Staffordshire, so there was certainly fluidity within the national community (Sena 2000: 58; LCRO f.202v). In 1592, Warwickshire commissioners recorded Thomas Stonley of Kinbury, Warwickshire, who was living with Samuel Marrowe of Berkeswell in the same county, and George Harris of Hales Owen, Worcestershire, had left his home to live in Solihull, Warwickshire. The commissioners wrote that both men were very poor and unable to cover the cost of their imprisonment, neither did they have friends who were able to bear the responsibility of either the cost, or to find them a home in a reformed household (SP 12/243, f.202). Lady Philipa Gifford of Sheldon, Warwickshire, claimed to have reformed herself, and to attend service in Buckinghamshire. No one in Sheldon could confirm this, so the commissioner was forced to find proof elsewhere. Her servant, John Grisham, was also presented for recusancy, but the commissioner recorded that since he was at times in Sheldon and other at his own parish of Oldnall, he was only able to confirm that Grisham went to reformed services once or twice (SP 12.243, f.202).

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There are numerous examples of this practice of evasion recorded in 1592. John Keeling, a servant to John Wyse of Coleshill, Warwickshire, left the county for an unknown destination. Thomas Blunte and his wife, who was previously been presented in Idlycote, were found not there in 1592. Robert and John Grissolds, brothers of Solihull, were thought to be 'beyond the seas', but they could also have been 'lurking in England'. The vagrant Francis Hollyoak, alias William Francis, of Hampton in Arden, could not be found. James and Richard Bishop of Brailes had left the parish for the continent, and the commissioners recorded they were believed to have joined a seminary, like their brother William. Robert Whateley, an old Marian priest, could sometimes be found in Henley in Arden, though the commissioners could not find him. Young Walter Chetuynde of Grendon, Warwickshire, was found in Staffordshire, whereas his neighbour Roger Wall had gone to Shropshire. Henry and Judith Freeman of Tamworth fled to Ireland, and Eleanor Brookesby was not found in Tanworth, Warwickshire, but in Leicestershire, where her husband was from (SP 12/243, f.202). The east-Midlands experienced a similar practice. Eusbie Isham, the sheriff of Northampton in 1585, wrote to Walsingham:

> I haue travelled vnto these places w[i]th certaine Iustices next adioyninge to haue manifested the effect of her ma[jes]ties pleasure but divers of them were not at home nor w[i]thin the Countie as by examination and searche yt dothe appeare: […] names knowen vnto any w[i]th whom I haue had conference aboute the same and as we suppose there was not any suche at any time dwelling in the said countie (SP 12/183, f.143).

While Catholicism was forced to become hidden and domesticated, it remained unabated, which must have been especially unnerving for John Whitgift, bishop of Worcester from 1577-1583. Recusancy was Whitgift's greatest concern, unlike other Midland bishops such as Thomas Bentham, Bishop of Coventry and Lichfield from 1560-1579, whose frustrations with his clergy stunted his efforts for conformity. It could not have escaped Whitgift that powerful Catholic families could provide support and protection to the conservative laity, in addition to Marian priests in the area. His main fortification against the spread of Catholicism was to ensure that the clergy were reformed and that they preached frequently against Catholicism and conservatism (Sheils 2004: 721).

This style was probably the most efficient means to the desired end of a reformed diocese, and Whitgift had the most success in so doing of all the bishops who held jurisdiction over Worcester diocese. In the 1580s, as a result of the activities of the Jesuits and seminary priests, an appreciably stricter stance resulted in regard to recusancy. Suspicion was heightened, as were fines and prosecution. In the diocese of Worcester, Whitgift initiated changes

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in several stages, such as the Bishop meeting with notable recusants, subsequent arrests, and heightened prosecution (Gilbert 1991: 19). Steadfast pockets remained, however, and it is possible that these smaller groups were forced to strengthen their inter-parish network.

We ought not to view this as proof that any Catholic engaged in the network, or even in the network of political resistance, was therefore open to violent and forceful action on part of the Catholic cause. Rather, Catholics could demonstrate peaceful political resistance by opposing policies and harsh enforcement of the anti-Catholic laws. In the Midlands, this was illustrated especially by the previously mentioned Thomas Tresham, who had a reputation in Northamptonshire as a lay Catholic leader. Tresham demonstrated an awareness of national politics, so he differs from the model of recusant political and social isolation. For example, in 1581, the Spanish ambassador Don Bernardino de Mendoza and Sir Thomas Tresham were discusssing ways to re-establish Catholicism in England; 'it is with him that I deal… Although Thomas Tresham is a prisoner, I am in constant communication with him by means of priests', Mendoza claimed (CSP Spanish, Eliz. III: 236).

