

MARY BIRKETT CARD (1774–1817):
STRUGGLING TO BECOME THE IDEAL QUAKER WOMAN

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ABSTRACT

This paper is based on *The Works of Mary Birkett Card 1774–1817*, an edition of the manuscript collection made by her son Nathaniel Card in 1834. The collection contains different genres and spans Card's life from childhood to near her death, forming a unique record of one woman's experience at the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Themes of self and identity, women's participation in public and private spheres, and ideological differences are apparent in Mary Birkett Card's struggle, in life and text, to become 'the ideal Quaker woman'. One particular focus is on her negotiation of Quaker ideology in relation to her literary creativity. It is argued that dramatic changes in her writing resulted from efforts to contain her literary imagination in line with 'plainer' Quaker aesthetic values and more restrictive ideas about the most appropriate forms of creativity for her as a woman and a Friend.

KEYWORDS

Quakers, women's writings, slavery and abolition, eighteenth-century poetry, Ireland, public/private spheres

INTRODUCTION

The name of Mary Birkett is becoming increasingly well known to abolitionist and feminist scholarship, and to a wider public given the growing interest in both anti-slavery and women's writing in recent decades. Mary Birkett was a Dublin Quaker who wrote *A Poem Against the African Slave Trade* in 1792 urging other women to boycott West Indian sugar and rum in protest against slavery.¹ In 1992, the feminist literary critic Moira Ferguson explored the poem in her study of women's abolitionist writing, *Subject to Others*, and it was the only anti-slavery poem historian Clare Midgley found that was 'written by a woman and directed specifically at her own sex'.² Other critics have looked at it since.³ It has also been anthologised.⁴ In 2007 it featured in an exhibition held at the Houses of Parliament to commemorate the

bi-centenary of abolition. Little was known about the author till recently. However, Mary Birkett, Mary Card on her marriage, was my great-great-great-grandmother and her son, Nathaniel Card, made a collection of her writings in 1834. This large collection, which includes over 220 poems, a spiritual journal and religious letters, copied into two volumes (one containing poetry, one mostly prose), was handed down through the family.

It is not known what happened to Mary Birkett Card's original manuscripts, or exactly what principles Nathaniel Card followed in compiling his collection—whether, for example, he sought to preserve all his mother's surviving writings or omitted any he considered inappropriate. The way in which pieces are included regardless of quality, for example early childhood verse and some clumsy later poems, would seem to indicate the former. Yet letters have clearly been preserved solely for their religious content—no purely personal, social or business correspondence appears. (One possibility here, though, is that these letters, interspersed with spiritual journal entries in the collection, might have been copies made by Mary Birkett Card in her original journal.) Nor do we know if any changes were made in the course of the copying process. It is clear, however, that it was a collaborative effort (perhaps a family project) as the writings are in four different hands, that a chronological sequence was intended (though inclusion of material out of date order on occasion indicates that some writings came to hand once the project had started) and that the copyists seem to have had little difficulty transcribing the original manuscripts (there are very few deletions, corrections or gaps). Beside its representation of different genres, one outstanding characteristic is the way the collection spans Mary's life from childhood (aged ten) to near her death (aged forty-two). This means that these works form a unique record of one woman's experience at the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. By linking them with Quaker records and other accounts, I was able to recover much of Mary's life.⁵

Quaker registers of birth revealed that Mary Birkett was born on 28 December 1774.⁶ This meant that she was only seventeen when she published her anti-slave-trade poem. The manuscript collection does not throw any light on how Mary came to espouse the abolitionist cause so young—her poem is simply copied into the collection without additional information—but further research uncovered her family's link with abolition. *The Business of Abolishing the British Slave Trade* by Judith Jennings, published in 1997, recovers the major contributions made by four Quaker businessmen.⁷ One, George Harrison, the son of a Kendal shoemaker, became an influential London Friend who worked solidly for abolition from 1783 when he became a founder member of the first British anti-slavery association, going on to serve on the main Abolition Committee alongside Clarkson and Wilberforce until its last meeting in 1819. Jennings mentions that Harrison had a daughter named Lydia. The Card manuscript collection contains several poems addressed by the young Mary Birkett to a cousin in London called Lydia Harrison. Lydia's father is not named in these poems, but Quaker registers of birth and marriage revealed that George Harrison was indeed Mary's uncle, her mother's brother.⁸ Finding this family relationship linked Mary's family in Dublin to the heart of the movement and explained Mary's keen interest in slavery at such an early age. Although it is not documented in the

manuscripts, there would surely have been communication between the two families, and it is likely that the Birketts followed George Harrison's career and abolitionist activity keenly.⁹ It is possible, therefore, that his example provided some of the impetus for Mary's poem. He may even have helped with publication or circulation, given that, along with other members of the Abolition Committee, he was heavily involved in the dissemination of abolitionist literature.

It is useful at this point to compare very briefly the life of Mary Birkett Card with that of Mary Morris Knowles, the subject of Judith Jennings's recent book.¹⁰ These two women, both Quakers born in the eighteenth century (they may even have met or at least been aware of each other's existence as Morris Knowles' husband, Dr Thomas Knowles, was also an early abolitionist who worked alongside George Harrison), nevertheless led very different lives. Both had a strong Quaker faith, were artistically creative and challenged male power in certain settings. But as Jennings shows, Mary Morris Knowles was a confident artist who excelled at needle painting. She was sophisticated, metropolitan, wealthy, well-travelled, linked to leading Friends in London and to contemporary literary culture, and married happily. Mary Birkett Card, on the other hand, lived in Dublin, had more peripheral links with leading Friends and, though middle class, experienced financial difficulties. Though her marriage was very much a love match, it was subject to tensions and it appears she experienced anxieties about her art as a poet. These very different lives allow us to explore the diversity of lived experience among Quaker women.

Abolitionist poetry forms a relatively small proportion of Mary Birkett Card's literary output. The manuscript collection contains around 70 poems written as a child and over 160 poems written in adulthood on a range of subjects, beside a lengthy spiritual journal, 42 religious letters and other prose pieces.¹¹ These texts provided opportunities to explore many different aspects of a Quaker woman's life and literary production in the period (a Dublin Quaker girlhood, questions of tradition in women's spiritual autobiography, divisions among Irish Friends, friendships between women, Quakers and money, Quaker women's autonomy, domestic life, philanthropy, the literary tradition of sensibility). Even more intriguingly, however, closer examination of the writings revealed a fascinating life narrative embedded within the texts as a whole, seemingly linked to changes in Mary's literary expression and creativity.

