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# The Power of Women: Women's Contributions in the English Civil Wars

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## **Abstract**

Leading up to the English Civil Wars from 1642- 1651 women's roles were strictly defined through societal norms, rhetoric through the Bible, and stereotypes during the time. These include being silent, listening to the husband, having soft hearts, and living indoors away from strife that a man could deal with. However, during the Civil Wars various key women rose up to defend their beliefs and push against the strict stereotypes they were facing. Through accounts of key figures such as Henrietta Maria, plays created by women, songs of cross-dressing women and more, we have accounts of these women breaking their stereotypes and putting their own contributions forward for their beliefs. This paper analyzes these accounts and how they directly attack the stereotypes.

*Keywords:* English Civil Wars, King James I, Henrietta Maria, War Ballads, Margaret Cavendish, John Knox

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One of the greatest periods of social and political turmoil for the people of England was during the period of the great civil wars. The 16th and 17th century in England was a time when a great many social constructs changed, not least of which was the role of women in the development of a new world perspective. These changes were perhaps most significant for the women of England who participated in the wars. The purpose of this paper is to argue that this

was the genesis of a women's movement, one where the idea of thinking for themselves and seeing themselves as equal to men began to change.

In the social orders before the Civil Wars, such as the early Stuart period, was a time when women began noticeably dressing in a more masculine fashion. As noted in an address by James I to the clergy, he urged them to “inveigh vehemently and bitterly in theyre sermons against the insolence of our women, and theyre wearing of brode brimd hats.. theyre haire cut short or shorne.”<sup>1</sup> John Chamberlain, a prominent letter writer who shed much light to this time period, stated “..the truth is the world is very far out of order.”<sup>2</sup> In any event, this command from the King gives us a picture of how women in England were dressing and acting. Women were cutting their hair short and dressing as men, an unwelcome to change for many. As both of the above accounts are from a man's perspective, one begins to understand that women were not adding masculine looks in their fashion trends to impress the men of their society; rather, they were attempting to establish themselves as distinct and participating individuals in their social and political world.

These worries resurfaced in Charles I's reign, when the queen and other women of her court took part in a play, as noted in a print by William Prynne stating “these.. unnaturall and unmanly times.. Female sexe are.. transformed into men.. not only immodest.. but even in the.. odious if not whorish, cutting of their haire.”<sup>3</sup> Thus, not only were women dressing as men during this time, but there is also evidence to indicate that women were also participating in the civil wars without disguise. Aside from the change in fashion, the participation of women soldiers in any conflict up to this time was almost unheard of.

An example of this sort of unladylike behavior, was Henrietta Maria, wife and queen consort of Charles I. Henrietta Maria's actions are well documented, unlike many women during this time, and allows for the examination of the three types of women who took part in the civil

wars: women in disguise, women openly fighting as female soldiers, and Henrietta Maria, who played an intimate role within the Civil Wars.

It should be made absolutely clear that the main role of women in the 17th century was care of the home. Moreover, much of English society's beliefs and morals came from the Bible, the words of which were taken in their literal sense. There are several passages which, when taken literally, can be used to prove the inferiority of women, not just in the eyes of their societies and those societies' laws, but in the eyes of God. For instance, Corinthians 14:34-35, "34: Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak but must be in submission, as the law says. 35: If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church"<sup>4</sup>, and I Corinthians 11:8-9 "8: For man did not come from woman, but woman from man; 9: neither was man created for woman, but woman for man"<sup>5</sup>. With words like "women were created for the man", and "woman shall only learn from her husband"<sup>6</sup>, one can quickly see that these biblical axioms were designed for the subjugation of women in the dominant male arguments and which were used to justify considering women as weak and necessarily male-dependent, as decreed by God.

Obviously, being part of the Anglican Church was also a significant part of English society during this period. As well as being a part of the spiritual fabric of the nation, Anglicanism was also an integral part of English identity since its formation by Henry VIII, who separated England from Catholicism and the influence of the Vatican. Notwithstanding, Henry's national church remained Catholic in all but name and was no less disparaging of women than its predecessor. Sunday church attendance and sermons on sound moral behavior, particularly that of women, was a weekly obligation.