Many of the terms we use to categorise English Catholics, such as papist, recusant, conservative, non-conformist, church papist and Romish, refer to inclinations and trends, not to a qualitative classification of a group or community. With strict terms as our guiding approach, it is difficult to see and understand the fluidity of Catholicism and the Catholic community with their protestant counterparts. Catholics defined boundaries, but they also fitted in with the wider community in social, cultural and political contexts (Shagan 2009: 15-16). For example, the social importance of Catholic families can be seen in marriage matches that may seem peculiar; Mary Throckmorton, daughter of Sir George and Katherine Throckmorton, married Sir John Hubaud, Constible of Kenilworth, in 1564. Hubaud was High Steward to the Earl of Leicester, and sources seem to show that his religion was never doubted. Hubaud's uncle Thomas was presented by the Throckmortons to the parish of Spernall in Warwickshire around 1588, which indicates a continuing connection between the families (Styles 1945: 172-174).

Tresham was fined heavily and imprisoned for many years during his lifetime for recusancy, but he never displayed militant behaviour, and frequently begged the queen for leniency, describing himself as her humble and loyal servant. In the mid-1580s a group of Midland Catholics made an impression on national politics and the Catholic community by drawing up a sophisticated proposal for Catholic freedom of conscience. The petition may have been written by Tresham, and was endorsed by the Lord Vaux, Sir John Arundell and a layman from Rowington, William Skinner. It asked for a specific number of churches in every shire to be allotted to those who preferred Catholic worship, and for anti-Catholic legislation to be dropped. As a token of

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their appreciation for this tolerance, each Catholic would pay a subsidy to the queen. The debate was in progress for five years, and the petition signed by many leading Catholic laymen around the country, again demonstrating an operative network of politically active Catholics (Scarisbrick 1984: 148; SP 12/167, f.54).

The fact that the layman, William Skinner, faced the brunt force of the law for his part in the petition, rather than the more prominent gentlemen of the Midlands suggests that the prominence of the gentry were a more formidable obstacle. Job Throckmorton was commissioner for Warwickshire between 1583 and 1584, and wrote to Ralph Warcupp that he had apprehended Skinner, searched his home and examined its inhabitants as witnessed to Skinner's recusancy. Throckmorton believed there was enough evidence to bring him within the statutes, as Skinner had confessed his belief that Catholics should enjoy toleration, that Mary Stuart should be the heir apparent, and that he harboured Jesuits. Throckmorton wrote, 'If certain men near me were well wrung, there migh happen to be wrung from them some evident matter of the service of her Majistie in the full discovery of Skynner and his adherents', whom Throckmorton named as 'Thomas Hunte of Busshewood, Thomas Attwood of Rowington, Sir William the priest at Batsley, John Cooper of Rowington, and Dorothy his wife, Henry Hudsford, schoolmaster of Solihull, with his father and elder brother' (SP 12/167, f.54). A letter that was intercepted by authorities en-route to Europe described the petition as unpopular among English Catholics (CSPD, CCXVII: 238). The debate of this petition in the Commons recorded Francis Craddock of Stafford supporting the Act, but suggesting restraint on the clauses for family life, evidently believing that there were some areas where authorities ought not to meddle (Neale 1969: 281, 293-294).

The gentry Liggons family of Madresfield, Worcestershire, are an example of a diverse, yet integrated, Catholic family. Richard Liggons was responsible for the family, and he seems to have espoused a variety of social and political objectives. His younger brother, Ralph, served Mary Stuart and the Duke of Norfolk abroad from 1571, trying to garner continental support for her right to the throne. He had links with England from the continent, which suggest he was actively garnishing support for the Queen of Scots in both England and Europe (Calendar of Manuscripts at Hatfield House, HMC IX/2: 84). Another Liggons brother, Ferdinand, had expressed his wish for Elizabeth to take the throne in 1553 over her Catholic sister Mary. Another brother, Hugh, was recorded as a recusant from 1580, while yet another, Thomas, harboured priests (Williams 2001: 8-9; Beauchamp 1928: 25; SP 53/14, f.54). The eldest brother, Richard, conformed and attended reformed services. He was high sheriff of Worcester in 1574 when the Privy Council ordered that Ralph return from the Low Countries, and he was sheriff again

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in 1585 when Ralph was trying to gain foreign support for Mary Stuart (CSPD XCVIII: 1). It is unclear whether Richard's conformity was to protect his siblings through political influence, but if this was his intention it proved successful.

