It was the hopes of a Reformation that we fought and suffered . . .
Richard Baxter

Between 1663 and 1665, informants to Secretary of State, Sir Joseph Williamson, reported on one Mrs. Holmes, living at St. Lawrence Lane, London. Jane Holmes was reputed to be a “great patroness of the worst sort of people.” She consorted with regicides and Rump MPs. She frequented prisons and encouraged those that were in “greatest opposition to the government.” A widow of “great estate,” she spent her money liberally among “those that lie in wait to disturb the peace of the kingdom . . . and gains with her money from the Church daily and under the pretense of charity corrupts many and wanting people.”

She was hardly alone. Spy reports in the 1660s are filled with stories about women of various social groups who were thought to be aiding and abetting political opposition to the government. How so? What exactly were these women doing and what made them so dangerous that the government paid informants to spy on their travels, haunts, friends, and neighbors? Not surprisingly, they were doing what women in persecutory societies have often done throughout Western history. They were nurturing the faith and fortifying the faithful by acting as missionaries and organizers, working for the reprieve and release of political and religious prisoners, publishing and distributing sectarian literature, patronizing preachers, supporting nonconformist families in trouble, and more.

2 G. Lyon Turner, ed., “Williamson’s Spy Book,” *TCHS* 5 (1911–12): 250. Mrs. Holmes (also spelled “Homes”) was a friend of the Rumper republican and regicide, Cornelius Holland, and one of her servants was reportedly a former MP in the Rump Parliament.
Their activities were almost always tied to the care of their confessional brethren and the furtherance of nonconforming churches and sects. In the 1660s especially, this brought them into the Cromwellian orbit of former politicians, officers, and soldiers. Many of these women were themselves married to or were the widows of Republicans and regicides. Their acts of charity and daring, and their sheer tenacity in the face of persecution were politically charged. Like Shaftesbury’s famous image of popery and slavery as two sisters going hand in hand, so Protestant Dissent and opposition politics became joined, even if most nonconformists desired nothing more than to live in peace and worship freely.³ The linkage between religious and political opposition that came out of the Civil Wars and the Protectorate endured during the Restoration as did concerns over disorderly women venturing beyond the domain of hearth and distaff. Little wonder that Mrs. Holmes was thought to be encouraging the underground of political desperadoes and radicals in London; that was a world that shared her zeal for godliness and the gospel ministry. The experience of defeat, following the demise of the Commonwealth and the return of the monarchy, had left many men – politicians, soldiers, and preachers – forlorn and desolate, lost in a political wilderness. Where was Christ’s kingdom now? For women the experience was similar; only they outnumbered men among the nonconformist varieties of Protestantism under attack during the Restoration, and they were fundamental to the preservation of these sects. True enough, women were not likely to carry guns or boldly plot risings in taverns over pots and pipes, but they were conduits of communication, money, and inflammatory literature. They were also there to pick up the pieces in the end, tending to their brethren in the gaol and at the gallows.

Nonconformity and Persecution

The people of God are sad, not knowing what to do or where to go

William Hooke⁴
