

MARY MORRIS KNOWLES:  
DEVOUT, WORLDLY AND 'GAY'?

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ABSTRACT

This essay examines three themes relating to the beliefs and actions of Mary Morris Knowles (1733–1807) as a devout Quaker woman, incorporates new research and places her in multiple contexts within eighteenth-century Quakerism. Considering Knowles in relation to the themes of self and collective identity, her concepts and practices of womanhood in the private, social and public spheres and her theology and religious practices raises new questions about Quakerliness, or ways of being a Quaker. How wide and diverse was the spectrum of behavior considered appropriate for a Quaker woman and did it change over time? Was it possible for Knowles to be devout as well as worldly and did that make her a 'gay' Quaker? The answers to these questions indicate the need for further research to assess various ways of being a Quaker in eighteenth-century England and the extent and prevalence of Quietism.

KEYWORDS

Mary Morris Knowles, Quakerliness, Quaker Quietism, gay Quaker, polite Quakerism

INTRODUCTION

The life story of Mary Morris Knowles (1733–1807) bears witness to an extraordinary Quaker woman whose deeply held religious beliefs shaped her life, albeit in sometimes unexpected ways. Throughout her life, she integrated Quaker beliefs with her widely acknowledged reputation as a beauty, nationally known artistic achievement, plentiful wealth and polite socializing with men and women from a wide range of religious, intellectual and cultural backgrounds. From youth through old age, she consistently advocated liberty, writing and speaking in favour of liberty for English women, American Colonists, enslaved Africans and French revolutionaries.<sup>1</sup> This essay takes a closer look at three themes relating to her beliefs and actions as a devout Quaker woman, incorporates new research and places her in multiple contexts within eighteenth-century Quakerism. These three themes, which also appear

in the lives and writings of her contemporaries, are: self and collective identity as a Quaker: concepts and practices of womanhood in the private, social and public spheres; and her theology and religious practices. The goal throughout is to see her, as much as possible, as she saw herself and as her contemporaries saw her, both as a Quaker and as a woman.

Considering these themes in relation to Knowles raises new questions about what Emma Jones Lapsansky usefully identifies as *Quakerliness*, ways ‘of looking, behaving, being’ a Quaker.<sup>2</sup> Was there a spectrum of behavior considered appropriate to being a devout Quaker woman in eighteenth-century England? If so, how wide and diverse was that spectrum and did it change over time? How unique is Knowles in fusing the polite behavior of the prosperous middling sorts with sincere Quaker beliefs? Did other female and male Friends share her practices of polite Quakerism as a means to overcome the legal and social limitations still imposed on Quakers during the Georgian Age?

Considering Knowles as a devout Quaker woman means looking at her self and collective identities and asking how her religious beliefs shaped her concepts of womanhood, including her experiences as a wife and mother. As a wealthy and well-educated Quaker woman, how did she participate in the private and public arenas of her day? Do her actions indicate that there might have been an intermediate social sphere that may have had particular significance for Friends? This, in turn, raises more questions about how Knowles viewed ‘the world’ outside Quakerism and if she considered herself a ‘gay Quaker’. Finally, this case study leads to a much larger question that a single life story can pose but cannot answer: how prevalent was Quaker Quietism throughout the long eighteenth century in England?

#### SELF AND COLLECTIVE IDENTITY

Throughout her life, Mary Morris Knowles exhibited both a strong sense of self and a strong commitment to her identity as a Quaker. This at once sets her apart from the ‘suspicion of self’ identified as a characteristic of eighteenth-century Quietism by Ben Pink Dandelion in his *Introduction to Quakerism*.<sup>3</sup> Knowles’s strong sense of self can be seen directly and indirectly in a brief review of her life story. Mary Morris was born in 1733 in Rugeley, Staffordshire, into a prosperous family of apothecaries and surgeons whose ancestors numbered among the first Friends. Her father, Moses Morris, died when she was six, but she developed enduring relationships with male and female nuclear and extended family members, including the Lloyds of Birmingham. While she greatly esteemed her older brother, Joseph Morris, she may have lacked consistent male oversight as a child and thus did not develop habits of deference to male authority as she grew up.<sup>4</sup> More research is needed on Quaker families in Britain, along the lines of the work done by J. William Frost on Colonial America,<sup>5</sup> to assess the full impact of family roles on the development of daughters in Britain during this time.

As demonstrated in her later writings, Morris studied the Bible and core Quaker texts, especially Robert Barclay’s *Apology*. Yet, she also read a wide range of prose and poetry, including *The Tatler* and the works of Alexander Pope, the Scriblerians

and James Thomson. She discussed the latest scientific theories and seemed to be fluent in French. While Morris may have been unusual in studying science, other Quakers girls shared her literary reading habits. Mary Birkett read widely, as Teakle (this issue) shows. In Lancaster, Mary Chorley read Plutarch and the novels of Samuel Richardson and Tobias Smollett.<sup>6</sup> Sarah Champion, later Fox, read novels as a youth in Bristol.<sup>7</sup> Betty Fothergill, the beloved niece of Samuel Fothergill, read Pope, Addison, Swift, Thomson, Gray and Johnson.<sup>8</sup> In Coalbrookdale, Susannah Appleby, companion to Abiah Darby's daughter Sarah, transcribed Thomson's poetry.<sup>9</sup> Further research is needed to assess more fully how widespread these reading habits were among eighteenth-century Quaker girls in Britain.