The Religious Society of Friends has largely enjoyed a good press to date on 'women'. Quaker women could preach, travel in the ministry and run their own Meetings. But, as has often been pointed out, this equality was in spiritual matters only.¹² Their Meetings were mainly connected with women's caring role (education, charity, marriages), and major decisions were taken by the Men's Meetings. Moreover, Quaker attitudes to women necessarily shared much with society at large—Quakers were, after all, people of their time. It can be argued that there were more pressures on the Quaker woman in some ways. Some public, or semi-public, duties—participation in the Women's Meetings, philanthropy—were incumbent upon her, particularly if she was from a prominent family. Yet she had to fulfill her private role of wife and mother to a similar ideology of femininity in many respects as pertained in the households of devout non-Quakers. It was acceptable to write and

even to publish, but there were particular constraints on what and how she should write.

As Phyllis Mack, speaking of ‘the persona of the ideal female Quaker’ and how ‘the Quaker woman was symbolic of Quaker values’ in this period, states:

Whatever actual work women did as shopkeepers, traders, or farmers, however many miles they travelled as itinerant preachers, their reputation for virtue and honesty required that they deport themselves—both in public and at home—as gracious, sensible wives and daughters. The image of their placid faces and simple Quaker clothes, unsoiled by the grime of politics or industry, was essential to the larger image of Quakerism as both high-minded and of high reputation.

Pointing to the tensions behind this image, in women’s attempts to reconcile rationality with sensibility, capability and activity with feminine dependence and decorum and ambition with female modesty, she finds that ‘women’s diaries and private letters reveal a degree of anxiety and overt depression that was absent or repressed in the writings of seventeenth-century preachers’.¹³

The embedded narrative in Mary’s texts is about living out these complexities—the struggle to become what we might call ‘the ideal Quaker woman’—in life and art.

SELF AND IDENTITY

Mary was born in Liverpool in 1774, the eldest of thirteen children of William Birkett, a tallow chandler (or candle-maker) and soap-boiler, and his wife Sarah. In 1784 the family moved to Dublin, where her father continued his business. The first two poems in the collection voice Mary’s fears about moving to Ireland, a place she envisaged as one of ‘dire discord’, ‘where the thief and robber oft alarms’. Poignantly, she compares her sensations to that of a caged songbird deprived ‘while young’ of its freedom in the forest—an image which would prove surprisingly apposite later in relation to her self-expression in poetry.¹⁴ The influences on her developing sense of self were complex. Irish Quakers formed an endogamous community, consisting mostly of trading and manufacturing families like the Birketts, marked apart like Friends elsewhere by their sober habits, and the plain dress and archaic speech of the majority. Maintaining links with Quakers in Britain, they also retained their English identification. Mary was no exception. Although she wrote from an Irish location or a perspective formed by that location, Ireland would remain forever ‘other’. Even if she addressed Irish women as her sisters when urging them to reject slave-produced goods, and took pride in Ireland’s non-participation in the slave trade, England was always, for her, the source of patriotic feeling. Indeed, *A Poem on the African Slave Trade* displays a keenly pro-British colonialist stance.

Religiously, too, Irish Quakers occupied an ambiguous position—anti-papist yet sympathising with the Catholic poor, not fully part of the Protestant hegemony. A resulting insecurity was perhaps why Irish Quakerism emphasised ‘the discipline’ more than its English counterpart. As in England, those who adhered strictly to the rules—wearing ‘the Quaker grey’, using the archaic speech forms ‘thee’ and ‘thou’ and maintaining a rigorous simplicity in the home—were called ‘plain’ while those

who did not were 'gay'. (Of course, in practice this was not a rigid division. Varying degrees of 'plain' and 'gay' existed which also influenced levels of engagement with the world beyond the Religious Society of Friends.) Mary's childhood poems show her, and her friends, acquiring the accomplishments expected of young ladies in society at large: singing, music, fancy needlework, drawing and French. As many of these pursuits would have been anathema in a 'plain' home, it would seem the Birketts were relatively 'gay' Friends, or might have been considered so by some of their contemporaries. These poems are interesting in revealing the tensions such Quaker girls had to contend with in attempting to display these worldly accomplishments publicly while still maintaining a Quakerly modesty. They also demonstrate the extent of Mary's literary education. She was familiar with works by major poets like James Thompson, Oliver Goldsmith, Alexander Pope and Thomas Grey, and also with some of Shakespeare's plays, despite the Quaker suspicion of drama. It is clear the reading and writing of poetry was not only sanctioned but positively encouraged in the Birkett household.

Two poems offer insights into the formation of Mary's gendered identity. In a lovely little poem written when very young, 'On Eve', Mary asks why Eve was to blame. After all, the Fall enabled Christ's salvation so we can all still be saved 'if we are good'. Eve's actions were understandable in the circumstances and it was partly the fault of her guardian angel anyway for leaving her unprotected.¹⁵ Yet on her sixteenth birthday, Mary wrote a poem articulating the traditional view of Eve who brought evil into the world by tempting Adam. Mary's construction of herself as an emergent woman is informed by this archetypal defective Eve, who sinned with her tongue when she led Adam astray. Examining her conscience over the previous year, Mary asks:

Did e'er my hasty tongue from Reason stray
 To our weak sex that dreadful fault they lay
 Ah, hapless sex! what evils dost thou know
 Tho' form'd a *blessing*, oft a curse below
 For where the tongue usurps its hateful sway
 Truth Reason Justice Virtue all give way
 Look back my soul! survey thy deeds again
 And never let *that little member* reign.¹⁶

In manuscript the words 'that little member' are underlined, highlighting the weight she attaches to this need to govern her tongue—a need that was impressed generally upon young women of her class, but also one, it will be shown, that carried particular connotations for Quaker women.