Not only was church attendance obligatory, but the new "Protestant" belief system was that everyone had access to the laws and moral education presented in the Bible. If literacy was an issue, they could be read to by volunteers in local churches. Thus, the reach of the bible's

teachings increased, allowing people to begin making their interpretations, or lack thereof, of the words in the bible. Most often, however, these interpretations were undoubtedly made by men and their interpretations were narrow and uninspired when it came to scriptures pertaining to women. Coupling biblical passages with the interpretations of men in authority like James I, more and more pressure was exerted on women by the church regarding their actions, appearance, and their inferior position in society; the church simply stood as an organization to reinforce men's notions of women and 'their place'. Indeed, Chamberlain's idea of the world being "out of order" also contributed to the mounting pressures on women to conform to society's rules. As society became increasingly more tense, and as the civil discord became more widespread politically, people in positions of power, such as in the church and authoritarian political positions, both women and men in lower social positions began to push back in an attempt to increase their power and to vocalize their discontent. It was a moment, however small, when women at least would begin to be seen as individuals distinct from men. Many people were vocal in their stance against women holding power. As summed up by the contemporary author Liddy about one of these vocalizations, "... for a woman to take over political or military leadership would be contrary to the law of God and the law of nature," even though it contradicted the beliefs of a very silent majority, these vocalizations were heard throughout.<sup>7</sup> It should be noted that this thinking is about John Knox. Knox was notable for his vehement belief against women in any sort of power. However, some women pushed back against their boundaries and the Civil Wars, including Margaret Cavendish, women who fought in the wars, and Mary Bankes. This is a daring, if not heroic, part on these women to stand up to people like James I and John Knox, those who were believed to have absolute authority.

Margaret Cavendish was a writer in the 17th century who, while there is no evidence that she fought in any battles, wrote plays that give a reflection on the minds of women during the English Civil Wars. Cavendish was close with Queen Henrietta Maria, being her lady-in-waiting

leading to the war and was banished from England during the Civil Wars. She was in a wealthy position, being a successful playwright as well as the Duchess of Newcastle. She has several works that were written during and after the English Civil Wars which are a good reflection of the societal changes and thoughts that women had during the time. Margaret Cavendish is, in fact, an advocate for women's independence and individualism for her time. Liddy's work exploring Margaret Cavendish's play highlights the parallels between her dramatic courts and the courts she was personally involved in her position as Henrietta Maria's lady-in-waiting<sup>8</sup>. She works to illustrate what she feels are injustices in her society during the 17th century, including in her work *Love Adventures*, she reverses the roles of men and women, with the man not wanting to be courted but pressured by his family.<sup>9</sup> This change puts women in a position of power from the beginning of her work, setting the stage for the rest of the play, however never fully putting men below women outright, and perhaps suggesting a natural equality between the sexes. She pushed boundaries with the differences in courting as well as having the protagonist cross-dress.<sup>10</sup> In *Loves Adventures*, Cavendish portrays her protagonist in two lights, the one of the woman pretending to be a man, and one of a Lady. Contrarily, it is the man's version of this protagonist who proclaims that the man is above her, while the Lady takes her fate in her hands to defend her own beliefs.<sup>11</sup> This difference is an intriguing one, one that, when applied to women of the time who did go and fight in the wars, illustrates her thinking of them. While women were taking part in the man's world, Cavendish is clearly stating that they do not, or should not, do it for glory and fame but rather for the love of their men. On the other hand, with her Lady taking command of her fate, Cavendish is highlighting an important part of women's work in this time, which was gaining courage and fighting for themselves, as themselves. Both sides of her protagonist are portrayed with pride and thus the pride felt by women with their other sisters who took up their own cause in the wars. Later on, through the play, her protagonist in the war, when confronted that one cannot be a good soldier if they show emotion, which was

