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"I was so bold to write to your mastership my mind, and all my sisters": The Communal Negotiation of Dartford Priory in the Letters of Elizabeth Cressener to Thomas Cromwell

by Elizabeth Goodwin

Around the mid-1530s in Kent, amid the context of Minor Dissolutions, governmental visitations and Continental religious upheaval, Dartford Priory's long-standing prioress Elizabeth Cressener wrote to Thomas Cromwell with the communal good of her convent in mind. Asking "especially that we may not receive into our poor monastery none of any other religion", Cressener asserted not only the strongly order-ed identity of these Dominican women, but also implied the formidable strength of communal feeling between their single English house: "...for we be of that profession and habit that none other be of within this realm; and therefore it should be very troublous to us to have any other than we bring up after our own order and fashion. As knoweth our merciful Lord, who have you in his blessed tuition and safe governance."¹ Paul Lee has pointed out that, since Cressener had been prioress since just before the turn of the sixteenth century, and that most nuns were still claiming pensions as late as 1556, the Dartford community was made up of women who had professed under the same abbess and, therefore, 'had much in common with each other which made them different from other nuns.'² This communal unity, this common identity through religious devotion and togetherness, is asserted in writing in the hope of negotiating against

¹ Elizabeth Cressener Senior to Thomas Cromwell, 1535, in Mary Anne Everett Wood (ed.), *Letters of Royal and Illustrious Ladies of Great Britain, from the Commencement of the Twelfth Century to the close of the reign of Queen Mary*, vol. 2 (London, 1846), p. 155.

² Paul J. Lee, *Nunneries, Learning and Spirituality in Late Medieval English Society: the Dominican Priory of Dartford* (Rochester, NY, 2001), p. 113.

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Cromwell's proposed changes and challenges. There was a convent who understood, took pride in and took these textual measures to protect its uniqueness as a community of Dominican women in England.

The construction of texts from within the convent offered a way to negotiate the challenges to their authority and monastic ways of life posed by external forces, and allowed her to assert resistance not simply as the single women writing, but by asserting their strength as unified communities. Writing allowed Cressener to respond to the reformation of her convent through the assertion of themselves as communities, offering defensive, resistant and intelligent strength to her wants and claims through words. Leader from 1488 to her death just before the Suppression, Cressener was at the centre of the negotiations between convent and government in the run up to the end of her life. Under her leadership, Dartford maintained a harmonious and complementary relationship with their surrounding locality but it is her quite pointedly personal relationship with Thomas Cromwell, however, that is one of interesting and studied intercession, carefully played using well-chosen negotiator-y language. Cressener presents Dartford's community as one, unified through text; Jennifer Wynne Hellworth's adaptation of Brian Stock's 'textual community' takes the gender of its inhabitants into account, 'to be particular to women's textual practices'. She further judges that such female textual communities, alongside other communal networks, were essential '[in the] production and dissemination of knowledge'.³ Communities involving women

³ Jennifer Wynne Hellwarth, *The Reproductive Unconscious in Medieval and early Modern England* (New York, 2002), pp. xvii-viii.

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religious so often relate back to the texts which define and connect them, but also use texts going forward, to further causes and negotiate their roles in the face of criticism.

In the same letter in which she makes the successful claim to avoid taking on any other nuns from different orders, Elizabeth Cressener reflected on a direct appeal that she had made a couple of years earlier to Cromwell, demonstrating a supreme personal and communal agency when regarding the spiritual well-being of the convent. Remembering that Cromwell wanted to place a certain Mr Palmer, one of his friends/connections, in the role of high steward at Dartford, Cressener reflected that “at that time I was so bold to write to your mastership my mind, and all my sisters, in that cause; certifying your good mastership that we never had none that occupied that room but such as hath been of the king’s grace’s most noble council.”⁴

After listing the men who had held the office (demonstrating her pronounced understanding and status as head of Dartford over such a long period, as well as articulating the shared memories that bound the community), she requested that Cromwell himself have the office: ‘we [the nuns] would beseech you to accept such a poor gift, given to your good mastership by your poor beadwomen, with the fee thereunto belonging.’⁵ Her additional request regarding the identity of new recruits into the Priory is couched in similar terms - “Beseeching you of your charitable assistance in all our rightful causes...”⁶

⁴ Elizabeth Cressener Senior to Thomas Cromwell, 1535, *Letters of Royal and Illustrious Ladies 2*, p. 154.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 154-155.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 155.

