

‘MINISTERING CONFUSION’:  
REBELLIOUS QUAKER WOMEN (1650-1660)’

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ABSTRACT

This paper assesses the position of women within the Quaker community, concentrating on their ministerial roles. Female prophets and preachers were visible during the first decade of Quakerism, and the early years prove fruitful for exploration of women's experiences. In order to consider the difficulties women faced when taking a public role in support of Quakerism, some context on seventeenth-century attitudes to women will be provided. It will be argued that women had to challenge patriarchal notions that the 'weaker' sex should be silent, passive and obedient. In contrast to prevailing seventeenth-century norms, the potential radicalism of the Quaker approach to gender can be demonstrated. Yet, the majority of this paper deals with evidence showing that women were chastised by other Quakers for apparently departing from the conventional female roles. Hence, this paper examines the co-existence of radical, egalitarian attitudes to gender alongside more conservative, and restrictive evaluations of women's ministry.

KEYWORDS

Women, 1650s, Preaching, Discipline

The early successes of the Quaker movement, in the first decade of its history, were produced through its focussed evangelising campaigns, and, arguably, its ability to use print to consolidate its presence as a new religious force. Women were vocal, and committed, members of this new movement. Throughout the 1650s, particularly, they defied the expectations of the time by speaking in public (when women, as we will see in the course of this paper, were usually associated with private spheres, rather than public spheres), and, also, writing of their experiences for publication. Quaker women's activities have attracted the attention of historians and literary critics; rightly, studies reveal that Quakers were, in Phyllis Mack's terms, 'sympathetic to women and to feminine behaviour'.<sup>1</sup> The Quaker movement provided opportunities for expression, and some

of these will be outlined in this analysis of women's preaching and writing. Quakerism is justly viewed as an egalitarian movement, since it 'made possible women prophets' challenge to their restriction to the private sphere'.<sup>2</sup>

Although Quakerism can be credited with having the vision to recognise the talents of women, there is another side to the movement's approach to female Friends that bears some evaluation. A judgmental approach to women's ministry exists alongside radical beliefs in the equality of all people. Evidence of inter-factional disputes indicates that women were occasionally rebuked for their forwardness in the public sphere. William Braithwaite, writing of early disciplinary problems, observed that 'it must not be supposed that even in this first period the new fellowship was free from internal difficulties'.<sup>3</sup> It is these 'internal difficulties' that most reveal tensions between principle and practice. The movement might allow that, in theory, each person possessing the ability to interpret God's word could publicly communicate their insights, but in reality some were deemed more capable than others. Letters from early Friends, commenting on the progress of the ministerial campaigns, bring to the surface anxieties about women's interpretation of God's word. Of the northern Quaker Mary Howgill, for example, it was noted that 'she hath done hurt for she ministreth confusion among friends so that some friends now will not appoint a Meeting for her'.<sup>4</sup> If the Quaker movement was in a sense capable both of valuing women and chastising them, then the 'confusion' of values needs to be explored.

Quakerism was most inclusive and 'revolutionary' in terms of the way it gave women a public role in publicising the movement's message, through preaching. Large numbers of women were not only converted (the Quaker word is 'convinced'), they also joined the ranks of the itinerant Quaker ministry in travelling where they felt they had a spiritual calling. Women were active in Oxford and Dartmouth, in London, Aylesbury and Banbury, in Weymouth, Plymouth and Carlisle, to name only a few of the places.<sup>5</sup> The women who evangelised in these places later wrote about their experiences as ministers of God.<sup>6</sup> These spiritual journeys are very vividly recounted prophetic encounters, showing how the women could speak God's word authoritatively. In addition to the self-authored texts by women in the ministry, there is also an extensive body of writing indirectly about women. A text such as *The West Answering to the North* (1657), for instance, presents a very varied image of women's public testimony. This overview of Quaker activities in Cornwall depicts preachers such as Anne Blacklyn, Katherine Evans, Hester Biddle, and Priscilla Cotton engaging in the public ministry.<sup>7</sup> Yet the flamboyant role of the Quaker prophet was not the only possible option for committed Friends. *The West Answering to the North* additionally indicates that women aided the movement by visiting Quaker prisoners, taking them food, and the text further demonstrates that even such seemingly non-confrontational activities could result in persecution. Several of the women who supported imprisoned Friends in the county were subsequently incarcerated in Launceston jail themselves.<sup>8</sup> It seems likely that such sources indicate that women's testimony was extensive, and that women played an important part in the establishment of Quakerism nationwide.

