Witness, Warning, and Prophecy: Quaker Women's Writing, 1655–1700

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Introduction

The Other Voice

In November of 1655, the Quaker Margaret Newby invoked a near riot as she preached in the West Midlands town of Evesham: "I did speak amongst the people, and a friend did hold me in her arms, and the power of the Lord was so strong in me, and it cleared my conscience, and I was moved to sing, and friends was much broken, and the heathen was much astonished, and one of them said if we were let alone we would destroy the whole town."[1] Newby's ecstatic devotion threatened the non-Quaker citizens of Evesham so much that they feared this woman and her compatriots might be the town's undoing. Her account underscores the intense hostility and fear that early Quakers and their enthusiastic tendencies aroused, and the absolute certainty with which they persisted in proclaiming the message of the inner light. Indeed Newby was so certain of the righteousness of the Friends, a movement that at this point had only formally existed for some three years, that she could blithely dismiss the non-Quaker but Christian citizens of Evesham as "heathen," a term reserved for those ignorant of the Bible and God.

On this occasion, the mayor prevented Newby from destroying "the whole town" by putting her and her traveling companion Elizabeth Cowart in the stocks overnight. He ordered them not to sing, but they did, "being both moved eternally by the lord to sing in the stocks."[2] He offered to free them just as long as they promised not to return, but they told him they could not make such promises. Immediately after they were conveyed out of the town, they turned around and entered it again. More than 350 years after the fact, it is hard to fathom these women's willingness to risk imprisonment and physical punishment for the sake of proclaiming the message of the inner light. For their contemporaries, however, their actions were even more incomprehensible. In a time when long-distance travel was typically motivated by the search for better economic conditions, why had two women journeyed from the northwestern county of Westmorland to preach to the people in this West Midlands market town?[3] On whose authority

1. Margaret Newby to Margaret Fell, December 25, 1655, Transcriptions of the Swarthmoor Manuscripts, Library of the Society of Friends, London. As early as 1653, Newby was imprisoned along with Mary Howgill and Jane Waugh for accusing a justice of the peace in Kendal of tyranny and for warning him "of the evil to come." (In the present volume, Howgill appears as the author of a tract, whereas Waugh is the subject of another.) Anthony Pearson, *To the Parliament of the Commonwealth of England* (1653), 5.

2. Newby to Fell.

3. For information on early modern mobility, see Patricia Fumerton, *Unsettled: The Culture of Mobility and the Working Poor in Early Modern England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), and

did they blatantly defy the dictates of the local clergy and magistrates? And finally, why were women, who were enjoined by the dictates of early modern culture to remain silent in public, preaching about spiritual matters?

Even in an age roiled by civil war and the execution of the king, the early Quakers never ceased to shock and trouble their contemporaries. Although the Quakers were a Christian movement, their beliefs and worship were unlike those of their Anglican and Puritan counterparts: they read the Bible as an important, but not exclusive, record of divine inspiration; they believed that each person should listen to the "inner light" or voice of God within rather than attending to the words of university-educated clergymen; and they regarded women as the spiritual equals of men and thus equally bound to follow the inner light wherever it might direct their steps. That Quaker women assumed roles in the public sphere—as preachers, as pamphlet writers, as advocates for the imprisoned, and as itinerant ministers—caused their neighbors great distress.

Encouraged by the Quaker belief in the spiritual equality of the sexes, Quaker women published prolifically in the second half of the seventeenth century; they produced some 220 texts, more than any other single group of women writers in the period. Whereas before the 1650s, most women authors were members of the gentry or the aristocracy, many of the Quaker women writers came from the middling sort. For the most part, their writings took the form of pamphlets that were published under the auspices of the sect to be read aloud in meetings and used for proselytizing. All of their writings were, at their core, spiritually motivated—they proclaimed the inner light, they proselytized, they warned that the last days approached, they directed political authorities to desist from persecuting them, and they recounted their "sufferings" and missionary journeys for the faith. Their writing contributed not only to the growth of their movement, one that continues in the present time, but also to intellectual history more broadly. When these women wrote on behalf of their sect, they also broached issues of individual rights, due process, liberty of conscience, separation of church and state, and social justice as though these ideas were self-evident, and not, as was the case, only just beginning to enter into mainstream political discourse.