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A similar appeal to intervene in the case of the apparently difficult Mr Stroddle, whom the Lord of Rochester had placed at Dartford after 'he perceived that he could not quietly live with Mr Stroddle,' was put before Cromwell by Elizabeth Cressener merely months later.⁷ The prioress's words here belie an internal power struggle ("And as soon as he came he took it upon him to be president, contrary to my mind, but only that he said he had the king's grace's authority; the which I now perceive he never had, till this time, of your good lordship, and he took no manner of pains belonging to the said office") that both threatens her authority and the stability of her community.⁸ To combat this, she again asserted her influence, and her belief in this power, by beginning with "your suppliant, Elizabeth Cressener, prioress of the monastery of Dartford, the which hath been this forty-nine years unworthy governess of this great house" and the togetherness of her convent ("my only hope and trust is in God, and in your good lordship, for the repealing or reformation of the premises; and I, with my poor sisters, shall always continue your poor beadwomen, as we be especially bound").⁹

It was this relationship between Cressener and Cromwell, of the prioress applying for favours from the prominent master for her convent's own advantage and 'resulting perhaps in special protection for Dartford', that Mary C. Erler outlined as 'particularly acute on the prioress' part.¹⁰ She went on to place Cressener's letter in a Late Medieval/Early Modern Kent context, suggesting that they 'provide a sense of the forces to which religious houses were

⁷ Elizabeth Cressener Senior to Thomas Cromwell, 1535, in *Letters of Royal and Illustrious Ladies 2*, pp. 265-266.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 266.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 266.

¹⁰ M. C. Erler, 'The Abbess of Malling's Gift Manuscript (1520)', in Felicity Riddy (ed.), *Prestige, Authority and Power in Late Medieval Manuscripts and Texts* (Woodbridge, 2000), p. 151.

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subject, both from lay and ecclesiastical allies.¹¹ For a convent so actively involved in the devotional community of the age, a spirituality that so coloured and enhanced their engaged work in their localities, it might appear odd that not only did Prioress Cressener seemingly need and want Cromwell's support in her consistent appeals to him, but that the support was seemingly mutual, with her signing the Acknowledgement of Royal Supremacy so early on in 1534. But in terms of the practicalities of the good of her community, Elizabeth Cressener's attempts at fealty with Cromwell were far more based within a contradictory negotiation of power in order to keep her community together and the spiritual and practical good it was doing alive.

Such negotiation, compromise and challenge were not without precedent for her Dominican sisters on the Continent when faced with internal and fundamental change. While Dartford was not visited and 'corrected' like so many Dominican houses had been under Raymond of Capua's Observant reform through the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, their reading material and activities betray the same 'depth of spirituality and religious commitment' that demonstrated a profound connection with their reformed brothers and sisters.¹² Yet in terms of resistance and negotiation to reform, Dominican nuns across Europe had precedence not only for being both some of the first to accept and fulfil the requirements of Observant reform, but also for standing firm and being less willing to take the Observance changes. Regina D. Schiewer discussed the prolonged and famous resistance of the Nuremberg convent of St

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 151.

¹² Amy Leonard, *Nuns in the Wall: Catholic Nuns in Reformation Germany* (Chicago, 2005), p. 26; Lee, *Nunneries, Learning and Spirituality*, p. 115.

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Katharina, only broken by council intervention and reformed nuns moving in and taking over positions of responsibility.¹³ The Dominican nuns of Strasbourg similarly reacted against outside forces entering and changing their practices.¹⁴ Amy Leonard asserted the foreshadowing of the 'resistance, rebellion and compromise to come during the sixteenth century' with the nuns greeting fifteenth-century reform 'with the same concern for their position, religious well-being and traditional life.'¹⁵ In this context, Cressener's diplomacy appears to be a factor of the same negotiation of reform as her corresponding prioresses and abbesses from the previous century, placing her in a wide and extensive devotional community of women understanding and respecting their rights over their own convents.

In attempting to form an alliance with one of the most important men in the country, Cressener was trying to maintain her community and fulfil the societal functions that had become particularly important under her leadership. In a way, her actions could be categorised as a form of resistance; though not in common with the vocal and firm resistance of women like Caritas Pirckheimer in the German convent of Franciscan St Clares, or through the reading, dissemination and commissioning of texts that explicitly criticise those in power like the sisters of the English Syon Abbey, Cressener tried more oblique and contradictory forms of opposition, that of the appearance of subservience and the appearance of encouragement.¹⁶ It is worth noting here that besides Syon Abbey and Dartford Priory, it

¹³ R. D. Schiewer, 'Sermons for Nuns of the Dominican Observance Movement' in Carolyn Muessig (ed.), *Medieval Monastic Preaching* (Leiden, 1998), p. 78.