Preaching women might have been empowered to act in part by ideals that overturned the conventional wisdom about godly ministers. As Quakers did not believe that it was necessary for a preacher to have been 'bred at Oxford and Cambridge', the ministry was open to anyone who believed that they had a gift.<sup>9</sup> Many of the Quakers who will be examined asserted their right to participate in public debates, often by addressing people who seemed, on the face of it, to have had more authority than they. For example, women preachers often 'interrupted' ministers of the established church, and debated with their 'betters' on theological matters. Unlike some other seventeenth-century women who complained that their lack of education was an impediment to them, Quaker women had no such compunction.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, it has been observed that 'forwardness' was a virtue in Quaker women's presentation of their voice in print.<sup>11</sup> Since 'overturning' society's expectations dislodged ministers from their elevated position, it is perhaps unsurprising that some complained 'it is a shame for women to speak in church'.<sup>12</sup> It is just possible that acerbic comments, such as this attack on women by William Prynne written in 1655, reveal that their ministry was perceived as an incipient threat to the established clergy.

By way of beginning to understand how openly Quaker women used their spiritual gifts to criticise established authorities, the attitude of one preacher and writer, Rebecca Travers, will be briefly examined. Travers sternly criticised the people in St John Evangelist church, London, in a pamphlet published after they had physically and verbally attacked her. The assault is described in *For those that Meet to Worship* (1659), in which Travers accuses the congregation of 'railing, tearing, thrusting, hailing and pushing me down'.<sup>13</sup> Travers alleges that her university-trained opponent, the Anglican minister, was a 'fool', and she maintained that she was the true messenger of God. Paraphrasing Isa. 29: 14-15, Travers declared that 'the Wisdom of the wise is turned into foolishness', thereby undermining the supposed superiority gained by university learning; and she asserted, instead, that 'he that hides from the wise, reveals to the babes and sucklings'.<sup>14</sup> This kind of inversion of truths universally acknowledged (that a man in the possession of a degree and a benefice was unquestionably a good minister) was practised by Quaker women who challenged the supposed learning of clergymen.

Valuing the spiritual talents of all was an essential part of Quaker theology; hence women presumed that their challenges to social superiors were biblically justified. Averring that 'there is neither male nor female here but they are all one in Christ Jesus,' Margaret Fell made clear that the current of egalitarianism flowing through Quaker writing resulted in the championing of equality.<sup>15</sup> The measure of a Quaker's godliness was simply his/her ability to respond to God's immediate presence. Hence, men had no greater purchase than women on godly revelation; the rich no greater authority than the poor; and educated ministers no greater talent than 'lowly' mechanics. Friends' understanding of God was that He manifested His enlightening presence within the believer, just as the Apostle John had perceived: 'I am the light of the world, and lighteth every man that cometh into the world, saith Christ'.<sup>16</sup> With this theology, Quakers empow-

ered people who did not usually publish their religious beliefs to speak publicly. Rebecca Travers again puts this inclusiveness into context when proclaiming that the 'great and small, high and low' should fear 'the Living God, and come to know the true faithful witness.'<sup>17</sup>

The doctrinal principle of spiritual equality empowered women to re-assess gender norms too. Quaker women writers were not only radical in terms of their theologically driven notions of 'oneness' in the light, they also created arguments that pushed against traditional notions of what it meant to be female. Their challenges to masculine authority were sometimes subtly conveyed in language that assumed that men's rights should also be women's. Thus, Hester Biddle addressed co-religionists ('companions') in terms showing she assumed that all had the same importance:

I am ravished. I am filled with life and love towards you my Companions and Fellow Citizens of that new *Jerusalem*, which is free born, and is the Mother of all the Faithful, which is beautified with the Glory of the Lord, Glory, Righteousness and purity compasseth about the Throne of the Lord, and Equity attendeth his Throne for ever.<sup>18</sup>

