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Esther Gentili (d.1649)

Much of Esther Gentili's life is archivally mysterious, down to the spelling of her name. Records alternate between Esther and Hester, while her surname varies between her married surname 'Gentili' and her maiden name 'de Peigne', even after her marriage. To history, she has been significant primarily as the wife of Regius Professor of Law at Oxford, Alberico Gentili.¹ This essay, by contrast, will shift critical focus from her role as a wife to examine her identity as a transcultural agent in her own right, studying her movement between France and England, and the ways in which this movement was reflected in the archival traces she left behind.

It is not uncommon for the only such traces of early modern women to be the records of their birth, marriages, and deaths, and this is the case for Gentili. A French Huguenot, the date of her birth, her parentage, and the occasion of her arrival into England are all unknown. Since she outlived her husband by over forty years, it is a viable assumption that her year of birth was later than that of her husband, who was born in 1552. However, even that nominal narrowing of options could still place her birth year anywhere between 1560 and 1570. Her marriage to Alberico, which took place in 1589 in London, provides the first known documentation of her existence within English records.² A year later, her sister Jaél de Peigne married Sir Henry Killigrew at St Peter le Poer, London.³ This latter relationship provides a few more hints as to the de Peigne family's situation. In Killigrew's will, written over a decade later, he would 'geve and bequeathe unto my beloved wife Jaell the Two Thousand crownes her mother promised me in maryage with her, whiche yet remayne in her mothers hand unpaid'.⁴ This instruction reveals several facts about the sisters' circumstances: firstly, that Killigrew had believed the family to be considerably wealthy when he married them, and secondly, that his mother-in-law was still alive in 1603 but his father-in-law apparently was not.⁵ There is no record, however, of a similar issue with the payment of a dowry for Gentili, suggesting that either the debt was

1 Artemis Gause, 'Alberico Gentili (1552–1608)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* <<https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/10522>> [accessed 14 July 2019].

2 *Ibid.*

3 Luke MacMahon, 'Sir Henry Killigrew (1525x8–1603)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, <<https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/15533>> [accessed 13 July 2019].

4 Will of Sir Henry Killigrew of Parish of Saint Christopher near Le Stockes, City of London, The National Archives, Kew, PROB 11/101/273.

5 2000 crowns being equivalent to roughly £85,823 in 2022 <<https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/currency-converter>> [accessed 10 January 2022].

settled, or – possibly more likely, considering the lower social status of her husband – that it had been considerably lower.

The sisters' marriages brought them markedly different experiences of English life. Jaél de Peigne married into the gentry, connecting herself to a wide circle of Elizabethan elites. Sir Henry's first wife had been Katherine Cooke, sister-in-law to Lord Burghley, and there was a close family connection between the Killigrews and the Cecils.⁶ He was an Elizabethan diplomat of significant standing, though he largely retired from public service after 1591, and with her marriage, Jaél's French nationality was subsumed within a new English identity as Lady Killigrew. Esther Gentili, by contrast, married a man who, like her, was a religious refugee in England. The growth of his career had been aided by participation in Tudor legal and political networks and through the assistance of settled Italians like Sir Horatio Palavicino. Because of this, there was no need for Esther Gentili to resign her French nationality upon marriage: if anything, it aided her husband's career, connecting him to a wider network of transnational migrant communities.

Her French origins played a significant part in their family life: their first two children were baptised at the French church on Threadneedle Street and Alberico's will would later name a French minister, Abraham Aurelious, as a signatory, suggesting their continued presence at the church after these baptisms.⁷ The names the two sisters gave their children similarly reflect these different approaches to their status as French refugees. Lady Killigrew's three sons were named Robert, Henry, and Joseph, and her daughter's name is usually recorded as Jane: names which reflect their family's English identity.⁸ By contrast, the Gentilis had five children who were each named after a member of the influence network surrounding Alberico: the eldest child Robert was named after the earl of Essex; two of their daughters were both named Anna after Anna Palavicino; another daughter was named Hester, the anglicised form of Esther; and their youngest son was named Matteo after Alberico's father.⁹ These names alternate in the archival records between their original and Anglicised forms, reflecting the family's shifting position between English, Italian, and French communities.

