

PORTRAIT OF LADY BROOKE IN MOURNING



INFORMATION SHEET

CONTEXT: THE HIDDEN COSTS OF CONFLICT FOR WOMEN IN THE CIVIL WARS

STARTER (needed to display in a different box):

- What emotions do people use clothing or symbols to express today (e.g., weddings, protests, funerals)?
- If you wanted to show the world you were suffering a deep, personal loss, what symbols or colours would you choose?
- Why might showing your loyalty to a political cause (like the King or Parliament) be dangerous during a civil war?

The British Civil Wars (1642–1651) were devastating for the gentry class, regardless of loyalty. While men fought, women faced extraordinary personal and financial pressure.

- **Political Danger:** Loyalty was a matter of life or death. Royalists and Parliamentarians seized the land and wealth of their enemies in an act known as **sequestration**. For wives like Lady Brooke, managing the household and finances, sometimes under siege or occupation, meant constantly navigating political risk.
- **Financial Strain:** The Brooke family estate was already burdened by significant debt before the war began. When Lord Brooke was killed, Lady Brooke was left to manage these existing financial problems while the war continued to drain resources.
- **The Mother's Role:** Beyond politics and finance, a key stress for women was the burden of protecting and raising their families. Katherine was left responsible for raising her large family of ten children (six sons and four daughters) in a period of intense instability, forcing her to **lobby** (formally persuade or influence) the newly established Parliamentary authorities for support.
- **Financial Support:** Charles I wanted **custody** (legal control) of her eldest son, Francis, and she had to use the law courts at Westminster to stop him. Parliament wanted to take good care of Katherine because Lord Brooke had been a popular war leader and was viewed as a **martyr** (a person killed for their beliefs) for Parliament following his death. Parliament gave Katherine the London townhouse of the royal favourite, her brother-in-law, George, Lord Digby. She later rented the property to the parliamentarian **commander-in-chief**, Sir Thomas Fairfax.
- **Mourning** was a powerful social ritual. Wearing specific clothes demonstrated respect and status, but during the war, this act became deeply political, often revealing the wearer's allegiance and highlighting the cost of the conflict. For women of the elite gentry class, like Lady Brooke, every action, including her choice of clothing, could be interpreted as a **political statement**.

OBJECT FOCUS: PORTRAIT OF LADY BROOKE IN MOURNING

This painting, produced around 1643–1644, is a portrait of **Katherine Russell, Lady Brooke** (wife of the prominent Parliamentarian commander, Robert Greville, 2nd Lord Brooke).

- **The Subject:** The Lady is dressed entirely in black (**full mourning attire**) and holds a handkerchief. Her expression is solemn, and her gaze is directed at the viewer.
- **Symbolism in Black:** Black clothing was expensive to dye and maintain, signaling wealth and high status. More importantly, it was the universal colour of grief. By **commissioning** (formally ordering the creation of) this portrait, Lady Brooke permanently records her profound sorrow.
- **The Loss:** Lord Brooke was one of the first and most high-profile Parliamentarian casualties of the war, killed by a sniper's bullet during the **siege** (military blockade) of Lichfield Cathedral in March 1643. His death was a significant blow to the Parliamentarian cause.
- **Significance:** This portrait is not just a personal record of loss. By wearing the full, deep mourning clothes, Lady Brooke makes her grief for a key Parliamentarian **martyr** public and permanent. She turns a private tragedy into a visual declaration of her family's sacrifice and loyalty to the Parliamentary cause. By publicly displaying her grief and her commitment to the mourning ritual, Lady Brooke turns a private tragedy into a powerful piece of political messaging. This portrait served as a public reminder of her family's sacrifice, which was key to securing their later financial support.

THE FINANCIAL RECOMPENSE: Class and Compensation

While Lord Brooke's death left his family in temporary financial turmoil due to pre-existing debt, Parliament, seeking to honour its martyrs, provided Lady Brooke with **extraordinary financial support and grants** (a large, special financial payment, or **extraordinary pension**).

- **Elite Compensation:** Unlike common war widows who might receive a small, often inconsistent **pension** (regular payment) from local parish or county funds, Lady Brooke's status as the wife of a major figure resulted in her receiving a significant, steady **allowance** (payment) from the central Parliament.
- **Political Motivation:** This payment was not just charity; it was a political act. By generously supporting the widow and children of a great Parliamentarian commander, the new regime demonstrated its appreciation and solidified the loyalty of the upper classes.
- **Petitioning the Authorities:** Lady Brooke's actions included successfully **petitioning** (formally requesting support) the relevant Parliamentary committees for this financial **compensation** (money awarded for loss), ensuring her large family's security. Katherine petitioned the House of Lords in 1647 to help her pay for her son Fulke's education, as her husband had not written him into his will, as he was unaware of his wife's pregnancy - he died before being told the news. The Lords gave Katherine £5,000. Katherine's household accounts, now held in Warwickshire County Record Office, show that this money came from the rents of royalist aristocrats' estates in Ireland. This made Katherine the most richly rewarded war widow of the Civil Wars. Parliament continued to honour Lady Brooke into the 1650s, paying for improvements to her home at Warwick Castle. We can compare Katherine's experience as a war widow with that of a common soldier's widow who could petition but received nowhere near the amount of money given to Katherine. Most would only receive a yearly pension of £2 or £3.