Mary Morris wrote a satirical autobiography while in her 20s, insisted on choosing her husband, and did not marry till age 33. She became such an outstanding embroidery artist that Queen Charlotte requested her to create a needle painting of George III. Knowles stitched a replica of a recent portrait of the king, receiving fame and fortune for herself and her husband. They moved to London, where he became a prosperous physician, while she became a celebrated woman and completed a large-scale needle painting of herself. Living in London, Mary Morris Knowles actively engaged in the cultural life of the capital, participating in literary salons and becoming friends with such well-known men as James Boswell and Samuel Johnson.<sup>10</sup>

Despite some Quaker doubts, Knowles was not alone among Friends in creating, commissioning and collecting art. Dr John Fothergill, brother of the widely respected minister and reformer Samuel Fothergill, maintained extensive botanical gardens outside London and employed artists, including at least one woman, to draw the plants he collected from around the world.<sup>11</sup> John Scott, the poet, also maintained an estate at Amwell with landscaped grounds open to the public. After the successful publication of his verses, Scott traveled often to London to visit literary leaders like Samuel Johnson.<sup>12</sup> Wealthy Quakers in Colonial Pennsylvania commissioned and collected portraits and paintings.<sup>13</sup> A portrait of William Dillwyn, for example, Quaker Loyalist and abolitionist who left Pennsylvania for England during the American Revolution, is in the collection of Friends House Library in London.

In addition to creating visual art, Knowles expressed her Quaker beliefs in the polite forms of her day, including neoclassical and pastoral poetry. Although some Quakers disapproved of poetry, a surprising quantity of verse appeared in the late seventeenth century, as Quaker scholar Rosemary Moore shows.<sup>14</sup> Eighteenth-century Quaker women, too, wrote and published poetry, as the example of Mary Birkett Card demonstrates. In her study of *Abiah Darby*, Rachel Labouchere describes how Abiah and her daughter Sarah wrote poems to express deep emotion, such as grief for the death of a family member.<sup>15</sup> As a young woman, Mary Shackleton (1758–1826) of Ballitore discussed her poetry in a letter to Robert Barnard.<sup>16</sup> After her marriage to William Leadbeater, she wrote and published several works, including a book of poems.

In theological terms, rather than the dualistic perception of 'a supernatural plane and a natural one' associated with Quietism,<sup>17</sup> Knowles viewed knowledge, creativity and the inner spirit as harmonious forces for good. Although Christ is an important historical and spiritual presence for her, as will be seen, she describes the divine spirit

in more abstract terms. For example, in 1767, she wrote to Mary Farmer, a young Friend who later married Charles Lloyd of Birmingham, describing the inner spirit as a 'strengthening power' and a 'deathless energy'. For Knowles, as in Enlightenment thinking, learning, creativity and spirituality were integrated not separated. For example, she observed to Farmer, 'how irresistible the influence of strong intellect, and fine imagination, when sanctified and irradiated, by the beams of Heaven!'<sup>18</sup>

Unlike the second-generation Quaker women sampled by Nikki Coffey Tousley,<sup>19</sup> Knowles evinces a robust confidence in her Quaker faith and salvation in her letters, poems and reports of her conversations. For example, Boswell recalls that during a discussion about death troubling to him and Johnson, 'Mrs. Knowles seemed to enjoy a pleasing serenity in the persuasion of divine light to the soul'.<sup>20</sup> Throughout her life, until the time of her death, Knowles repeatedly refers to the grace and mercy of God and the joy of salvation. After the unexpected death of her husband, for example, Knowles wrote to a friend that her grief was 'mixed with a meaningful proportion of that cordial *spirit* of acceptance and the expectation that she will see him again 'where happy spirits are forever entered'.<sup>21</sup> At age 68, Knowles wrote that 'arduous souls' may have 'accidental infirmities', but she stresses instead the 'joy [that] fully embraces what it can and opens wide and glad portals to receive all that may be graciously vouchsafed'.<sup>22</sup>

Sarah Champion Fox of Bristol, an acquaintance of Knowles, shared her positive sense of self and confident faith. In her introduction to *The Diary of Sarah Fox, nee Champion, 1745–1802*, Madge Dresser describes the wealthy and well-educated Fox as having a marked 'sense of self respect'.<sup>23</sup> In Dresser's edition, Fox closes her diary by stating her conviction, 'we shall, I trust and fully believe, my dear brother [Richard Champion] and much loved friend [her husband Charles Fox], be permitted to meet...to joyfully celebrate the high praises of the Lord God and the Lamb forever'.<sup>24</sup> More research is needed to ascertain the extent to which other contemporary Quaker women shared the strong sense of self and confident faith evinced by Knowles and Fox.