These influences on Mary's identity—Irish Quakerism, plain versus gay, the Eve archetype—are key to understanding the dramatic changes between her writing as a young woman, and later, particularly after her marriage. Not only are there changes of focus in her journal, but her adult poetry falls into two halves (1790s/early 1800s) before she seems to confine herself to prose. And these changes would *seem*, on the surface, to chart her transformation from a passionate, outward-looking, politically radical and independent young woman to a more inward-looking, conservative and

submissive wife. The embedded narrative is, of course, far more nuanced and complex than that. This paper will confine itself to sketching the changes and contrasts, and highlighting key elements of that embedded narrative.

Mary's youth spanned the tumultuous 1790s. The French Revolution of 1789 caused great upheaval in Ireland as elsewhere. Irish disaffection culminated in the Irish Rebellion of 1798. New ideas circulated in the works of Thomas Paine and Jean-Jacques Rousseau and traditional beliefs were questioned. Within Quakerism, this questioning tended toward deism, whereby belief in God was maintained while scriptural revelation and the miraculous were rejected. Friends in Ireland divided—many left or were disowned. In the 1790s, too, the anti-slavery movement gathered momentum. Mary engaged with all these issues. In 1792, aged 17, she published *A Poem on the African Slave Trade* in two parts, the second being, according to her preface, prompted by the good reception of Part I. (It is likely, in fact, that the two parts coincided with the passage of William Wilberforce's abolition bill through the two Houses of Parliament, as Part II addresses Members of the House of Lords, and Mary's uncle, George Harrison, published an address to the bishops that summer.¹⁷) In 1793 she penned a poem entitled 'Soliloquy supposed to be written by Marie Antoinette just before her separation from the Dauphin'.¹⁸ She described what happened to pacifist Quakers during the Rebellion in 'Some Account of Remarkable Deliverances'.¹⁹ From 1796 to 1797 her journal charts a spiritual crisis culminating in a piece intriguingly called 'Progress of Infidelity' (1798), in which she recants 'the odium of Deism' and radical political views, for example on equality and the holding of property in common, in favour of more conservative beliefs.²⁰ As official and published Quaker sources are meagre on this period, this section of her journal provides valuable insights into the effects of this controversy on an individual woman Friend.²¹ Her journal concentrates on her spiritual condition, rather than describing people or events, but the unnamed schoolteacher and elder she blames for leading her to question her traditional faith was probably Abraham Shackleton, one of the central figures in the controversy.²² She would also surely have known of another controversial figure, the American minister Hannah Barnard. Barnard visited Ireland in 1800–1801, preaching at Sycamore Alley, Mary's Meeting House in Dublin, in April 1801. Supported by Shackleton, she was denounced to London Yearly Meeting by two other people Mary knew, the Dublin elder Joseph Williams and the American evangelical minister David Sands. Furthermore, Mary's uncle, George Harrison, defended her (though not necessarily her views) against her detractors when she appealed to London Yearly Meeting in May 1801 against the refusal to grant her a further certificate to travel in the ministry.²³

Mary's poetry from the 1790s is dominated by romantic friendships with other young Quaker women, spiritual reflections with a mystical dimension and sometimes a light-hearted wit. Much of it is passionate, particularly the anti-slavery poem in its anger at injustice and the romantic friendship verse in voicing the intensity of intimate relationships between women. In the latter, friendship and spiritual development go hand in hand, with Mary, for example, casting herself as her friend's Debbie Watson's spiritual teacher. Mary passionately believed that collectively women could wield influence—even prevail over men. Her abolition poem not only calls for concerted

action by women to boycott sugar and rum, it asks them to influence their menfolk to do likewise whatever their objections, for God's law of universal love takes precedence over patriarchal law. Referring to the consumption of rum punch in mixed company at the dinner table, she prevails upon her 'Sisters...on whose resistless tongue / The sweetest flowers of eloquence are hung', to take a public stance:

This can you see, nor urge your peaceful sway,
 To push the dear bought beverage far away!
 Say not—no power of yours so far extends,
 These are your brothers, husbands, sons or friends,
 Whose precepts or whose law you erst obey'd,
 And reverence due concomitantly paid;
 ...
 Have you no influence? you whose bosoms feel
 Pity[']s soft glow & freedom[']s honest zeal!

Women must act, and in a manner combining feminine compassion (soft pity) with a passionate determination (zeal), even political awareness (a sense of liberty or freedom) not readily allowed to them, for the sake of that ultimate Judge 'who every act & thought will prove / In the large scale of universal love'.²⁴

On a lighter note, in 'A Petition', written on a trip to London in 1794, Mary and her friends urge her cousin Thomas Harrison to leave his Oxford studies briefly to join them.²⁵ The poem humorously valorises the power of women if they combine together:

Yield *for once* to our sex, for we join to assail
 And *one* man against four, has small chance to prevail
 For that ancient dominion so proudly you boast
 Mid the tumult of voices is frequently lost
 And tho' o'er us, empire you think to retain
 When our voice is collected you lord it in vain[.]²⁶

THE STRUGGLE TO BECOME THE IDEAL QUAKER WIFE

In 1801 Mary married her second cousin Nathaniel Card, a Dublin merchant. The couple had eight children, but tragically four died as infants. Nathaniel's business was dogged by financial difficulties so money worries loom large in Mary's journal (providing a rich seam for exploring Quaker attitudes to money). In her poetry, philanthropic appeals, domestic themes and religious or moral verse come to predominate while friendships with other women become centred in social life and domesticity rather than romantic attachment. Mysticism, too, is replaced by a more conventional religiosity. Her poems then become far fewer, until they appear to peter out completely—none are dated after 1809. Instead she turns increasingly to prose—her spiritual journal and letters. Well before her marriage, her journal demonstrates her return to a more traditional faith—essentially eighteenth-century quietism with marks of the evangelicalism that would come to dominate the Religious Society of Friends in the nineteenth century. She eventually became a 'plain' Friend urging others to conformity in speech and dress. But the most disturbing feature of her writing after marriage is a yearning for a pure language linked to gender codes that

required her to obey her husband and control her self-expression in order to conform to an ideal of submissive womanhood.

Close examination of the manuscript record indicated that these changes in her writing resulted from efforts to contain her literary imagination in line with ‘plainer’ Quaker aesthetic values and more restrictive ideas about the appropriate forms of creativity for her as a woman and a Friend. Moreover, it is likely that this endeavour was connected with the tragic loss of children.

