

The Crimson Ribbon

The Crimson Ribbon is set during one of the most turbulent times in England's history, in a century that saw great change. The mid-seventeenth century witnessed the awful horrors of civil war, the persecution of witches, an era of uncensored journalism and the emergence of new, radical religious sects and revolutionary political thinking, all of which played a part in the creation of *The Crimson Ribbon*.

How I discovered Elizabeth Poole Katherine Clements

'You justly blame the King for betraying his trust, and the Parliament for betraying theirs: This is the great thing I have to say to you, Betray not you your trust ... Stretch not forth the hand against him: For know this, the Conquest was not without divine displeasure, whereby Kings came to reigne, though through lust they tyrannized: which God excuseth not, but judgeth; and his judgements are fallen heavy, as you see, upon Charles your Lord.'

Elizabeth Poole, *A Vision*, 1648

The real Elizabeth Poole appeared before the Army Council in the days before the trial and execution of Charles I, where she told of visions received from God, and argued for the life of the King. She was taken seriously – her close questioning is recorded – though she failed to influence the outcome of the trial. She published pamphlets describing her visions and the meanings she attributed to them.

We don't know much about Elizabeth Poole, who she was or why she was given a voice during one of history's most controversial prosecutions. *The Crimson Ribbon* is my attempt to answer these questions, using a mixture of research, conjecture and imagination.

I first came across Elizabeth Poole in Antonia Fraser's biography of Oliver Cromwell. Already fascinated by the character of Cromwell himself, I was immediately intrigued by the question of why this unknown woman was given an audience with some of the most important men of the day, and whether there might have been any connection between Elizabeth and Cromwell himself, as Royalist propaganda suggested. As further research revealed a dark, seductive world of illegal printing presses, extreme spiritual obsession and a mysterious scandal, Elizabeth's story proved impossible to resist.



Women and the persecution of witches



'The fearful abounding at this time, in this country, of these detestable slaves of the Devil, the witches or enchanter, has moved me (beloved reader) to dispatch in the post, this following treatise of mine, not in any way (as I protest) to serve for a show of my learning and ingenuity, but only (moved by conscience) to press thereby, so far as I can, to resolve the doubting hearts of many both that such assaults of Satan are most certainly practiced, and that the instruments thereof merit most severely to be punished.'

King James I, Preface to *Demonology*, 1597

Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live. *Exod.22.18*.

The 1640s saw the infamous witch-hunts led by self-styled 'Witchfinder General', Matthew Hopkins. His means of discovering witches, experienced by Ruth and Lizzie in *The Crimson Ribbon*, were used to identify and prosecute hundreds of men and women, in an unprecedented climate of suspicion and recrimination. Wise women, working as healers and midwives, were particularly at risk; magic, whether used for good or ill, was associated with the Devil and Puritan thought made little distinction between the two. The apparent powers of such 'cunning' women could easily be seen as something darker. During the troubled, lawless years of civil war, ordinary people, compelled by fear, superstition and religious fervour, were keen to purge evil from their midst. Accusations of witchcraft, genuine or otherwise, could be used to silence women who acted outside social norms, often with devastating results.

Women's Rights in the English Civil War

'Since we are assured of our creation in the image of God, and of an interest in Christ equal unto men, as also of a proportional share in the freedoms of this Commonwealth, we cannot but wonder and grieve that we should appear so despicable in your eyes, as to be thought unworthy to petition or represent our grievances to this honorable House. Have we not an equal interest with the men of this Nation, in those liberties and securities contained in the Petition of Right, and the other good laws of the land?'

Preamble, *The Petition of Women*, 1649



The years of the English Civil War are peppered with tales of courageous women: wives defending their homes against enemy attack, for example, or soldiers revealed as women in men's clothing. Some of these romantic stories are true, though these brave women were probably the minority, notable for their rarity. But it is true that some women did experience a new freedom as a result of social upheaval caused by the war. A developing culture of petitioning and public demonstration allowed politically minded women to express their thoughts and ideas. Women were particularly active in the Leveller movement (though the Leveller concept of *universal suffrage* did not extend to include the *weaker sex*). Women preachers, traditionally banned from the role, were popular in the new religious sects. And female prophets, proclaiming divine guidance in their visions and predictions, were able to spread their messages in pamphlets and tracts. Sometimes these women were given reverence and respect, other times they were dismissed as hysterics, but the beginnings of an uncensored press gave women – women like Lizzie in *The Crimson Ribbon* – a voice like never before; a voice in which we can hear the seeds of a women's right movement recognisable today.

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