#### CONCEPTS AND PRACTICES OF WOMANHOOD IN THE PRIVATE, SOCIAL AND PUBLIC SPHERES

While offering valuable insights, neither Thomas Clarkson's admiring and detailed *Portrait of Quakerism*, published in 1807,<sup>25</sup> nor the macro-theories of Jurgen Habermas in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, translated into English in 1989,<sup>26</sup> fully explain the lived experiences of Knowles as a wealthy Quaker wife and mother who was also socially active and publicly recognized as an intellectual, artist and Quaker spokesperson. Knowles's commitment to her Quaker beliefs and her strongly gendered identity shaped her concepts and practices of womanhood in the domestic, social and public spheres. Like Mary Birkett Card, Knowles's concept of womanhood was influenced by her vision of Eve, the experience of childbirth and the loss of an infant. Like Card, Knowles authored a poem pondering 'the Sin of our First Mother's fall'. In it, she characterizes the pains of childbirth as a result of Eve's fall, but, unlike Card, she does not portray Eve as a symbol of permanent female

weakness. Instead, in her poem, Knowles focuses on the mercy of a gracious God offering hope for salvation to the expectant mother and child.<sup>27</sup>

A life-threatening delivery resulted in the death of her first child, but rather than identifying with the sinfulness of Eve or the purity of the Virgin Mary, Knowles evoked the intimate spiritual experience of Mary Magdalen with the crucified Christ. In a letter to Mary Farmer, Knowles reflects on her physical and spiritual ordeal as a form of religious instruction for her young unmarried friend. '[W]hen my spirit seem'd hovering over the snuff of this life—like the flame over the expiring taper', she wrote Farmer, 'methought I had fast hold of my Saviour's feet and in my distraction methought like Magdalen I folded my arms around them...' Like the Magdalen, Knowles found comfort in clinging to Christ. She continued, 'while the Surgeon's cruelest force was exerted, I cried, "I will not let thee go—I will not be loosed from thee!" And oh my friend, I *think*, I verily think, I felt the unction of mercy and peace and that if I had dyed...I should have fled with him'.<sup>28</sup>

In his *Introduction to Quakerism*, Dandelion identifies 'spiritual intimacy', the 'direct intimate relationship between humanity and God and Christ', as a core concept in Quakerism.<sup>29</sup> Knowles's letter to Farmer stands as a powerful testimony of a woman's intimate relationship with Christ. Like Mary Magdalen, Mary Knowles experienced a spiritual intimacy with Jesus, both devoted to and protected by him. Like Card, Knowles experienced pain and grief in childbirth, but unlike Card, her pain and even the loss of a child became a source of redemption, inspired by the vision of Mary Magdalen.

Knowles's understanding of Mary Magdalen is likely based on the Gospel of John. John's account is 'the most extended treatment of Mary Magdalen in any of the four gospels', as Katherine Ludwig Jansen points out in *The Making of the Magdalen: Preaching and Popular Devotion in the Later Middle Ages*. As Jansen shows, vibrant and sometimes conflicting biblical, popular and Papal accounts of the Magdalen persisted for over 1400 years after her death.<sup>30</sup> Like other Quakers, Knowles studied John's texts carefully. Boswell recounts, for example, how she impressed him and Johnson with 'a fine application' of a verse by the apostle John.<sup>31</sup> As Jensen notes, in John's text the resurrected Christ appears only to Mary Magdalen because Peter had already left the tomb. By the end of the Middle Ages, Jensen argues, 'the fraught issue of authority within the Church—visionary or institutional—emerged as a gendered issue incarnated in the figures of Mary Magdalen and Peter that burned at the core of Christian identity'.<sup>32</sup>

Evoking the redemption of the Magdalen and her place near Christ in heaven, Knowles told Farmer, 'the gratitude that overwhelmed my soul on its return to ease is not to be described—for I thought I was spared to become more pure, to head the heavenly courts with my redeemer'.<sup>33</sup> Knowles's letter is a rarely found description of the details of childbirth by a woman of her time.<sup>34</sup> The letter is carefully constructed, conveying her narrative through dialogue and shifting points of view among various family members and a neighbor for maximum impact on the reader. More research is needed on the influence of the Magdalen after the Reformation, since her example informs Knowles's self-concept and self-representation as a Quaker woman heading the courts of heaven.