Biddle astutely made a subject position that was usually masculinised applicable to all. Her reference to the 'Citizens [...] free born' had a specific meaning within seventeenth-century London, where Biddle lived, since not every man was 'free' – only those who earned, or purchased, their freedom.<sup>19</sup> Biddle, however, claimed citizenship for all, and she did so by praising the apparent 'equity' within the Quaker movement.<sup>20</sup> Biddle's writing is utopian, of course, and it shows how texts construct 'reality', rather than reflect it, but she was not alone in imagining a society where all people were 'free' citizens.<sup>21</sup>

On the political stage, too, Quaker women opposed the supposed legitimacy of their 'betters' by challenging successive 1650s parliaments. They forthrightly challenge the accepted rulership of the governing class. Parliamentary power was evidently very unstable during the commonwealth, even without the onslaughts of Quaker activists. The tenure of Oliver Cromwell's protectorate was relatively brief, and his position reliant on the support of the army; Richard Cromwell's period of prominence was even briefer, and the army asserted its dominance once more. Richard's deposition consolidated the power of the army's General Monck, and finally resulted in the return of monarchy, the end of radical hopes.<sup>22</sup> Throughout these power shifts, Quaker men and women addressed the rulers and power holders in person and in print. In 1654, Francis Howgill and John Camm addressed the man of 'subtlety and deceit' – Oliver Cromwell; but Mary Howgill, possibly Francis' sister, also wrote a pointed letter, which she delivered to the Protector in June 1656.<sup>23</sup> Concerned that the militaristic nature of Cromwell's rule was crushing liberty, and aware that the Quakers had suffered greatly under the Protectorate, Mary Howgill catalogued his sinfulness. She alleged that he had forgotten God in giving power to violent men, and consequently she argued that 'the blood of the innocent shall be

required of thee.'<sup>24</sup> The text unleashes an almost unrelenting torrent of scorn, but in addition to such hyperbole Howgill also played with the semantics of rulership by unravelling the meaning of Cromwell's adopted title 'the [Lord] Protector'. 'He that protects thee now is unrighteous Mammon,' she wrote, 'and so him that is our Protector [God] will rule thee.'<sup>25</sup> Mary Howgill alleged that Cromwell was Mammon's servant, not God's, whilst affirming that the Quakers would triumph eventually since they were under God's protection. Other women also addressed Oliver Cromwell, the army, and the king in the Quakers' first decade, thereby reminding those responsible that they had a duty to respect the freedoms and liberties of others.<sup>26</sup> The Quakers' leading spokesperson to parliament was Edward Burrough; women engaged directly with the state relatively infrequently,<sup>27</sup> and yet, even given the predominance of writing by men, the Quaker approach is radical in that it produces a public role for women, enabling them to vocalise their political opinions.

Arguably, Quaker women were asserting their equality in a culture that, contrastingly, ensured that men achieved and maintained their position of dominance. In recent years, the extensive work of feminist scholars has demonstrated how women's subordination was determined by cultural, social, legal and economic measures: seventeenth-century society seems to have been inherently patriarchal in nature.<sup>28</sup> The inequalities between male and female were inscribed at every level. In the state, for instance, the dutiful obedience of subject to ruler was mapped in terms of the 'natural' obedience expected of wives to their husbands. Thus, James I wrote, 'I am the Husband, and the whole isle is my lawful wife,' arguing that obedience was owed to him as both the king and the father of the nation.<sup>29</sup> This political analogy remained 'a basic tool for most writers of political theory' until the late seventeenth century.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, the adult male's familial role was perceived in terms which indicate that in the home, too, order was to be maintained through enforcing a strict distinction between 'the Governors' (fathers, husbands) and 'those that must be ruled' (wives, children, servants). *A Godly Form of Household Government* (1621) indeed prescribed separate and unequal roles for women and men within the family when it declared that 'there is nothing more unequal than that every man should be equal.'<sup>31</sup> The writer maintained that egalitarianism was in fact dangerous because it brings with it 'a confusion of all offices and authority'.<sup>32</sup> Difference, hierarchy and order are the watchwords in such traditionalist writing. The recurrent allusions to the natural order in *The Godly Form of Household Government* are suggestive of a grandiloquent concern to preserve differences of degree. Although the prescriptive approach to human relations may have been hard to enforce in practice, perhaps impossible, texts provide evidence of a great deal of cultural endeavour aimed at fixing the social order in favour of men.