6 Killigrew, for example, wrote a series of Latin verses to his sister-in-law, Mildred, wife of Lord Burghley before her death in 1589: The National Archives, Kew, SP 46/23.

7 London, London Metropolitan Archives, P69/HEL/A/002/MS06831/001; Thomas Erskine Holland, *Studies in International Law* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1898), p. 26.

8 MacMahon, 'Sir Henry Killigrew'.

9 Holland, *Studies in International Law*, p. 26.

Both sisters were widowed young. Sir Henry Killigrew died in 1603 and was followed five years later by Alberico Gentili, who made his will only five days before he died at the age of 56.¹⁰ While Killigrew's will is a legal tangle which left money to his wife only under certain conditions, and appointed men to oversee the convoluted process, Alberico Gentili's final wishes were much simpler. He left his wife as the executrix, 'for shee will well knowe howe to dispose boath of hers and myne, which I doe leave her for the benefitt of those my three little ones [excluding Robert, the eldest]' and asked his brother Scipio to have 'a care ... especially of the boye [Matteo, the youngest] because he beares the name of my father'.¹¹ His nephew Joseph Killigrew, son of Jaél, was one of the signatories alongside another very significant name: 'Phillipp Burlamach'. This appears to be Philip Burlamachi, an Italian immigrant who would later become a financier to Charles I.¹² He and his wife Elizabeth had moved to London that April and become members of the Gentilis' old church on Threadneedle Street.¹³ Burlamachi's business partner and brother-in-law Philip Calendrini is also mentioned in Gentili's will, supporting this identification. This overlap between Alberico and the vanguard of the next generation of influential Italians in London may have been brief, but it appears to have been significant for the Gentili family. In Esther Gentili's will, written nearly thirty years later, she wanted a 'Mr Bourlainachi' to receive 'of my goods ... twelve pounds': this may be a misspelling of Burlamachi, which would suggest that Gentili maintained the relationship even after her husband's death.

Surprisingly Esther did not stay in London, even though she was left as executrix of her husband's estate and widowed with four surviving children. Upon Alberico's death, she instead travelled to France and, unusually, left a legal trail. According to Thomas Erskine Holland, she was in Paris in 1608 carrying on 'an unsuccessful lawsuit before Achille D'Arblay, first President of the Parliament', and then again in 1610 on appeal before De Thou.¹⁴ The *Archives Nationales* contain scattered references to her presence: on 28 November 1609 she is recorded as staying in the Rue Saint-Jaques at the

¹⁰ The National Archives, PROB/11/207/171.

¹¹ The National Archives, PROB 11/128/695. Matteo Gentili the Elder had been buried at St Helens Bishopsgate in 1601, and Alberico asked to be buried as 'deep and neare' him as possible.

¹² Robert Ashton, 'Philip Burlamachi (d.1644)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, <<https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/37246>> [accessed 14 July 2019].

¹³ Ole Peter Grell, *Brethren in Christ: A Calvinist Network in Reformation Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 107.

¹⁴ Holland, *Studies in International Law*, p. 24.

house of Charles Hulpeau, bookseller.¹⁵ She is described here as ‘Esther de Peigne, veuve d’Albedico Gentili ... demeurant ordinairement à Londres’.¹⁶ This sentence typifies the complexities of her transnational movement: she is recorded under her maiden name in its French form, linked with her Italian husband, recorded as ordinarily resident in London but currently returned to France. These references also suggest the existence of another sister, Isabelle, with whom she was attempting to purchase an annuity from a man named Samuel de Curier.

These brief records shed some light on her later years. Holland does not state the context of the lawsuit, but it is clear that she maintained connections in France after her initial move to England. In her will she left Anna ‘all that which belonged to mee in this country and in France’, indicating that she maintained property in both countries. It may be that it was concerns over her French property which prompted her cross-channel trips, and it is notable that the property was not mentioned in her husband’s will, suggesting either that it was held in her name, or that it did not come into her possession until after his death. In either event, her management of the property, and her decision to leave it in her daughter’s possession, shows her work as an agent moving between national systems of jurisprudence; a transcultural figure in her own right, with a legal status separate from that of her husband.