At times people drew on the network for neither political nor conspiratorial gains, but to support the religion of the community. Late in 1588 Walsingham demanded that Archbishop Whitgift examine one 'Bannister, a servant to Wrenford, of Worcestershire, he having never been to church in his life but refusing to confess that he heard mass at his master's house'; Walsingham wrote that the servant is privy to all of his master's dealings, and suggests that he be confined and examined, for information about Wrenford and his acquaintances (LPL MS 3470, f.97r). Thomas Throckmorton wrote from Gloucester in 1594 that his brother Anthony had been informed that many Catholics heard Mass at the home of William Myners in Herefordshire on Sundays and holy days. This information was confirmed by Lewes Watkens while attending the Council of the Marches in Gloucester, who told Sir Thomas that as many people attended Catholic Mass as reformed service at Oldfield in the parish of Garway (LPL MS 3470, f.139v). One 'Bussop of Woluered [Wolverton], hath Mass in his howse ordynarilie and Seminaries: And a Sonne that hath ben at Rome and is a prist' (SP 12/249, f.145). Ralph Sheldon was charged with always having priests in his house to say Mass.

Further suspicion was aroused by the fact that his sister had been to Louvain, though what she was doing there remains unclear. Thomas Lucy and John Harrington were ordered to search both Bishop's and Sheldon's houses (SP 12/249, f.145). Thomas Pearsall of Eccleshall, Staffordshire, 'an ancient man and a notable grand Papist', kept a seminary priest in his howm to educate his children (Cal of Manuscripts of the Most Hon. the Marquis of Salisbury, XVII, 1605: 642). In Aldrudge, Staffordshire, Robert Gorway was accused of being 'a great seducer of the people thereabouts to popery and a very bad man of life and conversation, was vehemently suspected to have in his house 2 or 3 of the persons who had a hand in this treacherous practice' (Cal of Manuscripts of the Most Hon. Marquis of Salisbury, XVII, 1605: 642).

The network could also help Catholics even after they had been apprehended by the law. Anne Clarke, a widow from Herefordshire, was able to give 'by the helpe of my good frends' forty shillings 'in token of my obedience and loyaltie towards her Ma[jes]tie and to be discharged of all perservants and penalties of the lawe' (SP 12/189, f.2). Matthew Vaughan of Herefordshire did the same:

> dutifully consyd[er]ing the clemency & favor of her most excellent Ma[jes]tie towards such as are w[it]hin the danger of penal laws for maters of conscience & recusancy […] pressed my frynds to yealde to the yearly payment of fyue [five]

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> marks ‹to her highness› for me, to be discharged of Shyryffe pursyuannts Informers & other ordinary inconuenіences growing thereby (SP 12.189, f.2).

The creation of a network necessarily required loyalty to kin and community, as well as faith, but not necessarily to Catholic militancy, or indeed to all other Catholics. What Elizabeth I wanted was loyalty to herself from her Catholic subjects, but some members of her council could not accept that a Catholic could be loyal to both the state and Catholicism at the same time. The queen was naturally prepared to encourage and reward loyalty, especially among young priests she persuaded to convert who chose to serve in her new church, given the vulnerable state of her early reign (Hogge 2005: 51). Membership within the network involved loyalty to one's conscience, which often came with great sacrifice such as separation from friends and kin, and eventually financial ruin (Hogge 2005: 51).

Patronage

The patron-client relationship among Catholic recusants and the conforming protestant community has not received as much research as it deserves. Susan Cogan laments this, but also leads the research in the field of patronage as a form of networking. How patronage relationships were constructed and maintained, and the recusants' ability to use the network has not been fully researched for the Midlands. Catholic men and women employed patronage relationships in order to manoeuvre through politically rocky ground. Women frequently used this to secure release or comfort of their imprisoned husbands Cogan 2009: 89).