In 1804 Mary produced over 40 poems, 28 during a month’s stay with the lively American Quaker family, the Rotches, at Milford Haven in South Wales. In 1805 there are 51 dated journal entries but far fewer poems, and those are more serious in content. This change may well have resulted from the trauma of the loss of her second son Nathaniel, aged nine months, in April 1804 after her return from Wales, where she had enjoyed good company, witty conversation and a forum for her poetry. Her host, Benjamin Rotch, entertained guests from many different walks of life beside Friends at his home, Castle Hall, including literary or artistic people (he was a friend of the painter Benjamin West), non-Quakers and naval officers. In her journal, Mary states that Nathaniel’s death is a ‘punishment for’ her ‘inattention’. She promises God she will from now guard her ‘lips lest [she] be...soiled by the guilt of exaggeration—of untruths[,] of too much conversation[,] of light talk’, and asks him to grant her instead the ‘simplicity’, ‘sweetness’, and ‘gentleness’ of her lost child.²⁷ Little Nathaniel becomes emblematic of qualities she must cultivate in herself combining Quaker ideals and contemporary conceptions of compliant, self-effacing womanhood. There are several such cycles. For example, when another child falls sick in 1805, Mary again believes she is being punished, this time for disobeying her husband, and again she promises to take greater care in future. The passage in her journal where she describes the child being saved, she believes, in response to her prayer, is one of the most moving and disturbing pieces in the collection. She begs God to

forgive me mine iniquities & heal my child, for because of disobedience to the voice of my husband am I now sorely afflicted with the sickness of my child...do thou heal him, yea I have faith to believe & I am sure that thou will heal him, because that thou art merciful... Oh thou who hast afflicted me do I apply for thou only canst relieve me—give me—yea thou givest me the life of my child.

Even now he revives, he is given to me—he will recover—he will not now die—his sickness is for the Glory of God—for the punishment of my disobedience & his healing is according to thy mercy Oh! Lord.—In my self will I acted & its consequence was disobedience to the will of my husband—the fruit thereof is bitterer than death—...the sickness of my child—resulting from my own conduct which I ought to have avoided by patient humility, obedience & care—if thou O Father forgivest me this time, I will I trust be more careful in future how I disobey[.]²⁸

Yet less than a week later, she confesses once more a ‘great sin’—‘hastiness of expression in opposition to my dear husband’.²⁹ Later, she says:

I find this lesson of obedience a hard one, for it is very repugnant to my nature, which abhors it, I loath subjection, I would assey [*sic*] my own dignity—this is pride! but it is a deeply rooted pride early engrafted into my mind[,] nourished & cherished by education[,] by habit, by example.³⁰

We need to consider how language and gender could come to be linked in this Quaker context. First, maintaining ‘a pure language’ was vitally important. Plain speech differentiated Friends from ‘the world’, ornate language was considered superfluous, exaggeration insincere. Keeping to these prescriptions often involved restraint—not indulging in frivolous chatter for example (something to which many Friends, along with society at large, considered women especially prone). Learning to be silent in Meeting cultivated subjection of the self—especially important for girls whose future lay in subjection not only to God but their husbands. These links between purity, restraint, silence, subjection and women help us understand how, for Mary, language and her role as a Quaker wife and mother came to be intertwined. Once sin is located in the tongue, she fears physical retribution—but it will be visited not on her own body, but the bodies of those dearest to her, her children. Further research needs to be done before we can say how representative this was of Quaker women at this time. In Mary’s case, it is possible she adopted a narrower view of a woman’s place—one perhaps at variance with that absorbed during her girlhood (note the reference to her education in the extract from her journal above)—when she turned to a more orthodox, in some respects evangelical, faith after her ‘deist’ phase. What can be said from her journal, however, is that such ideas, common generally in the seventeenth century, were still prevalent among some Quaker families.³¹

Finally, when her first daughter Sarah died aged 13 months in 1808, Mary addressed a poem ‘To Hope’ which conveys not just the conventional message found in several other poems on this popular theme—that true hope rests in God alone—but a wariness, seemingly, of the creative imagination.³² It contains links between the child as creation and creative art, particularly in the way Sarah’s growing form is described in terms of beauty and form or structure, the object of both care and aesthetic pleasure:

How often watching ‘oer her form
That form in which my soul delighted
My bosom glow’d with raptures warm
With hopes—alas! they all were blighted

Oft would my ardent fancy trace
The harvest of my ripen’d treasure
Enhance each smile each opening grace
And view each little act with pleasure.

After a harrowing description of the little girl’s death, of how she ‘saw her lovely fabric fall’ and ‘her frame in ruins lie’, she cries:

Away then Hope! With all thy train
Of soft illusions, vain, ideal
That keenly edge the dart of pain
With joys unsolid—sorrows real.

Was Mary’s ‘sin’ here, perhaps, to have placed too much hope in a future for Sarah that lay only in her own ‘fancy’ or imagination? Apart from two brief philanthropic poems in 1809, there are no more dated poems in the collection.

Why should Mary abandon poetry? It was not necessarily considered unquakerly. As we have seen, Mary seems to have been encouraged to write verse as a child (her poems reveal her friends were too) and a good proportion of her 1790s verse was addressed to two other young Quaker women, Hannah Wilson Forbes and Debbie Watson.³³ After her marriage, one of her close friends was Sarah Hoare, probably the Dublin schoolmistress who later published *Poems on Conchology and Botany* (1831).³⁴ Many Quaker women, including Mary Morris Knowles as Judith Jennings shows, wrote poetry. But, like many other arts, it was highly suspect, the main objection being that it might detract attention from religion. In addition, the content of some poetry was considered immoral, there was the risk of self-indulgence or egoism and poetry could be accused of artificiality in its language or insincerity if it expressed unfelt emotion (the problem, for Friends, with drama). Edwina Newman has suggested that the process of creating verse necessarily involves ‘polishing’, which could be considered to run counter to the Quaker stress on speaking or writing only when divinely inspired.³⁵ These objections could only be overcome if poetry served moral purposes (describing the natural world, as in Sarah Hoare’s botanical poems, tended to be acceptable), represented genuine feeling and used appropriate language. And this is what Mary struggled with in her verse. Here I will expand on just one example, her repudiation of classical reference.

