THE DOWAGER COUNTESS AS A POOR OLDE AWNTE: LADY ELIZABETH RUSSELL IN “RETIREMENT”

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ELIZABETH COOKE HOBY RUSSELL

• Remarkably well-educated, along with her four sisters.
• Famous for rallying her neighborhood and the English government to force Shakespeare to move the Globe Theatre away from her house.
• Related to powerful families such as the Cecils and the Bacons.
• Wielded a lot of political power as a young widow, but faded from the public consciousness as an elderly woman – why? And why is that stage of her life understudied?
DEFINING LATE WIDOWHOOD

• Comparative age and length of widowhood. Especially poignant in the case of Elizabeth because she had been widowed twice.

• Lack of young children under her guardianship.
  • While her sons were young, she controlled their financial interests.
  • While her daughters were young, she controlled their marriage prospects.
ELIZABETH REMEMBERED

• Some of Elizabeth’s most lasting legacies were formed in her old age.

• For example, her book was published in 1605.
Elizabeth used the funerary monuments of her family to express socio-political statements that she no longer expressed at court, both in images and in words.

- Her husband, John’s, funeral monument features his daughters holding his coat of arms in a definitive statement that they were his legitimate heirs, despite being female.
ELIZABETH’S OWN MONUMENT

• Her children in various postures of power
• Dressed in widow’s weeds
• Latin and Greek inscriptions display her expertise
OTHERS
CONCLUSION

• Although Elizabeth faded from court news when she moved back to her estate at Bisham, she continued to exercise her influence on those around her. She continued her work as a scholar and left monuments to herself and her family, helping to define the way that later generations would analyze her life.
IMAGES

• *A Way of Reconciliation of a Good and Learned Man*, Lady Elizabeth Russell Dowager, 1605. Provided by Early English Books Online.

• All remaining photos: author’s collection, taken March 2019.