Margaret Whorwood Throckmorton asked the Privy Council that her husband Thomas be allowed to plead 'his weightie cawses in law' at Westminster in May 1590 (APC XIX: 102). Similarly, Muriel Tresham, wife of Thomas Tresham of Rushton Hall, Northamptonshire and daughter of Thomas Throckmorton of Coughton Court, acquired patronage and protection for her husband during his lengthy imprisonments in the 1580s and beyond. Muriel frequently wrote to Lord Burghley and his sons Robert and Thomas Cecil, petitioning for leniency for her husband. In March 1589 she wrote to Burghley requesting that her husband be moved from the bishop's prison at Ely to Banbury, 'for his health's sake', and to Thomas Cecil on the same day, asking him to intercede with his father to allow her request (HMC various iii: 109; BL Add MS 39828, f.137). Apart from his health, Banbury was also much closer to his home in Northamptonshire than Ely.

In May 1589 Anne Catesby petitioned her patron, Archbishop Whitgift, much in the same way, asking that her husband be allowed leave from prison to visit his mother, who was 'dangerously ill' (LPL MS 3470, f.112). Again in 1599 Muriel Tresham appealed for support from her patrons: this time she wrote to Lady Egerton to ask if her husband, Viscount Brackley, who was at

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that time Lord Chancellor, might help Thomas Tresham, who was then imprisoned over a disputed debt rather than recusancy BL Add MS 39829, f.35, 36). Lady Egerton was born Alice Spencer and raised at Althrop, Northamptonshire, eighteen miles from Rushton. It seems that Muriel was making use of a local network of her protestant peers. Muriel Tresham used the network, but also added to it by reaching out to protestant neighbours and patrons.

From the archive of her letters held at the British Library, Muriel Tresham seems to have been one of the most industrious women in the Catholic and recusant patronage network, though it should be kept in mind that her letters have been preserved while others may have been lost or destroyed (Cogan 2009: 89). As demonstrated above, Muriel regularly wrote to diverse men and women to appeal for assistance and support of her often-imprisoned husband. What is less clear is who the mouthpiece of the letters was, as much of Muriel's correspondence was drafted by her husband Thomas, even if he was in prison, as is clear from the Tresham Papers held at the British Library. This indicated that the family's approach to garnering patronage was to have both husband and wife cast a wide net by contacting various patrons.

Even after Thomas's death in 1605, Muriel continued to correspond with her network of patrons, especially Robert Cecil (Cogan 2009: 89). Maintaining patronage associations became all the more imperative once a recusant woman was widowed, as her legal standing as widow rather than wife was different. As a widow, a recusant woman could be lawfully accountable for non-attendance at Sunday services. Muriel Tresham wrote to Robert Cecil in March 1609 to protest how she was dealt with by John Lambech, proctor of Northampton. Muriel complained that regardless of her frail age, the proctor 'continually laboureth to have me presented Spirituall Court, & to be indighted at each sessions & assises' (SP 14/144, f.100) Muriel believed that Lambert's hostile chase of an elderly Catholic widow was less to do with her recusancy, 'I am greatlie stepped into years & seldome goo from home', and more an attempt to appropriate her lands for his own gain (SP 14/144, f.100; Cogan 1009: 90).

Thomas Tresham's younger brother, William, enjoyed the patronage of Sir Christopher Hatton, who acquired for William an allowance through serving the court as the Queen's Gentlemen Pensioners. By 1582, however, Leicester was unimpressed by William's relationship with Spanish Ambassador Mendoza, and William fled to France, where he remained until the queen's death (Finch 1956: 78). The patronage that Hatton offered William had not gone unnoticed by Thomas Tresham, who wrote to Hatton that William ought to be grateful:

> that of a thrall prisoner delivered him a freed subject, that of a countryman procured him a settled courtier; that of a person disgraced restored him into her

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> Majesty's good favour; yea, that bestowed on him forth of your coffers your own office of a pensioners room (HMV various lii: 23).

Robert Brooksby, father to Edward who married Eleanor Vaux of Harrowden, maintained a patron-client association with the protestant and Puritan Hastings family, the heads of which were the third and fourth earls of Huntingdon (Cogan 2009: 90). This, along with Margaret Whorwood and Muriel Tresham's patronage relationships, suggest that a Catholic client would not necessarily discourage a protestant patron from offering support. What seems to have been more important was that the clients' social credit was well founded. The endeavours of Midland Catholics to establish and conserve independent and household capital allowed them to participate in a network of patronage that enabled them to manoeuvre through the anti-Catholic legislations (Cogan 2009: 90).

