WIVES, CAPTIVE HUSBANDS, AND TURKS:
THE FIRST WOMEN PETITIONERS
IN CAROLINE ENGLAND

NABIL I. MATAR

The beginning of the Bishops’ Wars in 1638 and of the Civil War a few
years later have traditionally been seen as a liberating moment in English his-
tory. Movements and ideas that had been banned under the Laudian Anglican
establishment flourished in books and on the streets and changed the political
landscape of England and the rest of Britain. Literary and social historians such as
Ellen A. M’Arthur, Patricia Higgins, Simon Shepherd, Lawrence Stone, Margaret
George, Keith Thomas, and others have therefore assumed that it was these wars
that mobilized the first female petitioners in England: in their view, the women
who petitioned the Long Parliament on 31 January and 4 February 1642 were
the first women ever to use petitions for social and political protest—and they
did so because of the social disorder and “Liberty” that the wars inevitably pro-
duced. “The women’s petitions of the sixteen-forties,” wrote Shepherd, “seem to
be a sudden manifestation of [Civil War] feminism” (65). Before the Civil War,
“recourse to prophecy [was] the only means by which most women could hope to
disseminate their opinions on public events” (Thomas 163). For Thomas, as for
Higgins and others, pre-Civil War actions on the part of women exclusively came
“out of religion” (Higgins 216): “[t]he exercise of female conscience,” Patricia
Crawford concurred, “was central to a fundamental issue of English political life
before the Civil Wars’ (“Public Duty” 71). The Civil War took women beyond
prophecy and turned them into political and social petitioners.

But, as this paper will argue, over a decade before the first of the Bishops’
Wars broke out, wives of husbands captured by the “Turks” (a term used inter-
changeably for the Muslims of North Africa) had organized themselves into a
group of “distressed wives” and had presented petitions to King Charles I, to
Parliament, to the Lords, and to others in a position of authority. These wives
entered the political sphere not by appealing to “prophecy” or individual religious
conscience: rather, they appealed to their poverty and destitution, as well as to
their status as husbandless wives. It was not conscience but economic need and
deprivation that compelled these wives, well before the 1642 petitioners, to un-
dertake the first “wifely” petitioning in England.

In the period extending from 1625, when King Charles I succeeded to the
throne, until 1638, when the first of the Bishops’ Wars broke out, large numbers
of sailors, soldiers, fishermen, traders, captains, and seamen were taken captive
by the corsairs of Tunisia, Algeria, and Libya (Tripoli), along with the Moroccan pirates of Tituane and Salee. These captivities were part of the “small wars” that persisted in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and consisted of attacks that were carried out on commercial and civilian shipping chiefly by the Maltese and the Italians on the Christian side and by the Algerians and the Moroccans on the Muslim side. In the early part of the seventeenth century, English pirates entered the Mediterranean, too, and became formidable and fearsome rovers. As a result, and as British pirates captured other nationals, so were thousands of Britons taken captive either to be sold into slavery or to await ransom.2

Although the number of Britons held captive by the Muslim corsairs was not as high as that of the Spaniards, the French, or the Italians—who shared with the Muslims the Mediterranean basin—the plight of those men was far more difficult than that of their European counterparts. For while Catholic Europe had such religious orders as the Trinitarians and the Mercedarians that redeemed captives by providing ransom money and prisoner exchange (Friedman; Clissold; Penz; Dan), England had neither a civil nor a religious institution (notwithstanding Trinity House, which had been established by Henry VIII to assist maritime traders) that adequately and systematically dealt with this crisis. In the absence of redemptionist institutions, wealthy captives relied on their own resources to ransom themselves, while thousands of impoverished captives languished in slavery as they awaited help from the only group that had not forgotten them: their wives.

Much as the condition of those wives, in the absence of their husbands, was financially and socially devastating, and much as they lacked any political or legal clout (Laurence 55), they chose to act—and to act in a manner that was unprecedented for women in England: they presented petitions directly to the highest authorities in the land. At a time in England, before the Civil War, when a woman’s voice was rarely if ever heard in the public forum (Fraser 154)—except in riots and processions—and when the “strain in gender relations” had resulted in extensive misogynist literature (Underdown 38), these women undertook an action that had largely been “a male prerogative” (Otten 87). Perhaps because they were of the lower classes where wives were less socially submissive than those in the upper and upper-middle classes (Stone 139), they came together in a group whose bond was both economically based and gender-defined: ranging between small groups of ten at one time to groups of over 1500 at other times, these masterless wives presented petitions on behalf of their husbands in what must have been viewed by Londoners as the first political rally of impoverished women in the metropolis.3

How and why the wives thought of the petition—of making their voice heard to King and Parliament—is not clear. Poverty must have been a decisive factor. But by choosing to petition, these women risked being rebuked by a male establishment that was made anxious by the “mannish women” who were challenging social codes in London and who had been denounced for their insolence by no less a person than King James himself (Lucas; Henderson and McManus