At Lambeth Palace Library, London, Claire McEachern did research on the “intellectual daughters of Sir Anthony Cooke” with support from a CSW Faculty Development Grant.
What drew you to the study of religion in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century British literature?

In this period, early modern religion is where all the action is: political, intellectual, emotional, scientific, and of course literary. I came of scholarly age in the moment of new historicism, with an intention to become a Shakespearean scholar. I thought my dissertation, a study of the poetics of nationhood in Shakespeare's plays and the works of other writers, would be a study of early modern political identities—I wondered why we find in such texts what sounds to us like patriotic language, when scholars of state formation argue that nations aren't invented until the nineteenth century? In doing the research, I came to understand that sixteenth-century notions of community were based in the Reformation revisions of religious identity (for instance, the liturgical and linguistic descriptions of community proposed by the Book of Common Prayer) and that to study political identities in this period meant grappling with the way religion imagined the bonds between persons, places and polities.

What drew you to your current research project on the intellectual daughters of Sir Anthony Cooke—Mildred Cecil, Anne Bacon, Elizabeth Hoby (shown at left), and Katherine Killegrew? What is interesting to you about the lives of these sisters?

In researching a book on what it meant to believe in your own salvation in the wake of the Reformation, and what that might have had to do with how we believe in Shakespeare's...
plays, I came across a reference to the “intellectual daughters of Sir Anthony Cooke” in a history of the early English Reformation. I wondered who they were and why I had never heard of them—recent descriptions of early modern women’s identity, very like those of the original period, tend to note Elizabeth I as “alone of all her sex” in her learning and accomplishments, an exception to the general rule of “chaste, silent and obedient.” I went looking and found that these four sisters (of nine children) were educated by their father in humanist literature and languages, whose own learning had brought him to the attention of Queen Katherine Parr, in her effort to educate Henry VIII’s three children; the intensity of his commitment to Protestantism led him to become a Marian exile when Mary Tudor sought to return England to Catholicism. Prior to their marriages these women were renowned for their scholarly work in translations of major texts of reform, and reissued editions later in life (in addition to modern languages, they were competent in Latin, Greek, and Hebrew, the rare trifecta of humanist learning).

Two of the sisters married men who became prominent councilors to Elizabeth I (William Cecil, Nicholas Bacon); another married a famous humanist (Thomas Hoby, translator of The Courtier of Castiglione); another a noted diplomat (Henry Killegrew). As members of a large and not especially prominent gentry family, their intellectual capital was clearly a major component of their dowries. They published translations of important texts of English Protestantism, wrote their own poetry, supervised the education of brilliant children and stepchildren (including the philosopher Francis Bacon and his cousin Robert Cecil), served as patrons of artists and musicians and dissident preachers, and, being both long-lived and socially prominent, had fingers in many of the sixteenth-centuries most interesting political pies. They served in diplomatic capacities, as life-long friends of the Queen, and as administrators of their own property (which gave widows control over the assignment of religious livings). The two eldest were ladies-in-waiting to both Catholic Mary and Protestant Elizabeth Tudor, and the scope of their political involvement seemed to revise what I had been taught about what was possible for women in this moment (Elizabeth Hoby Russell, for instance, represented her own interests in a Star Chamber case). But perhaps most fascinating of all, they advocated throughout their lives for the more intense Calvinist strains of Protestantism, even as their husbands worked to engineer the Elizabethan settlement of religion (what would become the Anglican church) along less strident principles. Thus in addition to complicating my understanding of early modern women’s work, their involvements seem to me to paint a world of religious identities very different from the partisanal understanding scholars have had of this moment: to suggest, for instance, how species of Protestantism could vary by members of the same family, or even within a marriage.

You used the CSW Faculty Development Grant funds to travel to the Lambeth Palace Library in London to read the letters of Lady Anne Bacon, née Cooke. Can you tell us about some of your most interesting finds?

Lady Anne’s letters to her sons Anthony and Francis provide the only substantive record of a “voice” for any of the sisters; the reason we possess them is because Anthony was a member of the Elizabethan intelligence network. She is the sister most intensely committed to reformed Protestantism, and the clarity and vehemence of her opinions is very evident throughout (her penmanship alone—bold, large, scrawling strokes of the quill—makes quite an impression). They date from the 1590s, when Lady Anne (b. 1528) was in her 70s. These letters are on the one hand a record of what kinds of things an early modern helicopter mother concerned herself with: she complains about their borrowing her coach and cart, and sends periodic shipments
of strawberries and pigeons from her home in Gorhambury, accompanied with warnings about the religious persuasions of her son’s cooks or other hazards (“beware in any wise of the Lord H., he is a dangerous intelligencing man No doubt a subtle papist”). On the other, they demonstrate what we would consider a rather modern blend of the multiple roles required of an aristocratic woman: advice about politics, requests for sensitive information (when she felt the need for secrecy, she wrote in Hebrew or Greek), and descriptions of the administrative labors of running an estate. She even demonstrates a self-consciousness of the unique but nonetheless authoritative nature of her position. My favorite bit was from a letter of 12 May, 1595, when, clearly wondering whether her sons are heeding her words, she writes “I think for my long attending in court and a chief councilor’s wife, few [women precede] me, son, are able or be alive to speak, and of such proceedings and worldly doings of men. But God bless you and make you to hear wholesome public doctrine for your best understanding every way.”

Are there any other archival collections you are examining?

I will need to comb through the Cecil Papers at Hatfield house, and of course the British State Papers, whose online archives I wish the UCLA library would subscribe to!

What is your goal for the project? How will it advance knowledge of women’s roles during this period? Is there anything you would like to share about what the project means to you?

Records of most early modern lives (whether male and female) are notoriously patchy; but I wondered if, given that there were four of them, it would be possible to write a composite biography of these women. I’m hoping it will help that Mildred’s husband, William Cecil, was the person who in essence conceived of the British office of public records. My goal is to tell the story of a particular and rather unusual family; while there is always a risk of generalizing from particulars, I would also like to add texture to current understandings of early modern English women and English religion. As I am by training a literary critic, more used to dealing with imaginary people, the impact of language and the realm of interpretation, there is something refreshing about feeling (however naively) like I am uncovering something about “real” lives, and the project is requiring me to learn a different set of research skills. However, given the nature of the evidence, writing this book requires some methodological reflection about what the relation is between the kind of stories we want to tell and those we feel we are able to tell. I must also confess that part of me identifies with these sisters, as their lives seem to me to represent a very familiar blend (and clash) of the diverse forms of labor unique to women scholars today (minus, of course, the espionage and the servant problems).