Patron-client relationships could reinforce existing kinship ties. Sir Richard Verney was petitioned for patronage by Elizabeth Vaux, who held wardship over his niece: 'you shall so farre bynd me & myne unto you that if euer it lye in my powar thowgh it be with the hassard of my estate I will requite this kindnis' (SP 14/216/2, f.178). The executed Warwickshire man John Somerville's two daughters petitioned Sir Henry Goodere, their kinsman, in the early seventeenth century to assist them in regaining possession of family lands that the crown had confiscated in 1583, after Somerville's arrest (CSPD 1603-1610: 221; HMCS col 24: 19). Similarly, a patron's benefits could trickle down to his clients' own network, as was the case with Thomas Tresham and his clientage with the Cecil family. When Thomas Tresham petitioned to the queen and Privy Council for tolerance in the interests of Midland Catholics, he put himself in the position of patron to all Midland Catholics. He wrote to Burghley in 1588:

> [I] mosy humblye beseech [you]… that my Innocencie, and loyalty maye be ever sheltered under your honourable protection… [family is] dewlie bound reverence your hono[u]r, not onlie a most excellent magistrate of his common wealthe, but as a special Patron of me in what I esteeme dearest (SP 12/219, f.138).

Women

Recusant women, with their lower social status, faced different punishment than their male recusant counterparts, which ironically could work to their advantage. Married women, who were without legal autonomy, could therefore enjoy a certain amount of anonymity in consequence of their status. The Elizabethan Settlement required each individual, including women, to attend the Book of Common Prayer service on Sundays and holy days. The penalty for failing to do so, initially a fine of 12d, was handled by the Justices of the

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Peace, as proxy for the Privy Council, but also by the Ecclesiastical Commission. Thus, both civil and church authorities were involved in the suppression of recusancy, even though a recusant could be punished for an offence only by one court (Bowler 1965: xii). Lists of those who refused to attend church were eventually recorded into the Exchequer, first into the Pipe Rolls in 1581, and then into a new category created especially for non-conformists, the Recusant Rolls in 1593.

Single women—widows and a few independent unmarried women—are frequently recorded in these lists, and could potentially hold positions of power. In about 1584 Elizabeth Shirley took charge of her Catholic brother's estate at Staunton Harold, Leicestershire at just twenty years of age, and kept this position until Sir George married. Elizabeth had been raised protestant, and initially resisted her brother's efforts to convert her, though certain events such as poor health and her unwillingness to marry eventually persuaded her to enter a convent, and she became an Augustinian nun at St Ursula's in Louvain on 10 September 1596 (Walker 2004).

Married women who recused themselves from church services are absent from these particular lists, as they had few legal rights outside the marital confines, whereas unmarried adult women and widows were legally responsible for their own actions and therefore could be punished for recusancy with indictments, fines and imprisonment (Rowlands 1985: 150) Married recusant women caused consternation among authorities and could not easily be punished by normal means. On the one hand, a husband was not responsible for the criminal acts of his wife, but on the other, society revolved around the conviction that the enforcement of proper religious behaviour within the family was the task of the patriarch (Rowlands 1995: 150).

Within female networks the concept of 'kinswomen' features prominently and seems to have strengthened the religious aspect of the network, but also worked independently from it in a social context. In 1557 Lady Anne Neville chose to live with her daughter Agnes Brudenelle after the death of her second husband, Sir Anthony Neville, at the Brudenelle estate of Deene. Agnes and her husband Edmund quarrelled over religion, she a protestant and he at least sympathetic to conservative religion. Anne Topcliffe Brundenell, Agnes's cousin and sister-in-law, spent much time in Agnes's company, much in the way that Catholic women's social networks worked, and also demonstrates the fluidity of women within the networks (Wake 1953: 71).

Similarly, Muriel Tresham retained a relationship with her Throckmorton sisters, her natal daughters and her daughter-in-law, Anne Tufton. Like her husband as a prominent lay Catholic leader, Muriel seems to have nurtured a maternal network among Catholic women (Wake 1953: 105). Even after Catholic movement was restricted in 1593, Catholic women managed

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care for and spend time with each other. Muriel Tresham's daughters maintained bonds, even though they were separated geographically after marriage. The Tresham sisters Lady Elizabeth Monteagle and Catherine Webb called on their sister Lady Francis Staunton in 1601 (HMVC: 110-111; Cogan 2012: 133). The Tresham and Vaux women would have had little difficulty sustaining their own network, considering the closeness of the family homes: it was about ten miles between Rushton and Deene (Cogan 2012: 133). This type of close familial network also offered protection to women in need. For example Thoman Tresham's great-aunt Clemence retreated to Rushton after she was displaced as a nun at Syon Abbey, and she remained there until her death in 1567 (Butler 1974: 91-93; Bainbridge 2010: 102). Mary Arden moved back to her family home of Coughton Court at some point following the execution of her husband, Edward Arden in 1583 (SP 12/243, f.202).