The forty texts collected in this volume represent a small sample of Quaker women's tremendous literary output. They include examples of key Quaker literary genres—proclamations, directives, warnings, sufferings, testimonies, polemic, pleas for toleration—but they also showcase a range of literary styles and voices. These include the eloquent poetry of Mary Mollineux, whose lines were inspired by canonical lyric poetry, and the workaday verse of Sarah Blackborow's *The Oppressed Prisoners' Complaint*. When confronting the movement's opponents, Hester Biddle responded with fire-and-brimstone denunciations, while Anne Docwra offered legal disquisitions. Rebecca Travers admonished those who

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A. L. Beier, *The Vagrancy Problem in England* (London: Methuen, 1985).

persecuted the Quaker Solomon Eccles for "going naked as a sign" that they, and not he, were the ones with a problem. Barbara Blaugdone spoke of the family and friends who disowned her after she joined the movement, while Mary Dyer, whose family members interceded to save her at the eleventh hour from being hanged, apparently resented their help. And just as Quakers often traveled and preached in pairs, they often published in pairs: Elizabeth Hooton's writing appeared with that of the Oxford-educated Thomas Taylor, and she and Taylor presented diverse justifications for religious toleration; while Priscilla Cotton and Mary Cole collaborated to dismantle well-established injunctions against women's preaching and then wryly recorded that two quarrelsome priests ran away from them. In their varied responses to the core Quaker belief in the indwelling Spirit, these women left a rich literary legacy of an early countercultural movement. Theirs most certainly are other voices that deserve to be heard.

Political and Theological Origins of Quakerism

The Quaker movement emerged from the demise of the English national church and the fragmentation of religious belief that accompanied the collapse of the government of Charles I in the 1640s.[4] In the years between the Elizabethan church settlement of 1559 and the rise of Laudian church government in the 1630s, the Church of England had been a relatively fluid yet cohesive institution that accommodated a range of Protestant beliefs. One theological tenet of the national church was predestination. This belief, articulated in the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (first issued in Latin in 1536 and published in an English translation in 1561) of the French theologian John Calvin, asserted that only certain believers who were chosen by God would experience eternal salvation.[5] All others would be damned, and individuals lacked the power to influence their membership in the elect because all power over salvation rested in the hands of God.

Some parish priests adhered rigorously to this doctrine of predestination, while others modified and softened it with the aim of providing their parishioners with a rationale for leading an upstanding Christian life. This latter group

4. Rosemary Moore, *The Light in Their Consciences: Early Quakers in Britain, 1646–1666* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000), 3–5. Additional standard works on the Quaker movement include Kate Peters, *Print Culture and the Early Quakers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Adrian Davies, *The Quakers in English Society, 1655–1725* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); Bary Reay, *The Quakers and the English Revolution* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985); Hugh Barbour, *The Quakers in Puritan England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964); and William C. Braithwaite, *The Beginnings of Quakerism*, rev. Henry J. Cadbury, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1955); and *The Second Period of Quakerism* (London: Macmillan, 1919). Special mention must be made of the magisterial quality of Braithwaite's texts; his exhaustive overview of early Quaker sources has made his volumes essential to scholars of the movement.

5. Thomas Norton was the translator of the 1561 English language edition of the *Institutes*.

included those who by the 1640s might properly be called Anglicans; these English Protestants concerned themselves less with identifying the elect, instead viewing the "Church as an organic expression of Christian society."[6] They remained devoted to the Elizabethan prayer book, and, much as their Catholic predecessors had, they continued to celebrate feast days, to emphasize sacraments, and to use traditional liturgical forms. Those who embraced Calvinism, and who were sometimes derisively called "Puritans," tended to emphasize the importance of the Word of God as expressed in the Bible over the rituals associated with sacraments, feast days, and formulaic prayers. Thus, their services focused on preaching, and they emphasized the experience, or "heart knowledge," of the divine. These individuals often formed parallel communities of the elect who met outside of the services in their parish churches where those who were not "chosen" worshiped alongside "saints."

In the years prior to the reign of Charles I (1625–1649), individual parishes both tailored their services to meet the needs of their communities and remained unified under the broad framework of the Elizabethan settlement.[7] And although the national church was at this time relatively tolerant, the more strident Puritans who sought to form separate and autonomous congregations—known as Separatists—were persecuted. In 1607, the members of one such community, the Pilgrim Fathers or Pilgrims, fled to Holland, and then in 1620, sailed aboard the *Mayflower* to Plymouth, on Cape Cod, where they settled. In 1629, another more highly connected group of Puritans established the larger Massachusetts Bay Colony as a model Christian state.

