

‘As Common as the Cartway’? The Social Status of Clergy Wives

The marriage of Beatrix Richmond, widow and servant of the vicar of Horsham (Sussex), to John Spratt, vicar of Sevenoaks (Kent), in 1584, appears to confirm the received perception of the social status of early clergy wives.¹ The traditional view postulates that uncertainty as to the permanence of clerical marriage as an institution, combined with the opprobrium associated with ‘priests’ whores’, made respectable women unwilling even to contemplate marriage to a minister. As a result, only the desperate would feel that they had anything to gain from such a match, and servants, widows, and women of low social standing are, therefore, held to predominate among the earliest clergy wives. The elusiveness of this group of women has contributed to such assumptions and would appear to suggest that any attempt to determine the social status of ministers’ spouses is doomed to failure, a fear reinforced by the pronouncement that ‘very little evidence survives concerning the social origins of the clergy’.² Although there is no single repository of evidence to furnish a definitive analysis, a variety of sources do, however, offer considerable scope for a meaningful discussion of the social backgrounds of clergy wives during the reign of Elizabeth.

The denigration of clergy wives was present in the writings of contemporaries whose disparaging remarks were a deliberate ploy aimed to discredit the concept of clerical marriage and pour scorn on the women who married ministers. In Germany too, opponents of reform criticized many aspects of clerical households including the ‘wives’ social status ... to underscore these marriages as immoral and dishonourable and undercut the spiritual authority of the clergy’.³ In 1554, Thomas Martin, the English polemicist, had employed similar tactics when he claimed that married priests ‘were so blindfolded with the desires of the flesh, that they saw not whom they married, but for haste took at all adventures, some of them common strumpets, some of them

1 *The Parish Register of Horsham in the County of Sussex 1541–1635*, ed. R.G. Rice, *Sussex Record Society*, 21 (1915), p. 27.

2 R. Manning, *Religion and Society in Elizabethan Sussex* (Leicester, 1969), p. 171.

3 M.E. Plummer, *From Priest’s Whore to Pastor’s Wife: Clerical Marriage and the Process of Reform in the Early German Reformation* (Farnham, 2012), p. 215.

widows expressly against the word of God'.⁴ In a similar vein, Miles Huggarde referred to married priests as 'dissolute' and said they 'cared not what women they married, common or other, so they might get them wives'. As a result, he declared, 'the women of these married priests were such for the most part that either they were kept of other before, or else as common as the cartway'.⁵ Such views continued to pervade Catholic polemic throughout the reign. Nicholas Sander's, *De Origine ac Progressu Schismatis Anglicani Liber*, edited by Edward Rishton and first published in 1585, claimed that 'almost all [priests] ... married women of tainted reputation'. Protestants 'would not give them their daughters in marriage; so they regarded it as something disgraceful to be, or to be said to be, the wife of a priest'. As a result, 'hardly any honest woman could be found who would become the wife of even the highest dignitaries, who were therefore forced to marry whom they could get'.⁶ Although much of what was written at the time hardly amounts to indifferent observation, it has served to colour the judgement of subsequent scholars. The axiom, that Elizabethan clerics were unable to secure respectable women as partners in marriage, has become deeply entrenched in the narrative of clerical marriage.

One of the most scathing views of early clergy wives comes from the mid-nineteenth century and refers to the 'unequal unions' into which the upper echelons of the clergy were driven 'by a combination of circumstances over which individually they had small control'. Apparently 'mere country clergyman' fared no better, having been 'consigned for life to the companionship of such a female as would be likely, by accepting his hand, to console her widowhood or repair a blemished name!'. As a result, the Elizabethan clergy were held to be 'demoralized ... to an extent at present happily unknown'.⁷ Although such idiosyncratic views lack credibility today, a belief persists that the clergy found it difficult to obtain suitable partners in the years subsequent to the introduction of clerical marriage. Accordingly, the social status of clerical wives, being 'not merely low' but also 'anomalous', rendered a clergyman 'lucky, indeed' if he could make an advantageous marriage.⁸ Elsewhere a lack of concrete evidence

4 Thomas Martin, *A treatise declaring and plainly proving, that the pretended marriage of priests is ... no marriage* (London, 1554), sig. D1v.

5 H. Parish, *Clerical Marriage and the English Reformation: Precedent, Policy and Practice*, (Aldershot, 2000), pp. 183–4; Miles Huggarde, *The Displaying of Protestants* (London, 1556), STC (2nd edn) 13558, sigs 6r–v, 11v–2r.

6 Nicholas Sander, *Rise and Growth of the Anglican Schism*, ed. D. Lewis (London, 1877), pp. 279–80.

7 J.O.W. Haweis, *Sketches of the Reformation and Elizabethan Age taken from the Contemporary Pulpit* (London, 1844), pp. 76–7, 79.

8 Manning, *Religion and Society in Elizabethan Sussex*, p. 173.