Her 1790s verse is full of classical allusion. In *A Poem on the African Slave Trade*, Irish women are ‘the Hibernian fair’ and classical deities abound. In most other poems, the sun is usually Sol or Phoebus, the winds Zephyr or Boreas. In the later verse there is a gradual reversal toward a poetry validated by the omission of classical allusion. Finally, in 1807, in ‘An Epistle to M[ary] Leadbeater’, another Quaker poet in Ireland, Mary proclaims a manifesto for a simple poetry, devoid of pagan classicism, and elaborates on its functions.³⁶ Leadbeater’s is ideal because it is ‘artless’. Its functions are to promote virtue and instruct by rendering knowledge attractive—to ‘express / Lessons of Wisdom in poetic dress’. The style of dress, however, is vital, for Mary cries:

Shame on the Bards, who mar thy beauteous face
With Heathen lore to give thee Classic grace[.]

This spells the end for classicism in Mary’s own poetry for no classical reference appears in subsequent dated verse. This is partly inspired by a religious agenda. Heathen classicism is incompatible with a Christian poetry. But importantly, Mary’s manifesto is also gendered, for the purpose of this simpler poetry is to educate young women to:

Fulfil each duty of domestic life
The tender mother & the faithful wife[.]

One other possible influence for changes in Mary’s poetry from 1805 has emerged. Jennings refers in her essay to minutes of the Women’s Yearly Meeting in England in 1805 and 1806 expressing concern at members wasting time, ‘devoting’ insufficient time to ‘the Church’ and to a committee being established that included Mary Morris Knowles’s cousin, the minister Susannah Appleby. Knowles was apparently

visited. It may be that Mary Birkett Card heeded these injunctions, thereby becoming more conscious of the perceived waste of time poetry might entail. Several pieces of her writing form responses to direct external stimuli, either within or without the Religious Society of Friends (for example, ‘Some Account of Remarkable Deliverances’ may have been a response to a call from Dublin Women’s Meeting for such an account). Moreover, she may have been on friendly terms with Susannah Appleby, companion to Sarah Darby of Coalbrookdale, who visited Ireland in the ministry in 1799 and 1800. She sent ‘S[?] Appleby’ a copy of *A Poem on the African Slave Trade* with an accompanying verse, undated but possibly penned in 1799.³⁷

PARTICIPATION IN PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SPHERES

Mary’s efforts to become an obedient wife and promote homely feminine virtues did not mean, however, that she incarcerated herself in a private, domestic sphere. For one thing, she helped run the family business—one poem describes shutting up the warehouse on a Saturday and her diary shows her concocting complex plans to overcome the family’s financial problems. And strangely, given her epistle to Leadbeater, Mary says little elsewhere about domestic duties and offers no advice to young women, as you would expect of poetry aiming to help girls become ideal wives and mothers. Certainly, much of her later work codifies the ideology of domesticity—the glorification of home as woman’s proper sphere. But what inspires her most, as in her youth, is still female friendship and relationship. If she promotes those qualities society (and Friends) esteemed in women—piety, gentleness, humility, purity—by praising them in other women, it is mainly in the context of friendship or shared female experience. And that experience was not confined to the home.

In two spheres that could be called semi-public—philanthropy and the Quaker Women’s Meetings—bonds between women remained not only a source of inspiration but also a basis for social action. Mary raised funds for, or was active with other women in, many philanthropic projects in and beyond the Religious Society of Friends: a home for retired female servants, obtaining charity for individual cases, charity schools. She was involved in a ‘School and Repository’ scheme for poor girls funded by subscriptions and the sale of needlework the girls produced, and was closely connected with the General Daily Free School, probably the initiative for poor Catholic children founded by Quakers in 1798. Quaker records show that from 1807 she occupied many responsible positions within the Quaker Women’s Meetings. She served on committees for poor relief and managing Quaker schools, represented her local Meeting at Quarterly and Annual Meetings, took on the pastoral role of Overseer and the most onerous position of Clerk to Dublin Women’s Meeting from 1813 to 1816. Some of these duties took her away from home—for example attending Meetings in other towns like Moate or Enniscorthy, or visiting the Quaker Provincial School at Mountmellick.³⁸

However, Quaker women had to be careful here. Elizabeth Fry was sometimes criticised for neglecting her family when engaged with her prison work. Another contemporary, Sarah Greer, describes a husband objecting to his wife going to the Women’s Meetings as it was ‘fitter for [her] to stay at home, and mind [her] children’.

He went on to assert that ‘our Women’s Meetings were all humbug; that it was only for the sake of getting new bonnets, and new gowns, and shawls, and good eating, and talking among ourselves, that we wanted to go at all’.³⁹ We cannot know whether Mary Birkett Card attracted criticism for breaking her ‘domestic chains’, as she put it, in this way or whether her husband objected to her work outside the home. When she mentions their quarrels and her struggles to render him obedience, she is completely silent about the sources of such conflict. If her Quaker work and philanthropy were issues for him, then her increasing external responsibilities indicate that she continued despite his strictures—and was therefore certainly not a submissive wife.

Mary also continued to participate in the wider public spheres of abolition and publication, at least while still writing poetry. In 1806 she pressed one of the Dublin Members of Parliament, Hans Hamilton, to vote against the slave trade in verses seemingly addressed to him privately.⁴⁰ This does not seem to have been due to any change in her views on the propriety of publication. She went on to publish an obituary poem for the Quaker elder, Joseph Williams, in 1807 (her only other published poem).⁴¹ It was actually a tactic suggested by the London Abolition Committee, which asked individuals to write directly to their Members of Parliament (Thomas Clarkson was specifically asked to inform abolitionists in Ireland), stressing the need for secrecy in case slavery’s supporters should lobby Members first.⁴² Moreover, this poem to Hans Hamilton may not have remained private. It is very likely that she circulated it in some way, as seems to have been the case with much of her verse. As a child, her verses were clearly produced for consumption by others (they often mark events, such as a Minister’s visit or the death of a sibling) and the majority of her adult poems were either produced within circles of female friendship, or for a specific purpose, for example to elicit funds from possible benefactors for charitable projects. Then, after she appears to have abandoned poetry, Mary concentrated rather more on the religious letter, a thoroughly sanctioned form in which, ironically, she could still deploy elements of her poetic talent in diction, rhythm and patterning. These letters are outstanding examples of the rich language and imagery of Quaker quietism, although they also contain evangelical elements. Like her poems, they probably circulated in manuscript. It is likely that some of them, for instance, were written in her capacity as an Overseer, responsible for pastoral care within the local Quaker Meeting. These many different forms of writing demonstrate the thriving manuscript culture among women Friends contextualised by Newman and Jennings. They also show how we need to be wary of making simplistic distinctions between public and private in relation to women’s texts.