A clause aimed at controlling recusant wives was not initiated until 1581, when they were included in the 'Act to retain the Queen's Majesty's subjects in their true obedience' (23 Eliz., c. 1 1581). This Act finally put the responsibility of controlling recusant wives into the hands of the county JPs (Bossy 1976: 154; Rowlands 1985: 151). There was still little that could legally be done against them, however. Wives could be indicted and convicted, but still could not be fined, nor made to forfeit lands or possessions, since they legally owned neither during their husbands' lifetime (Rowlands 1985: 152). After his death, a recusant widow could have two-thirds of her jointure seized, and the Recusant Rolls of 1593/94 record sixty such seizures among 450 (Rowlands 1985: 152; Bowler 1970: xxxiv). While this punishment must have been perceived as harsh, fines could not be a means of suppressing religious nonconformity, and this was clear to the Council (Rowlands 1985: 152).

The evidence in both the civil and ecclesiastical records implies that recusant women were frequently evading authorities for punishment. Mrs Hancorne retreated from her parish in Warwickshire when she was meant to be presented, while Margaret Attwood of Rowington moved from parish to parish in the same county (Hodgetts 1965: 31). Authorities heard in 1592 that Bridget Strange of Gloucestershire had not been to church in three decades, and when she heard that pursuivants were coming to search her Warwickshire house she left with the altar vessels and vestments she kept for Masses in her home: 'she fled from the said howse and carried with her certen popish church stuff' (Petti 1968: 74, 87). Evidently the Obedience Act of 1581 did not have the desired effect on recusant women, for a further Act was created in 1586, attempting to clarify the 1581 procedures against Recusants (28 Eliz., c. 5 1586).

Why authorities could not resolve the problem of recusant women, for they evidently knew of their influence, is unclear, but may be based in the social tradition of the family hierarchy. By the early 1590s it was obvious even

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to the most senior administrators, for example Lord Burghley, that the influence of recusant wives resulted 'in respect that by their example whole families refuse to resort to church and continue in recusancy' (APC XXIII 1592: 193). For example, Thomas Tresham was a prolific letter writer, even while he was under house arrest in London. He sent letter drafts up to Lady Tresham in Northamptonshire, and she copied and sent the full letter to the intended recipient. Many of these are still kept with the Tresham Papers in the British Library. During house arrest, the women really took the reins of the family and kept the network alive by writing these letters and petitions.

While Catholic women attempted to evade authorities, the shape of the network is most visible when they ran into trouble from the law. Shortly after the Throckmorton Plot, pursuivants raided Throckmorton House in London while Mass was being said. Because of this we know that Margery Throckmorton was in attendance along with other women such as her daughters Mary and Anne, and her daughter-in-law Francis (SP 12/167, f.144). In similar fashion, the centre of Muriel Tresham's network comes into view with the repercussions of Essex's rebellion of 1600, when the Tresham women including Muriel and her daughters Mary, Elizabeth and Frances, and Muriel's daughter-in-law Anne, hurried to petition patrons who could protect Francis Tresham for his involvement in the rebellion (SP 14/216, f.141). Perhaps the most significant example of this, however, is the uncovering of Anne Vaux's and Eleanor Brookesby's network, which covered a massive geographical area within and without the Midlands, after the Gunpowder Plot on 1605. This included the radical families of Beaumont of Leicestershire, Catesbys of Warwickshire, Digbys of Rutland, Treshams of Northamptonshire, and the Wintours of Worcestershire (Cogan 2012: 137).

Eventually, by the early 1590s, local authorities were being ordered to indict and imprison recusant women, especially women of higher social standing. In the Midlands six gentlewomen in Northamptonshire were arrested (CSPD CCXI: 108). The Privy Council wrote to the Archbishop of Canterbury in 1592 advising that 'restraint of such principall gentleweomen, wives, widowes and others as have ben found to be obstinate Recusantes' be practiced (APC XI 1592-3: 9). Notable women such as Margaret Throckmorton were put into the 'protection' of protestant authorities; in her case the custody of the Dean of Gloucester (APC XXIV 1592-3: 279-280). Similarly, Lady Constance Foljambe, of Tupton Derbyshire, was put into the care of her grandson, Godfrey Foljambe, in 1587 (LPL MS 3204, f.121).