Although an affectionate wife, Knowles did not want to become ‘an obedient smiling *Wife*’<sup>35</sup> and chafed at the ‘chain’ of marriage. After the birth of a healthy son, she wrote to Susannah Appleby that she wished to visit Coalbrookdale but doubted that she could because of ‘the unsuitableness of my leaving the Doctor [her husband] and my little one for so long a time’. Continuing, she apostrophized, ‘O this Marriage, this thing call’d a marriage, it is a chain and often a rusty one, but still it is a chain tho of gold and polished so bright’. Knowles evidently knew how to slip the chain, however, because eight months later, she wrote Appleby again, this time detailing her plans for a visit.<sup>36</sup>

In her analysis of Quaker literary theory, Michelle Tarter sees a shift from focusing on ‘endtime’, the immediate second coming of Christ, to a sense of living in the ‘in between time’, where life on earth becomes ‘a place of spiritual formation’.<sup>37</sup> Knowles considered her social interactions as an important part of spiritual formation during this in between time, foreshadowing the perfect society to come. In 1780, she wrote to her young friend and cousin Susannah Appleby at Coalbrookdale, ‘I look forward sometimes with extacy [*sic*] to that Glorious Society where no misapprehension can be—where the pure spirits are clear and transparent in all their social relations, in all their sweet works of charity and love!’<sup>38</sup> Sarah Champion Fox shared her views, noting in her diary that since friendship ‘makes the greatest part of our attachment on earth, I have no doubt it will make a part of our enjoyments in Heaven, if we are qualified to join “the spirits of the just made perfect”’.<sup>39</sup>

Critiquing Habermas’s theory of separate public and private spheres, literary scholar Lawrence Klein suggests that eighteenth-century British women created an intermediary social sphere, neither wholly private nor completely public.<sup>40</sup> The Quaker belief that participation in the earthly community played an important role in preparing for the perfect spiritual society to come gives a deeper religious meaning to participation in this social sphere. Knowles and Fox saw friendships as an important component of, not a distraction from, spiritual formation. This belief seems manifest in the generous hospitality that Knowles and Fox, along with scores of their contemporaries, provided visiting Friends. It would be interesting to know if other contemporary Quaker women expressed similar sentiments about the spiritual importance of friendships and hospitality.

Yet Knowles did not confine her activities to the social sphere and created a public role for herself as a defender of her Quaker faith. As Moore documents, from their earliest days Quakers saw the value of proclaiming and publishing their beliefs and often engaged in exchanges with those of other beliefs, especially members of the Church of England.<sup>41</sup> Although the Morning Meeting of Ministers and Elders regulated Quaker publications, they could not oversee manuscripts, which often took on a vibrant life of their own: read aloud, passed from hand to hand, copied for wider distribution and sometimes appearing in publications by others. Knowles, for example, enjoyed a long friendship with Anna Seward, a staunch Anglican who became a popular writer. Seward arranged for her letters to be published posthumously, and although Knowles’s letters to her are not included, it is clear that she challenged Seward for celebrating war heroes in her poetry as inconsistent with Christian teachings on peace.<sup>42</sup>

As a young woman, before she married and gained fame and wealth from her art, Mary Morris conducted a poetic exchange concerning water baptism with an Anglican clergyman, rumored to be her suitor. While his challenge 'to repent and be baptized' contains romantic undertones and gendered allusions, she answers him solely as a Quaker, saying, for example, 'You plead for *outward*, we for *mental rights*'. This poem, explaining core Quaker beliefs about why Friends did not participate in water baptism, began as a private exchange but was copied and circulated in manuscript and then published and republished, even in broadside format, in her lifetime and afterwards.<sup>43</sup>

Knowles regarded this kind of public exchange as a sign of strong and confident faith. Shortly after her young friend and relative Susannah Appleby moved to the small Shropshire town of Coalbrookdale to become a companion to Sarah Darby, Knowles wrote her, 'solitude is the nurse of the infant Virtues and when she has reared up yours to a strength sufficient to stand the various blasts of the various winds of this tempestuous world, I wou'd wish you to come forth, and add to the much wanted examples of enduring fortitude and preserving piety'.<sup>44</sup> While these views may be contrary to Quietism, they seem consistent with the sentiments of William Penn, who wrote, 'True Godliness don't draw men out of the world but enables them to live better in it and excites their endeavours to mend it'.<sup>45</sup>

Knowles publicly defended her faith at a literary dinner party in 1778 where she engaged in a heated debate with Samuel Johnson about the decision of their mutual friend Jane Harry to become a Quaker.<sup>46</sup> When Boswell published the first edition of his *Life of Samuel Johnson* in 1791, Knowles insisted that he truncated her defense of Jane Harry and Quakerism. Knowles promptly published her own account in *Gentleman's Magazine*, the most popular publication of the day, to demonstrate that she had successfully defended Quakers from Johnson's charge of Deism. She did not reveal her authorship, more than likely to escape review by the Morning Meeting, but the article appeared as 'An Interesting Dialogue between the late Dr. Samuel Johnson and Mrs. Knowles'.<sup>47</sup> While submitting her account to *Gentleman's Magazine* represents a bold step for a woman, defending Friends' beliefs in this popular publication seems to have been an accepted Quaker strategy at that time. A quick review reveals at least 21 entries by leading Quakers published in *Gentleman's Magazine* between 1771 and 1780, for example, including two Yearly Meeting Epistles.<sup>48</sup>