Although I found no evidence that Mary travelled as a Minister, she seems to have ministered regularly locally. The Quaker obituary publication, *The Annual Monitor*, says she last appeared in the ministry only a few weeks before her death in 1817.⁴³ An account of her final illness over 13 days surrounded by family and friends, written by her brother George Harrison Birkett, carefully notes her sayings during this ordeal. Words spoken at this time, the border between this life and the next, offered comfort to others and evidence of the dying person’s salvation. In contrast to the death-bed doubts of Mary Morris Knowles, Mary displayed great confidence in God’s love,

repeating her trust in his ‘protection’ and her own sense of peace. After many ‘provings’, she ‘humbly’ felt she possessed the Kingdom of God ‘in some degree’. For her, as for Knowles, friendship was hugely important. In a dream, ‘she saw Susanna Hill, a minister whom she had loved’, and who had died two years earlier, ‘on an eminence who told her that she was waiting for her’.⁴⁴ Unlike Knowles, Mary wondered that though her ‘sins were many’, she felt ‘nothing to arise against me[,] is not that an unspeakable favour[?]’. Referring to the man (Abraham Shackleton?) who had ‘lamed’ her (initiated her deist doubts?), by ‘put[ting] things into my head I never thought of’, she was confident she had ‘been healed’.⁴⁵

On her funeral card, kept at Dublin Quaker Library, someone, probably a Quaker soon after her death, has written the words ‘a valuable woman’. Interestingly, in a press cutting on the death in 1856 of her son Nathaniel Card, who became a noted Manchester philanthropist and is credited with founding a temperance organisation called the United Kingdom Alliance, his qualities are explained by reference to his mother’s—‘from his mother, of whom he was deprived when young, and who was a woman of great piety, superior attainments, and ceaseless benevolence, he inherited many of...[his] traits’.⁴⁶ These comments indicate that, despite her inner struggles or perhaps as a result of them, Mary succeeded in fulfilling many of her community’s expectations of ‘the ideal Quaker woman’.

CONCLUSION

The manuscript collection of the writings of Mary Birkett Card is highly unusual in its range, its mixture of poetry and prose and the way it represents each stage of her life from the age of ten. It is also rare as a surviving body of work by a woman who was not a travelling minister, or from a leading Quaker family, as is the case with the majority of Quaker women’s writings that have been preserved. Moreover, her spiritual journal may not have been subject to alteration or redaction in the same way as most surviving Quaker women’s journals. As Jennings and Newman highlight in their papers, many women’s journals were edited or altered, either for publication or to create a manuscript copy for wider circulation. Material considered unsuitable, whether for religious or personal reasons, was sometimes removed. Of course, as mentioned at the beginning of this paper, Nathaniel Card may have made changes when copying his mother’s journal. However, unlike her poems and letters which are clearly documents originally produced for consumption by different groups (family, friends, members of her Quaker community, other women, a wider public in the case of her two published poems), the audience she, or Nathaniel Card later, intended for her journal is less clear. In the section entitled ‘Progress of Infidelity’ recounting her deist experience, which shares much with traditional conversion narratives, there are gestures toward a future reader who may be herself ‘at a more advanced age’ but could be ‘any other’ after her death, while another section addresses her children. But it is quite likely that Nathaniel Card did not copy the journal for consumption beyond the family and their immediate circle. This has implications for our reading of it, most particularly aspects such as Mary’s struggles

with marital obedience, but also her worries about financial matters, which I have not found in other Quaker women's writings to the same degree. Would mention of these concerns have been edited out if the journal had been prepared for publication/wider circulation? Were Mary's experiences unusual, did other women simply choose not to write about such personal matters, or have references to them been removed from the published or other manuscript journals we have? We need more evidence to come to light, and much more research, before we can see how far these concerns were representative of Quaker women.

This article has focussed on one major feature of the collection—the story of Mary's life, including tragic events such as the loss of children, linked to her literary creativity, which was revealed on examining the manuscripts in their entirety. It is possible that other writings by Mary Birkett Card, or references to her by contemporaries, will emerge in the future to confirm, challenge or augment this narrative. But the texts as they stand, with the conflicts they express and their changes in literary expression, are certainly indicative of attempts on Mary's part to fulfil what she came to believe was expected of 'the ideal Quaker woman'. And aspects of this endeavour were surely shared by other middle-class women Friends in this period seeking to reconcile contemporary conceptions of femininity with their identity as Quaker women at a time when ideological tensions within the Religious Society of Friends—between enlightenment rationalism, traditional quietism and the growing evangelical movement—were also impacting on constructions of Quaker womanhood.

NOTES

1. Birkett, M., *A Poem on the African Slave Trade. Addressed to her own Sex. Parts I and II*, Dublin: J. Jones, Grafton Street, 1792.

2. Ferguson, M., *Subject to Others: British Women Writers and Colonial Slavery 1670–1834*, London: Routledge, 1992, pp. 178–82; Midgley, C., *Women Against Slavery: The British Campaigns 1780–1870*, London: Routledge, 1992, p. 34.

3. See, for example: Kowaleski-Wallace, E., *Consuming Subjects: Women, Shopping, and Business in the Eighteenth Century*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1997, pp. 42–51; Mack, P., 'In a Female Voice: Preaching and Politics in Eighteenth-Century British Quakerism', in Kienzle, M.B., and Walker, P.J. (eds.), *Women Preachers and Prophets through Two Millennia of Christianity*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998, pp. 248–63 (pp. 258, 260); Rodgers, N., 'Two Quakers and a Utilitarian: The Reaction of Three Irish Women Writers to the Problem of Slavery, 1789–1807', *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* 100C, 4 (2000), pp. 137–57 (particularly pp. 145–51).