John Coke, rector of North Wingfield, complained of the 'evil effect' her release would have, and wrote a letter to the Earl of Shrewsbury, who seems to have had a role in this case. Coke's anxiety was the influence she would have on the members of the community who had been attending Sunday services since her incarceration (LPL MS 710, f.19). She seems to have been

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put into her grandson's zealous and reforming care on account of her 'great age', and the Council ordered her release from his management twenty months later, though he retained her 'living, goods and chattles'. She was keen upon her release to conform and retain her freedom, as an entry in a commonplace book written by Roger Columbell makes this interesting note:

> Mem. Godfrey Foljambe of More Hall, myself, my brother Blunt were at Tupton in the Lady Constance Foljambe's house, the 28th September, 1589, when all he morning prayers, saving the ij lessons omitted for want of a byble and the collect for the day for want of skyll to find out, was distinctly read with the Latinne also by Nicholas Harding; hir man servant, and Elianor Harrington, hir waytinge woman being present, who reverently and obediently behaved themselves during all the service tyme (BL Add MS 6702, f.20).

Free women also ventured inside prisons to help and comfort incarcerated recusants and priests. Inquiries into Dorothy Pauncefoot of Hasfield Gloucestershire showed that:

> she hath daily access and Recourse unto such as do lye in prison for recusancye; and so hath used of longe tyme And them dothe maynteyne, and of them doth Receaue newes and desclotheth the same to them that conveyeth the lyke beyond seas (SP 12/230, f.61).

Dorothy had herself been imprisoned at Newgate in 1585 for recusancy, and her husband, John, had fled to Rouen. She was believed to support a network of letter carriers between Gloucester and France, and to be acquainted with Thomas Alfield, a seminary priest from Gloucestershire, who was imprisoned at Newgate between 1582 and 1585, ending with his execution (SP12/167, f.81).

The names and positions of recusant women are not difficult to trace, especially of unmarried or widowed recusants, for they appear in commissioners' reports and later the Pipe and Recusant Rolls. What is more impenetrable is evidence of the network created and maintained by recusant women, either as spiritual guides within the home, priest harbourers, or exiled nuns. Women's roles in the religious network has recently been appreciated by Susan Cogan, who argued that it was in their capacity to construct networks of protection with other Catholic families, specifically for the protection and benefit of their male relations who would feel the blunt force of the law for non-conformity. Cogan admits that this role of recusant women has been overlooked in post-Reformation scholarship, despite its relevance (Cogan 2009: 70). Perhaps an exception to this is the plentiful research on Margaret Clitherow, and her role among Elizabethan Catholics, during her life and after her death.

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The most obvious, and arguably most influential, aspect in which recusant women involved themselves in the maintenance of the network was through the harbouring of missionary priests. This illegal activity was often taken up by women, and a statute of 1585 stated that all who harboured a Jesuit or missionary priest, male or female, had committed a capital felony (27 Eliz., c. 2 1585). Catholic hagiography of the period was engrossed with female priest harbourers: William Weston and John Gerard write at length of them, and women martyrs, such as Margaret Clitherow and Anne Line, had early hagiographical accounts written about them leading up to Catholic Emancipation. The two most famous priest harbourers were undoubtedly Anne Vaux and Eleanor Brookesby, daughters of the Lord Vaux of Harrowden, Northamptonshire.

The pair used their wealth to rent property in the Midlands, such as Baddesley Clinton in Warwickshire, and White Webbs, in Enfield Chase, closer to London. In doing so, the sisters provided safe houses for missionary priests and members of the recusant community, but their involvement in the community and network went beyond offering protection. Anne was at Coughton Court leading up to the Gunpowder Plot, and organised the Midland pilgrimage to Holywell, Wales, earlier in the year. A theory that it was Anne Vaux who wrote the Monteagle Letter, alerting King James and the Privy Council to the threat, was based on a supposed similarity between her own handwriting and the disguised handwriting of the letter. Historians generally agree that this theory lacks credibility (Nichols 1991: 214).[2]

Clerical Networks

The network of Catholic priests was a link between and overlapping with other parts of the network. The establishment of a clerical network allowed Catholic families with access to a priest to practice a religion that was more elaborate than simply receiving rites and sacraments. The importance of the network between clergy and family cannot be overlooked, for priests were frequently travelling within England and abroad, and could potentially have connections with Catholics of various forms of social standing, and even incarcerated Catholics. Thomas More, a Marian priest, was still roaming Gloucestershire, Worcestershire, Warwickshire, and Herefordshire in 1582 (SP 12/154, f.46).