The flexibility of the Church of England came to an end with the ascendancy, under Charles I, of Archbishop William Laud. Laud, who became the archbishop of Canterbury in 1633, governed the English church with a heavy hand. He imposed liturgical uniformity on every parish and insisted that communal worship center on sacraments, particularly that of Communion, and not the preaching of the Word. His policies elevated the status of the clergy—the preferred mediators between God and his people—and outraged Puritans who saw themselves as fully capable of conducting their own spiritual lives. Laud's reforms were not confined to religious affairs but expanded to include secular matters; he transformed the Court of High Commission from a body that disciplined clergymen to one that punished the moral indiscretions of lay people—and even members of the social elite. In 1637, he used the Court of Star Chamber to imprison and torture three

6. Derek Hirst, *Authority and Conflict: England, 1603–1658* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), 69. See also Blair Worden, *The English Civil Wars* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 2009), 8–12.

7. John Morrill, "The Causes and Course of the British Civil Wars," in *The Cambridge Companion to Writing of the English Revolution*, ed. N. H. Keeble (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 27.

Puritans for publishing their tracts; one of these men, William Prynne, famously had his ears cut off.

While alienating many in England, Laud's reforms had disastrous results for Charles's government when, with the strong support of the king, they were imposed on Scotland. In the realm of politics, Charles was every bit the autocrat that Laud was. From the beginning of his reign, he undermined the authority of Scotland's established governing and religious bodies as part of his campaign to bring that nation into uniformity with England. Unlike the English church, the Scottish church was staunchly Calvinist in its theology and governed by a group of elders or presbyters, hence "Presbyterian." Charles feared the Presbyterianism of the Scottish church because it challenged the divine sanction he and Laud claimed for the reforms in the English church, and because it encouraged the Puritan dissenters among the English.

Things came to a head in 1637, when Charles and Laud tried to impose on the Scots a prayer book that represented, from the Scots' point of view, Laud's most conservative, or "papist," reforms.[8] In 1638, the Scots defied Charles's mandates, and he responded by invading Scotland. Charles led a sizeable army into Scotland, but confronted by the better organized and strategically positioned Scots army, he withdrew and the first Bishops' War ended in a truce that liberated the Scots from having to enact Laudian religious reforms. Undeterred, Charles sought to raise funds to support a second invasion of Scotland. He even called a parliament in 1640 but dissolved it shortly thereafter when that body refused to subsidize his army. In August of 1640, the Scots invaded England, soundly defeated the army, and occupied two counties in northeastern England. They refused to negotiate with Charles and insisted on meeting with commissioners appointed by parliament. This, together with the urging of the council of peers that met in York in September of 1640, caused Charles to call a parliament in November 1640.

The Long Parliament—which continued in a variety of forms until 1660—played a pivotal role in the Civil Wars that ultimately culminated in Charles's execution in 1649.[9] At the outset, this parliament sought to create basic religious and political reforms: it toppled the much hated Laudian episcopacy—putting Laud himself in prison—and created legal assurances that parliament be allowed to meet regularly and to carry out its duties. But as time wore on, it became clear that whereas Charles might pay lip service to agreements made with parliament, he was committed to overturning them at the earliest opportunity. Parliament's distrust of Charles peaked in late 1641 when Catholics in Ireland rebelled against Protestant rule, and parliament was loath to put Charles in charge of the army that was needed to suppress the Irish rebellion. The members of parliament be-

8. Ian Gentles, *The English Revolution and the Wars in Three Kingdoms* (London: Longman, 2007), 7–8.

9. For overviews of the complex relationship between Charles and the Long Parliament, see Worden, *English Civil Wars*, 30–39 and Gentles, *English Revolution*, 84–88.

lieved his "papist" sympathies made him unreliable as a defender of Protestant interests in Ireland—some even insisted that he had instigated the Catholic-led uprising—and they worried that he might turn the army against parliament and England. Their anxieties about Charles's willingness to subvert Protestant and parliamentarian objectives were further stoked by the armed gentlemen who gathered around Whitehall Palace to protect him, and by Charles's actions: he assembled, in January of 1642, a small militia and entered the House of Commons with the intention of arresting five key members. Although efforts to reconcile parliament and Charles continued, they did not succeed, and in August of 1642, the first Civil War officially began.