seen as weakness, but challenges this view, illustrating that emotions are what will help her become a good soldier, increasing the braveness in her heart.<sup>12</sup> Women were commonly seen as soft-hearted and weak, but Cavendish is demonstrating that women can be strong too, even if it is different than what men typically think of as strong. In Cavendish's next work, *Bell in Campo*, she further explores the concept of women involved in the English Civil Wars. In this work, the men are not supportive of women around the battles, and if they are they would only be good to "encourage their fights, and so give fire to their Spirits; also to attend them in their Sicknesses, to cleanse their wounds, to dress their meat; who fitter than a wife?" (*BC* 113).<sup>13</sup> This following line from *Bell in Campo* confirms the social belief that women are only good for supporting roles, that straying from their womanly duties, particularly if they were to leave their homes and participate in the fighting, and the idea of women as fighters is far from the stereotype of current thought. However, in her next part of *Bell in Campo*, *Bell in Campo Part 2*, Cavendish calls to the strong women saying, "wherefore now or never is the time to prove the courage of our Sex, to get liberty and freedom from the Female Slavery, and to make ourselves equal with me".<sup>14</sup> In her words, not only is her protagonist calling forth the brave women of her era, but she's also calling to the brave women of her time. While it was released after the Civil Wars, Margaret Cavendish is obviously praising the women she saw fighting in the Civil Wars, to give them credit for their deeds, though they largely went unnoticed and under-appreciated, at least publicly. In another empowering speech in her work Cavendish writes "For shall Men only sit in Honours chair, and women stand as waiters by? Shall only Men in Triumphant Chariots ride, and women run Captives by? Shall only men be Conquerers and women slaves?" (*BC2* 143).<sup>15</sup> This call to arms is speaking to Cavendish's own society where women are again unnoticed by men, and furthering challenging the view of women on the backpedal. Also, it is interesting to note that the title 'man' is capitalized, and the title 'woman' is not. This distinction puts men into one category, with a proper title, while women are seen as less, but perhaps not all grouped together

like men, there is more diversity in women, and it is in diversity that Cavendish is speaking to brave women. It is also interesting to note the change of view she has gone through since her first work, *Loves Adventures*. In *Loves Adventures*, she has gone from acknowledging that men are superior, to in *Bell in Campo*, she has begun to directly challenge that view, questioning, “for shall Men only sit in Honours chair and women stand as waiters by?”<sup>16</sup> While there is no evidence that Margaret Cavendish sparked women to go into battle, it is a good source to look at how some women thought during the Civil Wars and their desire to help the cause they believed in.

Along with Margaret Cavendish’s plays on women in battle, there are also ballads written during this time about women. Unlike the plays where it is known to be a work of fiction and Cavendish’s way to talk about her society, ballads were commonly written about heroic acts that happened in real life. One ballad is clear about a woman who fights during the English Civil War and dresses as a man to do so. It is found in the Roxburghe Ballads, titled *The Valiant Commander with his Resolute Lady*. It is in this ballad where the lady in question says:

“Put mee on a mans attire  
Give mee a Souldiers coat,  
Ile make King Charleses foes  
Quickly to change their note.”<sup>17</sup>

This verse makes a clear reference in the English Civil War from a royalists’ perspective and is a woman who is saying this.

“She took a Musquet then  
and a sword by her side,  
In disguise like a man  
Her valour so she tride,”<sup>18</sup>

Again, later in this ballad, there is clear wording that a woman dressed as a man and fought valiantly. It is in these verses that proof arises that women did cross-dress in order to fight in the Civil Wars. While ballads are tall tales of the truth, they are embedded in truth, the women in the English Civil Wars as spoken about in these ballads, the ballads of women fighting could bring pride and support to people of the time. There are several other ballads of women crossdressing and fighting in battles that are also as inspiring as this. However, as dates are unable to be found for these ballads, they will not be explicitly discussed. There are no specific events listed in these ballads to be dated to the English Civil Wars unlike *The Valiant Commander with his Resolute Lady*, please refer to appendices A through D to view images of these ballads. These ballads would also have the same effect, rousing people for their own causes, as the people hear songs of these brave women. When looking at the language used in all of these ballads, they talk of heroic acts, or women who are strong and assertive in their actions, not willing to back down, and even if they must, do so with pride. Again, as with Margaret Cavendish's plays, while there is no definitive proof of these songs sparking women to physically fight, the language used illustrates a new way of thinking for women during this time.

There are several tales of women defending their homes from the enemy during the English Civil Wars. One of these women is Lady Mary Bankes of Corfe Castle. Corfe Castle was an important feature, dating back longer than anyone knew and was previously owned by the royal family during the Tudor period.<sup>19</sup> Lady Bankes stood defiant against the parliamentarian troops several times as they attempted to use strategy and not force to take the castle.<sup>20</sup> She used tactfulness against the enemy, holding strong even as they began intercepting and monitoring her actions, letters, and deliveries. When the castle is attacked outright, Lady Bankes “undertooke to make good against the rebels, and did bravely undertooke; for by heaving over stones and hot embers, [she, her daughters and soldiers] repelled tye rebels and kept them from climbing the ladders, thence to throw in that wild-fire, which every rebell had ready in his hand” as noted by