4. Part I of the poem is anthologised in Richardson, A. (ed.), *Slavery, Abolition and Emancipation: Writings in the British Romantic Period*, 8 vols., London: Pickering & Chatto, 1999, IV, p. 196. Full copies of both parts of the poem have been made available online by Josephine Teakle at <http://www.brycchancarey.com/slavery/mbc1.htm> (13 June 2006).

5. Teakle, J., 'The Works of Mary Birkett Card 1774–1817, Originally Collected by her Son Nathaniel Card in 1834: An Edited Transcription with an Introduction to her Life and Works', unpublished PhD dissertation, 2 vols., University of Gloucestershire, 2004 (hereafter abbreviated to *Works*).

6. London, Library of Society of Friends, Lancashire Quarterly Meeting Digest Register of Births, 1774.

7. Jennings, J., *The Business of Abolishing the British Slave Trade 1783–1807*, London: Frank Cass, 1997.

8. London, Library of Society of Friends, Lancashire Quarterly Meeting Digest Register of Marriages, 1774, Marriage of William Birkett and Sarah Harrison. London, Library of Society of Friends, Westmoreland Quarterly Meeting Digest Registers of Births, Marriages and Deaths, Births of George Harrison, 1747, and his sister Sarah Harrison, 1753, children of Edward and Sarah Harrison.

9. One of Mary Birkett's brothers, born in 1792, was named George Harrison Birkett, very probably after her uncle (Dublin Meeting, Digest Register of Births, 1792).

10. See Jennings, J., *Gender, Religion, and Radicalism in the Long Eighteenth Century: The 'Ingenious Quaker' and her Connections*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006.

11. For the edition of Mary Birkett Card's works produced for my PhD dissertation, the poetry was separated into three sections: childhood, the 1790s, 1800 and onwards. Poems included in the childhood section, therefore, are those produced before 1790, the year in which Mary Birkett reached the age of sixteen. Some of the poetry is undated, but approximate dates are usually clear from style, diction, subject matter and position in the manuscript collection.

12. See, for example, Isichei, E., *Victorian Quakers*, London: Oxford University Press, 1970, p. 107.

13. Mack, 'In a Female Voice: Preaching and Politics in Eighteenth-Century British Quakerism', in Kienzle and Walker (eds.), *Women Preachers and Prophets through Two Millennia of Christianity*, 1998, pp. 250-51, 53.

14. Teakle, *Works*, II, pp. 3, 4—'A Farewell to Old England' and 'On Entering into Dublin 1784'.

15. Teakle, *Works*, II, 'On Eve', undated, p. 91.

16. Teakle, *Works*, II, 'Written on the day when I was sixteen', 1790, p. 134.

17. Harrison, G., *An Address to the Right Reverend the Prelates of England and Wales on the Subject of the Slave Trade*, London: J. Parsons & Ridgway, 1792.

18. Teakle, *Works*, II, p. 209.

19. Teakle, *Works*, I, 'Some Account of Remarkable deliverances experienced by friends during the disturbances of 1796 and 1798', p. 160. See also Alexander, R., 'Democratic Quakers in the Age of Revolutions', MA dissertation, University of Lancaster, 2006, since printed privately.

20. Teakle, *Works*, I, p. 21.

21. For a detailed discussion of the deist controversy in Ireland and its impact on the young Mary Birkett, see the chapter entitled 'Progress of Infidelity', in Teakle, *Works*, I, pp. 58-85. For a primary account of the controversy, see Rathbone, W., *A Narrative of Events, that have lately taken place in Ireland among the Society called Quakers; with Corresponding Documents, and Occasional Observations*, London: J. Johnson, 1804. Secondary accounts include Newhouse, N.H., 'The Irish Separation of 1800: A Lesson for 1971?', Parts I and II, *Friends Quarterly* (1971), pp. 123-29 and 169-80; and by the same author, 'Seeking God's Will: A Monthly Meeting at Work in 1804', *The Journal of the Friends' Historical Society* 56 (1990-93), pp. 227-43; Grubb, M., 'Abraham Shackleton and the Irish Separation of 1797-1803', *The Journal of the Friends' Historical Society* 56 (1993), pp. 261-71.

22. Abraham Shackleton was headmaster of the famous school at Ballitore in County Kildare where the statesman Edmund Burke was taught by Abraham's grandfather, forming a lifelong friendship with his father Richard Shackleton. He was a leading figure among the 'New Lights', the term given at the time to those questioning a literal interpretation of scripture and some forms of traditional practice, or authority, within the Religious Society of Friends. He resigned his membership and was disowned in 1801.

23. *The Records and Recollections of James Jenkins Respecting Himself and Others from 1761 to 1821*, ed. Frost, J.W., Texts and Studies in Religion Series 18, New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1984, pp. 371-72. George Harrison 'reminded' those present 'that "the Appellant was about to appear among us, as a stricken dead [sic]—a stranger in a foreign land—a female, three thousand miles from home"'. But his appeals fell on deaf ears. Jenkins states that J.G. Bevan, for example, still 'treated her with that roughness which he could sometimes...exercise'.

24. Teakle, *Works*, II, pp. 162–63. Boycotting slave-produced goods was very much in the air in 1792. Abolitionists had been promoting abstention for some time, but in January 1792 Thomas Clarkson circulated *An Address to the People of Great Britain on the Propriety of Abstaining from West Indian Sugar and Rum*. Perhaps more importantly for Mary in Dublin, a pamphlet entitled *An Address to the People of Great Britain (Respectfully Offered to the People of Ireland) on the Utility of Refraining from the Use of West Indian Sugar and Rum*, first published in 1791, was reprinted in Dublin in 1792, as was *Considerations Addressed to the Professors of Christianity of Every Denomination on the Impropriety of Consuming West Indian Sugar and Rum as Produced by the Oppressive Labour of Slaves*. In general abolitionist consumers and writers tended to concentrate on boycotting sugar. The way Mary advocated a boycott of rum specifically in Part II of her poem is unusual. It asked more of her Irish women readers. A sugar boycott was one way women could contribute in what was considered their sphere, the home and shopping for home consumption, but to refuse punch on social occasions and persuade their menfolk to do likewise involved a more difficult sacrifice, a public gesture that risked derision.