The content of Knowles's defense of Quakerism also followed an accepted earlier strategy. Rosemary Moore points out that in the late seventeenth century 'some Quakers were beginning to recognize the need to express their faith in conventional Christian Protestant terms',<sup>49</sup> a practice that continued under the limited toleration of the eighteenth century. Following this tradition, in her dialogue with Johnson, Knowles said, with the permission of the dinner guests, she delivered 'a confession of our faith', since 'Creeds, or confessions of faith are admitted by all to be the standard whereby we judge of every denomination'. She explained that, 'Quakers do verily believe in the Holy Scriptures', and concurred with the Apostles Creed with only two exceptions. According to Knowles, after hearing her arguments, Johnson replied, 'I must own I did not all suppose you had so much to say for yourselves'.<sup>50</sup>

Boswell and his posthumous editors denied Knowles's version, adding a belittling footnote about her to the second and subsequent editions of *The Life of Johnson*.<sup>51</sup> While Knowles lived, however, every time a new edition of Boswell's *Life* appeared, a new version of her text appeared as well, printed both in tract and broadside formats. Moreover, her text was copied and recopied in manuscript, and clippings and copies survive in archives as widespread as the Religious Society of Friends in London, the Labouchere Collection in the Iron Bridge Gorge Museum in Coalbrookdale and Duke University in North Carolina.<sup>52</sup>

Through conversations, letters and print, Knowles fashioned a public role for herself as a devout Quaker spokesperson, although not a minister. She combined her deep religious beliefs with the polite behavior of the prosperous middling sorts to help fashion social and public forms of polite Quakerism. She actively sought to broaden understanding of Quaker principles among literary leaders and members of the reading public and was recognized as a Quaker intellectual and public advocate. Anna Seward described her as 'the ingenious Quaker', a term later used by Boswell.<sup>53</sup> In the correspondence of Dr. William Withering, a physician, scientist and member of the Lunar Society, she is described as 'the learned Quaker'.<sup>54</sup> In 1803 the *Lady's Monthly Museum* featured her as a highly accomplished woman, noting 'that she is no contemptible advocate for the principles of the respectable society of Friends'.<sup>55</sup> Knowles may have been unique, but her example indicates the need for further research and an expanded concept of the roles of Quaker women who were not ministers

#### THEOLOGY AND RELIGIOUS PRACTICES

Although a devout Quaker, all her life Knowles struggled with, in her words, 'strict Friends' concerning standards of behavior. She chafed at restrictions against music, writing a satirical poem that she said 'the Reader may *repeat* (not sing) in the *tone* (not tune)' of a popular children's song.<sup>56</sup> Over and over, she defended her drawing and creative needlework. Her defense often took the form of humor, especially what she called 'harmless satire'<sup>57</sup> expressed in couplets. For example, she requested a sympathetic Friend to send her 'a milk-white Foxglove' that she wished to draw. Knowing that some Quakers disapproved of drawing, she observed that, while 'Strict Friends on this subject sometime make a racket / I smile in observing their own blooming bracket / And when zealously pleading, against waste of time, / Should they still in festoons teach their woodbines to climb?'<sup>58</sup>

Did creating visual art, writing poetry and resisting the behavioral standards of strict Friends make her a gay Quaker? This question is not easy to answer because the meaning of the term 'gay', applied by Quakers to their religious compatriots, is complex and fluid. One level of meaning refers to dress and appearance, reflecting an internal debate among Quakers dating from the time of Margaret Fell. Fell observed that, 'It is a dangerous thing to lead Friends much into the observance of outward things, which may be easily done. For they can soon get into an outward garb, but this will not make then true Christians'.<sup>59</sup> London Yearly Meeting used the word *gay* in 1718 in speaking against wearing wigs, as seen in a companion essay. In 1799,



Elihu Robinson used the word to describe the dress of young women Friends at London Yearly Meeting.<sup>60</sup>

Despite her celebrity and wealth, Knowles seems to have practiced plain dress and speech. Printed accounts indicate that she adhered to plain language, using *thee* and *thou* in literary salons and her intellectual exchanges with non-Quakers, including Samuel Johnson.<sup>61</sup> She became well acquainted with the royal family in the course of creating her needle painting of the king, but presented her young son at court dressed 'without the addition of one ornament'.<sup>62</sup> Like many other Quakers of her time, Knowles spoke against the corrupting influences of luxury and the dangers of following fashion. In a playful poem conveying gentle criticism, for example, she recounts the seemingly true story of an elderly Quaker woman in Birmingham who embarrassed her wealthy relations, Rachel and Sampson Lloyd III, by appearing at meeting in a dress made of less expensive fabric rather than 'Rich silks that stand on end!'<sup>63</sup>