an onlooker during the battle.<sup>21</sup> Later, when the dispute over which side of the war had Corfe Castle, Lady Bankes continued her work, helping other women and families who were hurt and had damaged homes from the battles.<sup>22</sup> Though Mary Bankes went back to a more traditional role of maintaining a home, she continued supporting the war with her actions of helping those around her return back to their own lives. Lady Bankes was not ever passive during her defense of Corfe Castle, or her actions later. Also, though she was holding her home due to her husband's absence, Mary Bankes did not cower in the face of her enemy, but protected Corfe Castle using strategy, and as the enemy persisted, she played an active role in the defense.

Of women with detailed accounts of their actions during the English Civil War, none is better documented than Queen Henrietta Maria, consort of King Charles I. When Charles I was unable to take up military leadership in the English Civil Wars, Henrietta Maria stepped in for him in a public manner.<sup>23</sup> As noted by Stanton in her work '*An Amazonian Heroickess*', Henrietta Maria was responsible for several wins for the royalists, and her work inspired women around the country to take up the fight in their own way.<sup>24</sup> In fact, she is thought to have inspired the female leader in Margaret Cavendish's *Bell in Campo* that was looked at earlier, as well as Mary Bankes and defense of her home.<sup>25</sup> In letters from the queen to Charles I, it is documented her work, including securing funds, troops and other means of support.<sup>26</sup> These actions are important to note as they highlight a woman during the 1600s who is taking direct action in a conventional man's position. While she did not storm into battle as Cavendish wrote, Henrietta Maria did play an important role, helping win battles for the royalists, as well as inspiring other royalist women supporters to act, whether it was the women in the ballads, Cavendish's playwriting, or Mary Bankes assisting in protecting her home from parliamentarians. It is important to note that Henrietta Maria could have been embellishing her tales she wrote to Charles I. However, even if embellished to increase her image, she is still inspiring the royalist party with her tales.<sup>27</sup> This inspiration held importance to women like Mary Bankes, who were

valiant in their efforts in the battles during the civil wars, and pushed through societal norms of the time for their causes.

The time of the English Civil Wars disrupted English society in numerous ways. In this time in the 1640s and later, a pocket of women stood up to their causes in defending their view of how society should be run. There is evidence in James I orders to the clergy of to stop the trend of women taking up more masculine dress. There is evidence of men's opinions at the time, with John Chamberlain's letters. The opinion at the time was that these women were going against the natural order of the world. Again, these worries continued in Charles I's reign, and is evident that women did not stop their new way of dress as was ordered prior, and they continued. These views are reflected again with Margaret Cavendish's plays, *Loves Adventures* sticking closer to society's way of thinking at the time, with more restraints on women's roles, and keeping them below men, as seen as the natural order of the time. This way of thinking was perhaps spurred on, or justified with certain bible verses taken literally, as noted above.

However, with all these societal pressures there were still women who pushed back on this view, allowing the disruption of the Civil Wars to become vocal in their opinions. During times of political and social upheaval, as was happening in the English Civil Wars, there is more room for shifts in thinking, and slight shifts to push back on societal norms, giving room to question their society. Some women, such as Lady Mary Bankes and the women who dressed as men to be in the battles, took their stance in their world. Interestingly, in all the sources of women fighting, or calling up arms to fight, such as in Margaret Cavendish's plays, all are in the royalists side of the English Civil Wars. There is insufficient evidence pointing at women parliamentarians fighting in the English Civil War. It is interesting as royalists are viewed as more traditional, yet women are breaking the mould to defend these traditional views, in a very non traditional fashion. It is the Queen herself who is participating in warfare strategy and assistance, her lady in waiting who is writing plays inspired by the queen in her action, and Lady Mary Bankes, who's family is all

royalists, who actively defends her home from parliamentarians. More research is needed to determine if, and how many, women fought on the parliament side of the English Civil Wars. This essay looked at women's changing viewpoints during the time. I believe that with the evidence found, women did not actively or consciously begin viewing themselves equal to men, but looking back on the language of this time, there are subtle changes that indicate women were supporting one another to begin standing up for the causes they believed in, empowering one another. The actions of these women speak out of women who are brave and strong, and who are able to hold strong in the faces of their enemy.