Of course this is not peculiar to the Midlands; similar occurrences took place in Lancashire, an area with a higher proportion of Catholics, and as well as in Sussex, where there were less non-conformists (Sena 2000: 57). The religious experience of Midland Catholics was in many ways similar to those

2 Seeing as much research has been devoted to Anne Vaux and Eleanor Brookesby, their inclusion in this paper will end here.

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of the rest of the country, and a functional network allowed England's Catholics a sense of shared identity. Certain experiences, such as imprisonment, fines, religious rather than political persecution, and a comparison with the persecuted early Christians, were similarly recorded throughout the country, and it was the network that kept the polemical debate organised among the community (Sena 2000: 57).

Priests frequently lived in or visited Catholic gentry houses, and so these gentry families—and perhaps their network and servants—had frequent access to the celebration of mass and the other sacraments (Rowlands 1985: 165). In 1584, Lady Throckmorton, wife of Sir John Throckmorton and mother of the recently executed Francis Throckmorton, had enough religious support from various recusant priests that she was able to send one away to Rome. His purpose was to retrieve 'l[ett]res to the said Ladie from her… sonne Thom[a]s', and relics that were 'certen heare [hair] & Bones w[hich] the said morgan [the priest] tould the said Ladie ‹Throckm[or]ton› were the heare of our Ladie & bones of martirs' (SP 12/173/1, f.40). Ralph Sheldon was charged in 1594 for having 'Mass in his howse And resorte of Priestes: A priest kept allwaies in his howse' (SP 12/249, f.1455). Richard Topcliff wrote to the Earl of Shrewsbury in 1590, and after a dose of flattery begged the Earl to open his eyes to the network of priests who supported the Catholic community in Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire:

> Let me remember yo[re] Lo: that yo[u] are a prynce alone (in effect) in too cuntrees in the hart of England more danngeroosly infected than the worst of England of my knowledge: There and every where els Badd weeds will seeke to shrowde them selfs vnder great Oaks whose pollicees (I trust) yo[re] Lo will deserne now. […] Lowerr And Badd men can not hyde where they receave comforthe, nether will God suffer the practices of the wicked to lye hidden as laytly hathe [burst?] ovt the lewde dispocitions of that danndgeroos familye of the fytzharberts in y[is] countree (LPL MS 3199, f.215v).

Priests were viewed as especially untrustworthy because of their foreign connections, and thus any information that could be collected of them engaging in conspiracies was sought by authorities. Even so, older members of these families must have felt detached from medieval Catholicism. It seems that mass was celebrated continuously during Elizabeth's reign, but it is not unreasonable to assume that the celebration of holy days, devotion at nearby wells and relics, and pilgrimages were reduced, even among gentry families who had a significant network within the Midland counties.

Conclusion

We ought not to view the above as proof that any Catholic engaged in the network, or even in the network of political resistance, was therefore open to

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violent and forceful action on part of the Catholic cause. Rather, Catholics could demonstrate peaceful political resistance by opposing policies and harsh enforcement of the anti-Catholic laws. The picture of county Catholicism that emerges from this study is not one of isolation, either self imposed by the Catholics themselves or politically imposed onto them. Studies have shown that early modern people were connected with numerous groups of people at any particular time; groups which could change over the course of years (Shepard and Withington 2000: 5).

Therefore, it is not only difficult but also unwise to construct a 'typical' model of community, as it was constantly in flux and was naturally changeable among individuals, counties and with time. Catholics were not confined to the appendixes of their religion with sacraments, fasts and feasts, nor were they forced underground or into obscurity. They used, through the network, subtle but effective methods of political resistance, and the fact that the authorities sought to infiltrate the network with their own agents is proof of its effectiveness.

This paper has shown, from this rather broad and theoretical view of Midland Catholic networks, is that not all Catholics, nor all recusants, can be lumped together in the same political category. We should view Elizabethan Catholics more as how they viewed themselves: as members of a wider English community, and generally with pliable convictions within their Catholic faith. Catholics practiced strategies that assimilated themselves within the larger community. They may have seen themselves as persecuted against, but the evidence does not suggest that they saw themselves as anything but integrated members of English society.

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