KEY ISSUES

- **Class Disparity:** How does Lady Brooke's financial outcome—receiving a significant, guaranteed pension—compare with the struggles of ordinary, poorer war widows, who often received little or no support?
- **Gender and Economics:** How did women of the gentry class handle the combined pressure of political allegiance, estate management, existing debt, and **raising a large family** during a time of **total war**?
- **Grief as Strategy:** Discuss the concept of grief as a political tool. How did Lady Brooke use her widowhood (both the portrait and her petitioning) to secure the future of her children?

GLOSSARY - needs heading/formatting

Allegiance: Loyalty or commitment to a political party, ruler, or cause.

Aristocrat: A member of the aristocracy (ruling class).

Commander in chief: Person in overall control over the armed forces.

Dynasty: A succession of people from the same family who have played a very important role in politics.

Extraordinary Pension: A large, special financial grant given by a central authority, typically to an elite individual, distinct from standard payments.

Gentry: The social class below the nobility (dukes, earls, etc.) who owned large areas of land.

Martyr: A person killed because of their religion or beliefs.

Martyrdom: The death of a person who sacrifices their life for a cause, viewed as heroic by those who share their beliefs.

Musket: A long shoulder gun carried by soldiers.

Petition: A formal request with respect to a particular cause.

Royal favourite: Intimate companion of the monarch.

Sequestration: The act of seizing or confiscating property or assets, often used by both sides of the Civil War against the estates of their opponents.

STAR MODEL: SEE, THINK, ASK, RESEARCH

- STAR Model Student Worksheet
- STAR Model [Teacher notes](#)
- [Slide Deck: PowerPoint](#)

ACTIVITIES

1. SOURCE ANALYSIS/READING AND WRITING: WOMEN'S SELF-FASHIONING IN CIVIL WAR PETITIONS (KS4/5)

Context: [Andrew Hopper's blog](#), *Aristocratic Widowhead and Bereavement: the Household Accounts of*

Lady Katherine Brooke, argues that aristocratic widows knew how to use specific, coded language to gain support (combining humility with stoic forbearance, duty, and sacrifice).

Task: Use this [source worksheet](#) to examine Lady Brooke's petition to the King and compare it with a petition from an ordinary war widow, [Mary Burnham of Steeple Bumpsted, Essex](#).

Extension Question: Other examples of female petitions can be found on the [Civil War Petitions website](#). What are the **differences and similarities** in the content, language, and tone of these petitions? What does this contrast tell us about the differing experiences of civil war widows based on their social status?

2. RESEARCH/PRESENTATION: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF WOMEN IN THE CIVIL WARS (KS4/5)

Task: Students research an important woman from the Civil War period and prepare a class presentation where they **speak on behalf of their character**, explaining why their role was so significant to their cause. The class can then vote on who made the most significant overall contribution. The full task worksheet is [here](#) and the presentation checklist for review is attached [here](#).

Individuals to Research: Mary Frith ('Moll Catpurse'); Queen Henrietta Maria; Lady Mary Bankes of Corfe Castle; Lucy Hay, Countess of Carlisle (spy and double agent); Mary Overton (Leveller); Lady Jane Whorwood (Royalist spy who helped Charles I escape); Lady Mary Verney; Lady Brilliana Harley; [Jane Merrick of Hereford](#).

3. DESIGN TASK: THE LANGUAGE OF LOYALTY (KS3 Focus)

Design Task: Imagine you are a Royalist wife whose husband has just been killed defending the King. Design a piece of clothing, an accessory, or a piece of jewellery that uses symbolism and colour to show your grief *and* your unshakeable loyalty to the King.

Explain: Write a short paragraph explaining why Parliamentarians seeing your item might feel threatened, and why Royalists might feel inspired.

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

4. SOURCE ANALYSIS: PROPAGANDA AND GENDER ROLES

Propaganda Context: Examine sources from the [National Archives educational resources on Women in the English Civil War](#) like [The Parliament of Women pamphlet](#). This source shows how Royalist pamphleteers portrayed Parliamentary women as 'unwomanly' and domineering to discredit their opponents by linking them to social disorder.

Key Question: What do these sources reveal about the political and social anxiety surrounding women's participation in the war effort?

5. SOURCE ANALYSIS: WOMEN'S ROLE IN THE CIVIL WARS

Task: Analyse relevant primary sources in the Civil War in 100 Objects book (e.g., Lady Isabella Twysden's almanac or Lady Brilliana Harvey's secret letter) and consider the role that women played in the Civil Wars.

OTHER LINKED OBJECTS IN THE BOOK

- Petition of Elizabeth Bradley of Horbury, 1681
- Lady Isabella Twysden's almanac, 1645-1651
- Brilliana Harvey's Secret Letter, 1643

MOVING ON FROM THE OBJECT: WIDER ENQUIRY QUESTIONS

- How similar or different were women's experiences of conflict and its aftermath?
- What part did women play in the Civil War?
- How significant was their political activism?
- What were the most significant non-military costs of the British Civil Wars, and were these costs distributed equally across all social classes?
- How did the deaths of key military leaders on both sides—and the public response to their deaths—shape the narrative and direction of the conflict?

FIND OUT MORE: LINKS TO OTHER RESOURCES

[Aristocratic Widowhood and Bereavement: The Household Accounts of Katherine, Lady Brooke](#)

[Cross-dressing women at the frontline of the English Civil War](#)

[The Warrior Women of the English Civil War](#)

A useful book to read is 'Women and Petitioning in the Seventeenth-Century English Revolution: Deference, Difference, and Dissent', Amanda Jane Whiting (2015)