As the latter part of this paper will demonstrate, one possible effect of women's greater prominence in the public sphere was that it produced a corresponding defence of the patriarchal order, perhaps in response to gender-anxiety. Before we examine how Quaker discourse manifests social conservatism and patriarchy, through analysis of letters written by early Friends, one

typical example of the non-Quaker response to assertive women will be assessed. The assumption that women who carved out public roles for themselves were defying the natural (gender) order of things, thereby exceeding their authority when, properly, they should confine themselves to domestic activities, is stated in anti-Quaker texts. Yet, arguably, these same values are discernable in Quaker writing too.

One case must serve as a template for the assertion that Quaker radicalism provoked a concomitant backlash against women, and a corresponding resurgence of conservatively minded thought. The example is drawn from a text on Quaker 'suffering' which depicts Friends' harsh treatment by Cheshire JPs and law-enforcers. Quakers had already made inroads into Cheshire by the time that Deborah Maddock came to the law's attention. She was brought before the magistrates for the relatively unassuming action of taking a letter to the Mayor of Chester. The coercion of the state's officer in this instance was explicitly misogynistic, as is evident from his address to her: 'Such Huswives as she was fitter for the stocks, or to be ducked in a Cuck-stoll, then to carry letters, and come before Magistrates to deliver them so unreverently.'<sup>33</sup> The perceived thwarting of social convention by the 'unreverent' Maddock is responded to in a revealing way. Maddock was threatened with the cucking stool (the traditional punishment for disorderly 'huswives' and scolds); hence this law-enforcer directly calls to his aid the instruments of patriarchal power.<sup>34</sup> No wonder, then, that Maddock was said to have challenged his socially inscribed pre-eminence by declaring, 'There is no respect of persons with God.'<sup>35</sup> This case is a pointed example of patriarchalism, showing how clearly the gender-order was being defended and enforced. Throughout the entire country, though, Quaker women suffered the harsh penalties meted out by the authorities.<sup>36</sup> It seems clear that at least some of the incarcerated were being punished for their apparent indifference to the proper roles imagined for women: silence, passivity, chastity and obedience.<sup>37</sup>

The views advanced by those hostile to the Quaker movement arguably made Friends wary of gaining a bad reputation, and so behind the scenes, Quaker leaders found ways of regulating the movement's prophets. As early as 1652, a letter by George Fox set out his approach to inspired speaking. Tentative though the comments are (this letter offers advice rather than dictating practice), Fox commented on acceptable behaviour of believers, as he perceived it. He implied that some Quakers had already delivered inappropriate messages, and had therefore gone 'beyond their measure':

But such as are tender, if they should be moved to bubble forth a few words, and speak in the seed and Lamb's power, suffer and bear that, — that is tender. And if they should go beyond their measure, bear it in the meeting for peace, and order's sake, and that the spirits of the world be not moved against you. But when the meeting is done, then if any be moved to speak to them, between you and them, one or two of you that feel it in the life do it in the love and wisdom that is pure and gentle from above.<sup>38</sup>

What the phrasing betrays is that a spiritual hierarchy was being established, since some could impart judgment 'from above' over their co-religionists. Observing when someone had gone 'beyond their measure' became crucial. Accordingly, when the obscure phrase 'measure' is used in the bible, it sets up distinctions: 'Unto every one of us is given grace according to the measure of the gift of Christ' (Eph. 4:7; see also 2 Cor. 10:13). Unpicking this phrase, Leo Damrosch observes that it relates to varying states of godliness: 'the concept of "measure" was often invoked to suggest limitations in individuals in whom perfection was growing but who were not yet unequivocally perfect,' he notes.<sup>39</sup> Accordingly, Fox's use of the phrase demonstrated his anxiety about the Quaker principle of universal inspiration. Prophets going beyond their 'measure' were to be 'suffered' (or, tolerated) during the Meeting, but correction might come at a later date (this, at least, is what the letter seems to be implying). These Foxian comments were not formalising something as concrete as a set disciplinary code; and yet behind them was the suggestion that, on occasion, Friends' speech required some regulation.