The first Civil War, pitting the army raised by Charles and a collection of noblemen against that of parliament, ended in 1646. Parliament won, and this was due, in part, to the New Model Army. Formed in 1645, the New Model was England's first professional army, a paid military corps that was led by professional soldiers under the command of Sir Thomas Fairfax. At war's end, Charles surrendered to the Scots and was ransomed by parliament in 1647, and then promptly imprisoned. Although parliament had won the first Civil War, many chafed at its increased authority: some wanted to restore the king; others felt they had substituted one autocratic governing power for another. In particular, parliament's settlement of the religious question aroused the ire of just about everyone. Because the Scots had aided the parliamentarians with military support, parliament felt compelled to impose a Presbyterian-type national church. However, the church government it created allowed too much lay control to make the Scots happy, yet did not allow enough authority to individual parishes to please the more staunchly Puritan Independents, and its abolition of the prayer book and feast day celebrations alienated Anglicans. As a result, the religious settlement, though largely unenforced, contributed to the growing dissatisfaction with parliamentary rule.

Toward the end of 1647, many in parliament considered restoring the king to the throne on his terms, but were prevented by the increasingly radicalized army that had effectively seized political power. In October 1647, Fairfax called a council of the army at Putney Church to discuss the matter of a new constitution put forward by the Levellers, a political party that advocated legal reforms designed to assure all men, regardless of social class, equal treatment under the law. The Putney Debates were notable for what was discussed rather than for what was done: after publicly airing ideals of representative government, the army's leaders drafted a counterproposal that called on parliament to adequately subsidize the army. Parliament agreed in exchange for the army leaders' pledge to reduce the size of the army. In early 1648, the New Model's leaders disbanded some twenty

thousand troops and used parliament's injunction as an opportunity to reduce the numbers of political agitators in the ranks.[10]

The second Civil War began in the spring of 1648, when the provinces revolted against the army's rule. It was quickly suppressed, and the triumphant army purged the members of the Long Parliament who had sought to negotiate with Charles. Those members who remained formed what became known as the Rump Parliament. In January of 1649, the Rump convened a High Court of Justice that tried Charles for traitorously making war on the parliament and his people. The king was quickly found guilty and executed. After this, the Rump Parliament abolished the monarchy and the House of Lords, and appointed the Council of State to replace the king as the executive branch of government. The government of the Rump and the Council of State was known as the Commonwealth government, and it presided over England until 1653.

The most radical acts of the English Revolution in the 1640s—parliamentary rule, the Putney Debates, and the execution of the king—may not have embodied the collective will, yet they had an enormous impact on the way people thought about political and religious authority. This chain of events was crucial to the development of the Quaker movement because it created a constituency ripe for the message of the Holy Spirit's capacity to transform and perfect willing believers. Beginning in 1642 when Charles was effectively dethroned and state control of religion rendered impotent, a small but growing number of Englishmen and women began to embrace theologies that sought to recreate the dynamism of Jesus Christ's original message to the apostles. These ideas had gained currency in England as early as the sixteenth century, but in the dissolution of the national church in the 1640s, communities that held these beliefs were able to grow and flourish. One such group, who persisted as a small and secretive organization through the late seventeenth century, was the English Familist movement; its members believed that salvation was attainable for all who were reborn in the Holy Spirit and who thus became perfect during their mortal lives.[11]

A second group that both predated and held some beliefs in common with the Quakers were the Baptists. They originated from Congregationalists—Puritans who insisted that their churches be comprised of members who chose to join rather than those who were compelled based on parochial boundaries. All Baptists rejected infant baptism as unbiblical, but the Particular Baptists, founded in 1638, held closely to predestination, in contrast to the General Baptists, founded in 1609, who believed that salvation was open to all, or "general." In common with the Quakers, both Particular and General Baptists permitted female

10. Gentles, *English Revolution*, 319.

11. Christopher W. Marsh, *The Family of Love in English Society, 1550–1630* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 7, 48, 247, 251–53.

preachers, eschewed a professional, university-educated clergy, desired the separation of church and state, called for the abolition of tithes, and sought religious toleration.[12]

Many religious radicals in this period cannot be linked to a specific group or doctrine, but they were identifiable for having separated from the established Puritan churches. Those who denounced these radical separatists often called them Seekers, and as such they existed more as the "personification of a point of religious debate" than as an actual movement.[13] As J. F. McGregor puts it, contemporaries did not make fine-grained distinctions about this "mass of enthusiastic sentiment" and believed that it necessarily was the product of a sect, and so they created the name Seeker.[14] Insofar as they can be positively described, Hugh Barbour identifies them as Puritan "Separatists who denied the existence of any true ministry, church, or sacraments."[15]