¹⁴ Leonard, *Nails in the Wall*, p. 24.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

¹⁶ For Caritas Pirckheimer's resistance to the Lutheran attempts to close her convent, see Charlotte Woodford, *Nuns as Historians in Early Modern Germany* (Oxford, 2002), P. S. Datsko Barker, 'Caritas Pirckheimer: A Female Humanist Confronts the Reformation' *Sixteenth-Century Journal* 26 (1995), pp. 259-72; Leonard, *Nails in the*

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does not appear that any female religious English house attempted textual negotiation or resistance to the Dissolution reforms - the women of the Yorkshire Cistercian houses, for example, were, on average, around the national average in terms of wealth and size, and nothing survives in terms of attempts from the nuns themselves to keep them open or in any way resist what's happening and instead, nuns predominately just join another house of the same order as close as they can manage. This is a fairly representative national picture, to which Syon Abbey, a bastion of unblemished spirituality and order, is the other, newer, wealthier, more well-connected extreme.¹⁷

It says something about Dartford Priory's place somewhere in-between these two alternatives of national female religious identity, therefore, that of Dartford being connected, educated and relatively wealthy but without the same abilities to utilise text in such a resistant way, that Cressener needs to use text to negotiate, rather than expressly make stronger points, or kind of allow changes they didn't want to happen. As an interesting aside, the Oath of 1534 was left unsigned by each Dartford nun – it is, of course, difficult to say whether this was a pointed decision or not, but it certainly appears in the context of contradictory forms of power

Wall. For Syon Abbey's textual resistance and literary heritage, see Edward Alexander Jones and Alexandra Walsham (eds), *Syon Abbey and Its Books: Reading, Writing and Religion, c. 1400-1700* (Woodbridge, 2010); Alexandra de Costa, *Reforming Printing: Syon Abbey's Defence of Orthodoxy, 1525-1534* (Oxford, 2012); J. T. Rhodes, 'Syon Abbey and its Religious Publications in the Sixteenth Century', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 44 (1993), pp. 11-25.

¹⁷ For the history of the Yorkshire Cistercians and their place within broader monastic narratives of England up to the Dissolution, see C. Cross, 'The Religious Life of Women in Sixteenth-Century Yorkshire', in W. J. Shiels and Diana Wood (eds), *Women in the Church* (Oxford, 1990); Claire Cross and Noreen Vickers, *Monks, Friars and Nuns in Sixteenth-Century Yorkshire* (Huddersfield, 1995); C. Cross, 'Yorkshire Nunneries in the Early Tudor Period' in James G. Clark (ed.), *The Religious Orders in Pre-Reformation England* (Woodbridge, 2002).

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and powerful resistance that this silence could have been a measure of passive opposition from the Dartford women, who were not unable to make their point through text.

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On Cressener's death eighteen months before the Dissolution, Cromwell and Lord Rochester were closely involved in the election of a new prioress for Dartford. Erler, in her use of the last Dartford Prioress Joan Fane (or Vane) as a case-study of Cromwell's nuns, remarked that, before Cressener died, she attempted to 'ensure a smooth succession [for Dartford, in such difficult times]... by summoning both the Dominican provincial John Hodgkin and Rochester to her bedside.'¹⁸ This smooth succession, she suggested, was intended to be the last exercise of Cressener's own authority over the convent over which she had presided for so long that excluded Cromwell; again, supporting the idea that for all her obedient-sounding correspondence with the state, Prioress Cressener intended, and was cleverly exercising, the motivations of her convent around Cromwell, rather than sitting in compliance.¹⁹

The community over which Elizabeth Cressener resided was the key in her negotiations with Cromwell. In asserting communal unity, she employed a textual tool to form and further her community's understanding of itself and how others understood it. Unable to enact out-and-out resistance to the reforms, Cressener negotiated with textual terms that displayed and utilised the community strength that Dartford Priory held and encouraged.

¹⁸ Mary C. Erler, *Reading and Writing During the Dissolution: Monks, Friars and Nuns 1530-1558* (Cambridge, 2013), p. 73.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 73.