Judging from this poem and another cited below, Knowles did not consider herself to be a gay Quaker, but did other Quakers view her to be so? That, too, seems to be a matter of debate. Sarah Champion (later Fox) breakfasted with her in 1781 and wrote in her diary, 'She was affable and unaffected. With abilities superior to most of her sex, she conversed with freedom and cheerful vivacity...she was very agreeable'.<sup>64</sup> Richard Shackleton of Ballitore, however, criticized her in a letter to his daughter, Mary Shackleton Leadbeater, for lacking diffidence, humility, and simplicity. Yet Quaker commentator James Jenkins indignantly defended her, finding 'more *policy* than *candor* [*sic*]' in Shackleton's comments. Jenkins emphatically believed that Knowles's 'transcendent abilities, the great admiration they excited, and her wealth considered, she was really a pattern of *the* diffident, *the* humble, and *the* simple'.<sup>65</sup>

Another related but separate meaning of *gay* refers to Quakers who engaged with 'the world', those outside Friends' society. Yet as Dandelion points out in his *Introduction*, the history of Quakerism reveals different criteria to define 'what counts as "the world"'.<sup>66</sup> Knowles, along with other male and female Friends, did not limit her social interactions to Friends but engaged in polite sociability with business and professional colleagues. Doctors John Fothergill, John Coakley Lettsom and Thomas Knowles, Mary's husband, for example, practiced polite sociability with their medical colleagues at the Royal College of Physicians. Fothergill and Lettsom regularly presented sea turtles and other delicacies for the annual dinners to allay the tensions between the British university-educated Anglican Fellows and the Dissenting Licentiates of the College.<sup>67</sup> In mid-life, Mary Knowles listed among her time-consuming activities 'the connexions [*sic*] incident to my Husband's profession'.<sup>68</sup> Likewise, Labouchere shows how Abiah Darby frequently provided hospitality to visitors to her family's iron foundry in Coalbrookdale.<sup>69</sup> At a time when Quakers were excluded from universities and medical schools in Great Britain, these kinds of business and professional interactions served important economic and social purposes.

Knowles's concepts of womanhood also include a strong sense of female solidarity, a sisterhood based on intellectual abilities rather than religious affiliation, encompassing all women. In a youthful humorous manuscript entitled 'The Pudding Making Mortal', she defended her 'scientific sisterhood', saying women deserve justice as well

as men.<sup>70</sup> In a letter to Dr William Withering, the Lunar Man, she again pleads for the ‘injur’d sisterhood’ of intellectual females. ‘Women to possess understanding of masculine strength is an idea intolerable to most men bred up amongst each other in the proud confines of a college’, she wrote with emphasis, ‘indeed they seem to monopolize *learning* but happily *intellect* cannot be confined there’.<sup>71</sup>

As an intellectual woman, Knowles observed and commented on politics as a form of female political participation.<sup>72</sup> In her letter to Withering in the unsettled period following the American Revolution, she ironically compares the perfection of endtime with the current political scene. Describing the new set of Parliamentary leaders in Britain as, ‘The creatures of the new Creation’, she comments, ‘ah how unlike those whom St. John foresaw!’<sup>73</sup> Throughout her life she spoke and wrote about British, American and French politics, consistently expressing her support for human liberty, including the abolition of slavery.<sup>74</sup>

But did this kind of interaction make her a gay Quaker? Moore suggests that an oral tradition of political radicalism persisted among Quakers in the late seventeenth century after the Restoration.<sup>75</sup> As a young woman, Mary Birkett wrote and published a public appeal to women not to purchase slave-produced sugar, as Teakle (this issue) shows. Sarah Champion Fox welcomed Thomas Clarkson and other Anglicans into her home to discuss the abolition of the slave trade.<sup>76</sup> These examples indicate the need for more research on eighteenth-century Quaker women and their social and public roles as advocates for radical political points of view.

As a celebrated and sought-after guest, Knowles also interacted socially with many prominent non-Friends. Yet again, she does not seem unique or deliberately transgressive, since other Quakers, too, interacted with cultural leaders like Samuel Johnson.<sup>77</sup> In 1800, at age 67, Knowles wryly acknowledged and satirized both herself and strict Friends on the subject of mixing with those of other religions. She playfully wrote to Ann Blakes, junior, a young Friend that, ‘Tis order’d that we ancient Tabbies, / by all the monthly meeting Rabbis / That we should keep our gay young people, / From every house that has a steeple, / Or building popish or socinian / Or any not of our opinion’.<sup>78</sup> Knowles sympathizes with these ‘gay young people’ but depicts herself as a reluctant elder guarding those who wished to learn about other religious views.