George Fox and the Birth of the Quaker Movement

In 1643, a nineteen-year-old sometime shoemaker and shepherd named George Fox, who hailed from the English Midlands, decided to break off contact with family and friends, and with religious professors of all varieties, and to travel around seeking out spiritual enlightenment. He spent the next four years as, in essence, a Seeker, recording his spiritual struggles and the course of his travels in his *Journal*.[16] Fox did not abandon human companionship altogether and describes meeting in the early part of 1647 "a very tender woman, whose name was Elizabeth Hooton."[17] Hooton, who became one of Fox's earliest converts and a core member of the early movement, may have been a preacher among the Nottingham Baptists, a role she would continue to have as a Quaker.

In 1647, Fox heard "a voice, which said, 'There is one, even Christ Jesus, that can speak to thy condition,'" and thereupon he had the series of spiritual insights that form the core beliefs of Quakerism.[18] Fox's experience persuaded him that divine revelation is ongoing and not confined to the pages of Scripture. In the

12. Andrew Bradstock, *Radical Religion in Cromwell's England: A Concise History from the English Civil War to the End of the Commonwealth* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2010), 15, 16, 22, 24. For more on women and early English Baptists, see Rachel Adcock, *Baptist Women's Writing in Revolutionary Culture, 1640–1680* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2015).

13. J. F. McGregor, "Seekers and Ranters," in *Radical Religion in the English Revolution*, ed. J. F. McGregor and Barry Reay (London: Oxford University Press, 1984), 121.

14. McGregor, "Seekers and Ranters," 123.

15. Barbour, *Puritan England*, 31.

16. George Fox, *The Journal*, ed. Nigel Smith (London: Penguin, 1998), 4–22.

17. Fox, *Journal*, 12.

18. Fox, *Journal*, 13.

words of the historian William Braithwaite, Fox discovered "in his own spirit the place where a seed of Divine life was springing up, the place where the voice of a Divine teacher was being uttered, the place that was being inhabited by a Divine and glorious presence."[19] This revelation spurred Fox to insist that each person had the seed or voice of divinity and need only turn to what Quakers would term the "inner light" to know God's message. Believers need not rely on the interpretive powers of a mediating clergyman or even on the Bible itself to comprehend God's will. According to Fox, and contrary to widespread Christian belief, human beings were no longer inevitably tainted by sin: they need only respond to the voice of the "inner light" to be freed from sin. In 1648, Fox described the vision that inspired this doctrine of human perfectionism: "And the Lord showed me, that such as were faithful to him in the power and light of Christ, should come up into that state, in which Adam was before he fell: in which the admirable works of the creation … may be known, through the openings of that divine word … by which they were made."[20]

Shortly after the crucial revelation of 1647, Fox began to disseminate the message he received to any who might hear. He recorded that some were "convinced," a term preferred by Quakers over the more standard "converted" and which indicates a life-transforming experience of divine presence, while others "could not endure to hear talk of perfection, and of an holy and sinless life."[21] In 1648, Fox's preaching to members of a recently dissolved Baptist congregation in Nottinghamshire engendered the first group of adherents, and they identified themselves as "Children of the Light."[22] Around 1649, Fox sought to gain adherents from mainstream Protestants, and thus he began to enter their churches, which he dubbed "steeple houses," for the purpose of disrupting services. This practice became common among early Quakers, and not surprisingly angered both their neighbors, and the political and religious authorities.[23] After interrupting one such service in Derby in October of 1650, Fox was convicted under the recently issued Blasphemy Act, created by the Commonwealth government to suppress radical enthusiasts who asserted kinship with God, and imprisoned until late 1651. Sometime during Fox's struggles in Derby, the group gained the derisive name "Quakers," because they described themselves as trembling at the name of the Lord. Although the authors of a number of pamphlets included in this volume assert that they were "in scorn called Quakers," the historian Kate Peters argues that early Quakers, Fox included, embraced this pejorative as a means of solidify-

19. Braithwaite, *Beginnings*, 35.

20. Fox, *Journal*, 27–28.

21. Fox, *Journal*, 20.

22. Braithwaite, *Beginnings*, 44–45.

23. For more details about these conflicts, see John Miller, "'A Suffering People': English Quakers and Their Neighbors, c. 1650–c.1700," *Past and Present*, no. 188 (2005): 75–78.