25. One Thomas Harrison, son of John Harrison of Stavely, Westmoreland, gentleman, matriculated on 7 April 1794, aged seventeen, and gained his BA at Oxford University in 1798, according to *Alumni Oxonienses: The Members of the University of Oxford, 1715–1886: Their Parentage, Birthplace, and Year of Birth, With a Record of their Degrees*, ed. Foster, J., Oxford/London: James Parker, 1891, p. 618. This may be the cousin in question. As dissenters Quakers were generally barred from the universities, but it is possible he was not a member of the Religious Society of Friends. One source states that Lydia Harrison had a first cousin named Thomas Harrison, who became her second husband (see Penderill-Church, J., *William Cookworthy 1705–1780: A Study of the Pioneer of True Porcelain Manufacture in England*, Truro: Bradford Barton, 1972, p. 83). His father is stated to be William, brother to George Harrison, but I have not been able to locate this William in the *Lancashire and Westmoreland Quarterly Meetings Digest Register of Births* with George Harrison's other siblings, for example his brother Thomas Harrison, born in 1737.

26. Teakle, *Works*, II, 'A Petition To my Cousin T. Harrison Queens College', p. 224.

27. Teakle, *Works*, I, p. 37.

28. Teakle, *Works*, I, pp. 61–62.

29. Teakle, *Works*, I, p. 62.

30. Teakle, *Works*, I, p. 63.

31. See Mack, P., *Visionary Women: Ecstatic Prophecy in Seventeenth-Century England*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992, pp. 37–39. Mack cites Mary, Countess of Warwick, who wrote in her diary in 1667: 'May the 16. I kept it a private fast being the day three year upon which my son died... [I] had...large meditations upon the sickness and death of my only child...his sick bed expressions...how God was pleased to waken him... Then I began to consider what sins I had committed that should cause God to call them to remembrance and slay my son' (p. 38—quoting from Mendelson, *The Mental World of Stuart Women*, 91). Mack also cites Mary Morris Knowles's poem 'Written in the Terrors of Approaching Childbirth' (1768) as an example of an eighteenth-century Quaker woman believing that the function of her pain in childbirth was to 'prove / How great the Sin of our first Mother's fall'. (Portolio, Manuscripts, 6/158, Library of the Religious Society of Friends, London.)

32. Teakle, *Works*, II, p. 416.

33. A poem addressed to her friend Deborah Pike in 1787 states her virtues require praise from 'some abler hand' such as 'that loved maid*, whose words so fluent flow'. The asterisk identifies this 'maid' as Mary Shackleton, who later became Mary Leadbeater. This indicates the acceptance of women's poetry within the Birkett household and its circulation within the Quaker community.

34. Sarah Hoare (1767–1855) ran a school for girls in Dublin. Beside *Poems on Conchology and Botany, with plates and notes*, London: Simpkin & Marshall, Stationers' Court and Bristol: Wright & Bagnall, 1831, she published *A Poem on the Pleasures and advantages of botanical pursuits, with notes; and other poems. By a Friend to youth, addressed to her Pupils*, Bristol: Philip Rose, Broadmead, n.d. 'The Pleasures of botanical pursuits. A Poem' was also appended to Priscilla Wakefield's *An Introduction*

to *Botany, in a series of familiar letters with illustrative engravings*, London: Harvey & Dutton, 8th edn 1818, 9th edn 1823.

35. Newman, E., paper presented at the British Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies (BSECS) Conference, January 2009.

36. Teakle, *Works*, II, 'An Epistle to M. Leadbeater', p. 396.

37. Teakle, *Works*, II, 'To her Friend S[?] Appleby with verses on the Slave Trade', p. 138. The initial is not quite clear, but would seem to be an 'S'. Though undated, the poem sits in the collection with pieces dated 1799.

38. See Dublin Friends' Historical Library, *Proceedings of Dublin Monthly Meeting of Women Friends 1791–1813, and 1813–1829*. Mary Birkett Card appears in the minutes regularly as a participant from 1807 to 1817. Monthly Meeting Minutes of 14 September 1813 show her being appointed to the position of Clerk (replacing Elizabeth Bewley); she was appointed to the Provincial School Committee on 13 July 1813 and again on 10 September 1816, and to the Poor Committee on 15 December 1812. See also Dublin Monthly Meeting, *Proceedings of the [Women's] Committee of the Poor 1806–1842*—Mary Birkett Card served at least from 1812–15. Her name appears as an addition to the Select Meeting and Overseers for Dublin Monthly Meeting on 14 March 1815. On 11 February 1817 she appears as an overseer (someone with a pastoral role within the Meeting) appointed to a committee to consider who should next become Clerk to Dublin Monthly Meeting of Women Friends. From 1807 she frequently represented Dublin at Leinster Quarterly Meeting and at the National Yearly Meeting for Women Friends in Ireland. The minutes of the latter show her as present each year 1807–11 inclusive, then again in 1813. There were generally approximately eight representatives from Leinster. In 1814 and 1816 perhaps she was one of those listed as unable to attend owing to a 'family indisposition'. See *Minutes of the Women's National Yearly Meeting for Ireland* for these years, also at Dublin Friends' Historical Library.

39. [Greer, S.], *Quakerism; or The Story of my Life. By a Lady, who for Forty Years was a Member of the Society of Friends*, Dublin: Samuel B. Oldham, 1851, pp. 73–74.

40. Teakle, *Works*, II, 'An Address to Hans Hamilton M.P. On behalf of the Injured Africans', p. 380.

41. Card, M., *Lines to the Memory of our Late Esteemed and Justly Valued Friend Joseph Williams*, Dublin: R. Napper, Capel Street, 1807.

42. Jennings, *The Business of Abolishing the British Slave Trade*, pp. 105–106.

43. *The Annual Monitor, ... or obituary of the Members of the Society of Friends*, York/London, 1819, re. Mary [Birkett] Card.

44. Susanna Hill (1769–1815) was a minister who accompanied the evangelical minister Mary Dudley on her travels in Ireland between 1802 and 1804 (see Dudley, E. [ed.], *The Life of Mary Dudley, including an Account of her Religious Engagements and Extracts from her Letters*, London: Harvey & Dutton, 1825, p. 253).

45. Teakle, *Works*, I, 'Geo Harrison Birkett's Account of the last illness and death of his sister Mary Card', p. 188.

46. Press cutting (without newspaper publication details) in the possession of James Clarke, great-great-great-grandson of Mary Birkett Card.

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