While Knowles challenged some standards of Quaker behavior, she maintained close ties with many prominent Friends, including the Darbys of Coalbrookdale, the Lloyds of Birmingham and, in London, Joseph Woods and the family of Samuel Hoare. Her home was a center of hospitality for visiting Friends, especially during Yearly Meeting. She mentored several young Quaker women, who admired her and enjoyed her friendship, including Mary Farmer Lloyd, Jane Harry Thresher and Susannah Appleby.<sup>79</sup>

A latitudinarian but not a schismatic, Knowles consistently affirmed the importance of unity among Quakers, especially during the protracted ‘New Light’ controversy in 1800 and 1801, involving the theology and ministry of Hannah Barnard, a visiting minister from New York. This complex and bitter controversy involved not only theological differences but also political and social differences, as Barnard espoused French principles of equality and called on servants to sit with their

masters at Meetings in Ireland.<sup>80</sup> Knowles knew and respected Barnard but did not support her views. Most important, said Knowles, 'I sincerely wish the controversy may be conducted with that charity that we as a people profess, and a self-command, without which our supposed virtues are tinkling cymbals'.<sup>81</sup>

The Hannah Barnard controversy lasted more than a year; and it was not resolved with the charity and restraint wished for by Knowles. The controversy appears as both a symptom and a cause of deep fissures within British Quakerism, relating not only to Barnard but also to the American Revolution, the fear of radicalism engendered by the French Revolution and the strains of more than a decade of continuous warfare.<sup>82</sup> More research is needed to say for sure, but the bitter disputes surrounding this controversy seem to have marked, if not caused, major shifts in British Quakerism.

More research is also needed to understand more fully a major internal shift that seems to have directly affected Knowles. According to brief notes in the memoirs of Mary Capper, a minister, male leaders visited the Women's Yearly Meeting of 1805, recommending 'retrenchment', with J.G. Bevan summing up, 'Contraction not expansion, is the watchword'.<sup>83</sup> The Minutes of the Women's Yearly Meeting of 1805 show that a committee was established, including Susannah Appleby, now a minister, because the meeting was concerned about some members' 'too frequent waste of time', 'not devoting more time and substance to the service of the Church' and failure to visit 'the fatherless and widows'. The Women's Yearly Meeting of 1806 reported that those who had not been diligent had obtained notice.<sup>84</sup> This disciplinary action evidently included Knowles, aged 73. In 1807, Susannah Appleby told her aunt, Hannah Appleby, speaking of Knowles, 'I have seen Cousin in the meeting for discipline, last yearly meeting'.<sup>85</sup>

Despite her lifetime of confident faith, as Knowles lay dying in early 1807 she wrestled with self-doubts. As Rebecca Larson shows in *Daughters of Light*, many contemporary women ministers expressed doubts of salvation when facing death.<sup>86</sup> Deathbed doubts may have been common among eighteenth-century Quaker women, in general, even those who led a quiet life. Knowles's paternal grandmother, Esther Storrs Morris, for example, struggled to pray on her deathbed, although her husband describes her as deeply pious throughout her life.<sup>87</sup>

According to Jenkins, Knowles's deathbed doubts likely related to the areas of concern named in the Women's Yearly Meeting of 1805. Jenkins believed 'her uneasiness arose from a consciousness that her talents had not been sufficiently employed in religious services in the society'. He also thought she 'deeply regretted that notwithstanding her ample means she had afforded but little relief to "the widows, and the fatherless in their afflictions"'.<sup>88</sup>

Anne Fry Capper (1756–1821), the sister-in-law of Mary Capper and a cousin and lifelong friend of Knowles, tended her on her deathbed. The daughter of Knowles's friend and kinsman John and Frances Head Fry, Anne married Jasper Capper, who had been brought up as an Anglican in Staffordshire and became a Quaker, largely due to a transformative conversation with Knowles.<sup>89</sup> Jasper and Anne Fry Capper settled in London and raised nine children, all well educated in fine writing and French, despite the family's limited resources.

Anne Fry Capper became a minister in 1801. In 1803 she notes her discomfort at seeing engravings of the iron bridge over the Severn River on display in a Quaker home. Since engravings of the bridge had been issued in 1782 by permission of the Quaker-owned Coalbrookdale Company and printed by Quaker publisher James Phillips,<sup>90</sup> Capper's discomfort indicates a change, or at least a difference, in acceptable standards of Quakerliness in the early nineteenth century.

Despite her discomfort with art, Anne Fry Capper describes Knowles's dying days with sympathy and affection. She visited her on 20 January 1807, for example, less than two weeks before her death. 'A day of condescending favour, both at meeting and after with dear M.K.', Capper wrote, 'I believe she is humble and contrite though heaven-laden, may she find rest'. According to Capper, Knowles prayed for forgiveness in her final hours, She was repentant but believed she would 'not be cast away forever'.<sup>91</sup>

Evidently anxious to show her contrition, Knowles directed that her coffin be taken into the Peel Meeting House in London and 'the circumstances of the commutation of her dying hours' be 'adverted to'.<sup>92</sup> This seems to have been an extraordinary action, which puzzled Hannah Appleby, Susannah Appleby's aunt. Susannah, once mentored by Knowles, now explained to her aunt that, "My S.D. [Sarah Darby] says it is very rarely done, but by request".<sup>93</sup> Indicative both of her deep devotion and consistent with her concerns for unity, Knowles saw her dying doubts as a way to help other Quakers.