Both of the de Peigne sisters had been tasked in their spouse’s wills with raising their children virtuously. This seems to have presented Gentili with greater difficulty than her sister: her eldest son Robert had been greatly aided by his father in gaining a position at Oxford, but even by 1608 he was bitterly resented by his father as having had ‘too much’ already. He left England for Europe sometime after his father’s death, in the process abandoning his wife Alice Gentili, who died in 1619 and was buried in St Bride’s Fleet Street.¹⁷ By contrast to Esther, who remained single after Alberico’s death, Lady Killigrew married George Downham, Bishop of Derry, fourteen years after her first husband’s death.¹⁸ Soon after Jaél wrote a will where she left goods to her sister – ‘my second Taffata gowne’, ‘my ruffes’ and ‘five smocks’ – as well as giving her two nieces Anna and Hester ‘my two wedding smocks’ and

15 Minutes et répertoires du notaire Jean I CHARLES, Janvier 1601–21 Juin 1617, Archives Nationales, Paris, MC/ET/XVIII/149, fol. V/C/IIII/XX/XV.

16 Translation: ‘Esther de Peigne, widow of Alberico Gentili ... normally resident in London’.

17 London Metropolitan Archives, P69/BRI/A/004/MS06538.

18 They married on 22 April 1617 at St Margaret Lothbury in the City of London [LMA, P69/MGT1/A/001/MS04346/001].

‘two wastcots, coyfes, and crossclothes wrought with black silke’.¹⁹ Her will indicates considerable wealth and status: other items include ‘a diamond ring’ and ‘a little picture of Queen Eliz[abeth] in gold’. She also left money to the ‘poore of the French church in London’ and ‘the some of tenne pounds to be paid unto the Preacher and Elders of the same church and to be employed or distributed to and for the use of the ... poore at their discretion’.

When Gentili made her will, with no husband to consider, she was free to distribute her goods and money as she wished.²⁰ As mentioned earlier, a Mr Bourlainachi was referenced as ‘one that shall not bee very little acknowledged ... seeing the many obligations I have’. Hester, her daughter, had died in 1618 and was buried at St Katherine Coleman, a centre for migrant communities earlier in the century, leaving Anna the sole surviving daughter.²¹ Matteo appears to have disappeared at some point before the will was written, as its conditions changed depending on whether he could be ‘found again’ or was ‘no more’.²² Robert was willed a maximum of ten pounds provided he ‘change not religion and come not again into this country’, with a hopeful addendum that ‘good God make him know his faults and amend him’.²³ As it was, he did return after the will was written but before his mother died, and an additional addendum cut his inheritance down to twenty shillings as a consequence. The rest was left to her daughter Anna and her husband Sir John Colt when Gentili died in 1649, with her thanks for ‘having been so longe a time with them soe peaceably and with soe great contentment’.

Esther Gentili’s will is the only currently known document which preserves something of her voice and character. Though much can be gleaned from marriage records and receipts, the details of her will speak to her daily concerns, which were otherwise left unrecorded. It depicts an independently wealthy woman deeply preoccupied with questions of religious identity, protective of her children, and well connected within her community. It was originally written in a language other than English – likely French, though this is not recorded – and was signed ‘Esther de Peigne Gentili’. Unlike her sister, who went by Lady Jaél in her will, Gentili appears to have maintained her maiden name as part of her full legal name long after her marriage. Her will synthesises the legal and cultural concerns of her transnational status

19 The National Archives, PROB 11/161/378.

20 The National Archives, PROB 11/207/171.

21 George Unwin, *The Gilds and Companies of London* (London: Methuen & Co, 1963), pp. 246–247.

22 The National Archives, PROB 11/207/171.

23 *Ibid.*

through the frame of her relatively privileged societal position as a widow with a wealthy son-in-law.

The process followed here of interrogating these scattered archival references raises as many questions as it answers. Gentili is not unusual amongst early modern women, in that the details of her life are primarily recorded in those moments when they intersect with the state's concerns and give us little of her inner life. There are, however, spaces in between these official records through which occasional glimpses of complexities are visible which defy archival preservation: an emotional journey from France to England, a missing son and the loss of two young daughters, ongoing legal battles, and the personal negotiations of a transnational identity. These glimpses, fleeting though they may be, demonstrate the importance of considering Esther de Peigne Gentili as a transcultural figure in her own right, worthy of study for more than her role as simply Alberico Gentili's 'French Huguenot wife'.

Emily Stevenson

Further Reading

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