**Appendix A<sup>28</sup>**



## THE FEMALE DRUMMER

A maiden I was at the age of sixteen,  
From my friends I ran away, and a soldier I became:  
I listed in a regiment and a soldier I became,  
And I learned to beat on a drum run-a-drum.

Many a prank I've seen in the field,  
And many a Frenchman I've forced to yield:  
Many is the slaughter I've seen for the French,  
And so boldly I fought when I was but a young girl.

A fighting top-gallant in my time I have been,  
With the noble Duke of York at the Siege of Valenciennes,  
Favoured by my officers, for fear I should be slain,  
They sent me to old England recruiting back again.

My hat and my feather if you had but seen,  
You'd thought and have sworn a man I had been,  
The drummer enjoyed me with my fingers long & small  
And I played the row-de-dow best of them all.

Every night when to my quarters I came,  
I was no way ashamed to lay with a man:  
In pulling off my breeches to myself I often smiled,  
For to lay with the soldiers and a maid all the while.

They sent me to London to keep guard at the Tower,  
Where I might have been a maid to this very hour:  
A young girl fell in love with me, I told her I was a  
maid,  
And she to my officers the secret conveyed.

The officers they sent for me to know if it was true,  
For such a thing can scarcely be believed of you,  
When I told him of it he smiled and said,  
'Tis a pity we should lose such a drummer as you've  
made.

For your noble courage at the siege of Valenciennes,  
A bounty shall be allowed you, my girl, from the king:  
Now I've got a husband and a drummer he's I vow,  
And I've learned him to play on my drum, row-de-dow.

Here's a health unto the king, and a health unto you,  
A health to every soldier that sticks to his colours true  
And if the king be short of men, and war he should  
proclaim,  
So boldly will I march away to fight for him again.

ISS.



## The Lancashire Heroes.

MY father is a squire and I am his heir,  
And I fell in love with his footman so fair,  
They sent him to sea where the waters roll long,  
The Lancashire heroes pray Britons strike home.

Then I was resolved to follow my dear  
Straightway I did go and list for a volunteer,  
We soon went to sea while the waves rolling.  
The Lancashire heroes, &c.

The ship that we sailed in was called the Neptune,  
We landed at sea the fourteenth day of June,  
Not a finer ship on the sea had not room,  
The Lancashire heroes &c.

Our ship it set sail with nine hundred men,  
And out of the number nine hundred got slain,  
Like Lions we fought while the blood down deck did  
run.  
The Lancashire heroes &c.

There came a large bullet right over our main-top  
Which took of her left breast so great a wether-pin  
Resolved to conquer she fired a gun.  
The Lancashire heroes &c.

Our Captain was killed and Lieutenant likewise,  
And so was my sweetheart to my great surprize,  
But I never seemed afraid but fired of my gun.  
The Lancashire heroes, &c.

From broadside to broadside we fired away,  
These French beaten cowards from us drove away,  
But now I'm got cured to old England I come.  
The Lancashire heroes &c.

Come all you young virgins attend to my song,  
See how boldly I ventured my life for a man,  
I took up arms when a soldier I become.  
The Lancashire heroes &c.





## The Female Soldier's Adventure for her true Love,

**C**OME all young girls of courage so bold,  
Who value your true love more than gold,  
Listen awhile, and I'll let you know  
How I follow'd my true love thro' frost and  
snow.

My love he was a comely youth  
As ever lov'd a girl with truth,  
A smart young drummer then was he  
As ever belong'd to his Majesty.

For seven months he courted me,  
So well I lov'd his company,  
He vow'd he lov'd me as his life,  
Fain would have made me his lawful wife,

But when my parents came to know  
That I lov'd this young drummer so,  
They confin'd me without delay,  
Unto my chamber night and day.

My love he sent to let me know  
That his regiment abroa- must go,  
To Flanders then they march'd away,  
By orders of his Majesty.

And when this sad news I did hear,  
My eyes did flow with floods of tears,  
Locks and bolts I soon made fly,  
Resolv'd to follow my love or die.

In man's apparel then straightway  
I dress'd myself so smart and gay,  
Cockade and feathers, neat and trim  
In my love's regiment enter'd in.

With drums and trumpets merrily  
I follow'd my love so cheerfully,  
The music that did sweetly play,  
With colours flying, rich and gay,

Come all young men where'er you be,  
A toast men drink so cheerfully,  
Unto each lass of courage bold,  
That values her true love more than gold.

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