Did Mary Morris Knowles change her lifelong views and values on her deathbed or did English Quakerism change around her, eroding her confident faith? Probably both. Her life and death evince complex interactions among her beliefs as an individual, evolving cultural forms and changing Quaker practices. Current evidence indicates that while Knowles viewed worldly engagements as a sign of strength during her lifetime, facing death she rued some of her worldly activities.

Whatever her shortcomings, two close contemporaries honored her memory and her role as a defender of her faith and felt certain that she died a devout Friend. Susannah Appleby wrote her Aunt Hannah, 'She had Opportunities amongst a certain set of people, of putting Frds principles in a proper light. I have no doubt of her having a love to the Cause of Truth, poor thing'.<sup>94</sup> James Jenkins acknowledged that 'she had mixed much with literary characters, and of different religious sentiments—with the Atheist, the Deist, the Unitarian etc.'. Yet he stoutly maintained that, 'it did not appear that the religion of her education had been ever abandoned, but that, the trinitarianism of Friends...always remained unshaken'. Jenkins further underscored that 'she was a literary champion for our Society upon several occasions'.<sup>95</sup>

Yet British Quakerism did seem to be changing in the final years of Knowles's life. As Teakle documents, at almost exactly the same time that Knowles grappled with her dying doubts, Mary Birkett Card wrote her last poems with classical references and struggled to renounce her creative imagination. Knowles's deathbed doubts and Card's struggle for submission suggest the need for more research to understand fully the multiple and changing ways of being a Quaker woman in early nineteenth-century England.

Changing views of Knowles's death in the mid-nineteenth century further indicate changes within British Quakerism from Georgian to Victorian times. In the years following Knowles's death, reflecting new concerns and values, Anne Fry Capper visited the Anglican Evangelical Hannah More in Bristol, became concerned with temperance and accompanied her cousin Elizabeth Gurney Fry on a visit to Newgate prison. In her journal, Capper also describes how she 'repeated hymns' with her family and how her daughter Katherine 'knelt down' in Meeting and afterwards appeared as a minister. She records how Katherine married John Backhouse, a widower with three children in York, who was also a minister.<sup>96</sup>

In 1848, Katherine Capper Backhouse wrote a published account of the deathbed doubts of Mary Morris Knowles, expressing very different views about her than had her mother. Backhouse says, for example, that Knowles's doubts 'permitted' her 'to feel the burden of sin'.<sup>97</sup> By then, Knowles's life and worldly accomplishments had become more of a warning to others than a model to be emulated, as Knowles herself seems, to some extent, to have believed in the end.

#### CONCLUSION

Why is it important to remember Mary Morris Knowles and the story of her worldly accomplishments and her religious confidence and doubts? As Teakle notes, history has been kind to Quaker attitudes toward women; and while there is much to applaud, there is still more to learn. Much more research is needed on eighteenth-century Quaker women to know for sure what is typical behavior and what is not. Knowles reconciled the inevitable tensions between Quakers and 'the world' in very latitudinarian ways, practicing polite Quakerism rather than Quietism. Knowles and polite Quakers like her may have provided an important bridge from the social, political and religious radicals of the seventeenth century to the respectable reformers of the nineteenth century. Although her ways of being a Quaker did not endure, the story of her life and death poses new questions for further research, especially the prevalence of Quietism in Georgian times.

To understand the full range of behaviors practiced by eighteenth-century Quaker women, what Quakerliness meant to them, it is essential to differentiate between ministers and those who were not. Labouchere's studies of Abiah and Deborah Darby and Larson's *Daughters of Light* provide much valuable information about women ministers drawn primarily from spiritual journals. Spiritual journals provide important insights into the religious lives of individual Quakers, as Teakle shows. Yet exclusive reliance on them could present a limited view of the full scope of acceptable behavior for British women Friends in the long eighteenth century.

More research is needed on the lives of devout females who were not ministers to understand the spectrum of acceptable ways of being a Quaker. As with the spiritual journals of ministers, however, some of the published journals of women Friends are heavily redacted, so may not present a complete story. The published journal of Margaret Hoare Woods, wife of Joseph Woods and a contemporary of Knowles and Card, is redacted, for example. Even more tellingly, however, Woods's manuscript

journals are redacted as well, either by her or later editors, especially the entries relating to the early years of her marriage.<sup>98</sup> Similarly, a later heir reduced the 40 volumes of manuscript diaries kept by Sarah Champion Fox to 500 printed pages.<sup>99</sup> Understanding the full range of the lives of Georgian Quaker women will require looking at the full range of the vibrant manuscript culture they created, as all three of these essays show.

While there are many challenges to uncovering the fuller story of the beliefs and practices of eighteenth-century British Quakers, there are promising opportunities, too. As all three of these essays show, Quaker women like Abiah Maude Darby, Mary Morris Knowles and Mary Birkett Card provide new depth and breadth to understanding Quaker experiences of spiritual intimacy, concepts of endtime and what counts as 'the world'. Women like these still have many lessons to teach about what it meant to be a devout Quaker in the long eighteenth century.

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