Rarely do the Quakers' published texts indicate what the unpublished letters often engage with: the idea that the prophet might mistake his/her guide. Concern was voiced in the letters about certain individuals who believed themselves to be acting according to God's will, but of whom others had grave doubts. It is instructive to consider the language used to chastise Friends. Indeed, the manuscripts often do not make clear what the source of the problem was: typically, all that remains is a harsh judgment. This word 'measure' is used in the letters in much the same way that Fox applied it. For example, spiritual imperfection is detected in Thomas Harris (deemed 'above his measure') and Richard Myers (believed to be 'above his condition').<sup>40</sup> Going beyond your spiritual capabilities was also described as 'exaltation'. Phyllis Mack deconstructs this phrase in her study of religious women, noting that this implies 'a sense of self-generated, self-centred, wilful energy'.<sup>41</sup> The 'exalted' Richard Ray, Christopher Atkinson, Thomas Elilson, George Bishop, Thomas Ayrey, and Elizabeth Morgan were therefore condemned for asserting their self-will rather than God's.<sup>42</sup> Quakers were worried about the possibility of exaggerating the spiritual process that turned the revelation of God's light into prophecy. In their concerns about women, the letter writers are even more critical, and the sense of being exalted has darker connotations.

One woman who was certainly not perfect according to Quakers, was the Londoner Anne Gargill. She was judged by another Friend to be of an 'exalted spirit'.<sup>43</sup> Such a phrase therefore undermines the prophet's belief that she is godly, since the state of religious selflessness has not been achieved. Anne Gargill's own response to such accusations, as so often in cases when women were criticised, cannot be discovered. Either she never put it down on paper, or her account is now missing from the records. Yet one thing that is clear from her published writing is that Gargill was herself critical of those who sought their own exaltation. Two texts from 1656, published by the Quaker printer Giles Calvert, survive as evidence of Gargill's opinions. *A Warning to all the World* is

defined by Rosemary Foxton as a call to repentance; her other text, *A Brief Discovery*, denounces Catholic 'idolatry'.<sup>44</sup> In both of these pamphlets, Gargill used the word 'exalted' pejoratively. In *A Warning* she asks her imagined readership to explain why their 'hearts [are] exalted against the innocent that calls for purity'.<sup>45</sup> A similar attempt to establish contrasts occurs in *A Brief Discovery*, which accuses Catholics of being arrogant. According to Gargill, who had been a Catholic before being 'convinced', her former co-religionists wrongly believed themselves to be 'exalted above the light'.<sup>45</sup> When addressing others, therefore, Gargill assumed that her motivation was to condemn exaltation. Moreover, for Gargill, the assault on posturing Christians is assertively egalitarian: 'the exceeding wisdom of God wil [sic] dwel [sic] with the poor, and the rich shall be sent empty away.'<sup>47</sup> If Gargill did value herself above the rich, as this comment suggests, then her position was precisely a typical statement of Quaker egalitarianism. It is in no way incommensurate with widely held Quaker beliefs.

Further evidence about why Friends rejected Anne Gargill can be gathered from contemporary sources. Gargill seems to have been expelled from the Quaker movement in about 1657, following accusations levelled against her by fellow Quakers in Amsterdam, where she was briefly resident. Quakers had been attempting to establish themselves in Holland for about three years when Gargill, reaching Amsterdam, fresh from an evangelising mission to Portugal, began repeatedly to criticise them.<sup>48</sup> She appears to have been a disconcerting presence: as letters back to England show, she was immediately perceived as a threat to established Friends' work. William Caton declared: 'shee did labour utterly to destroy and toe scatter.'<sup>49</sup> This image of 'scattering' seems to be suggestive of the community's anxieties about its own survival. 'Scatter' is indeed a word often used in the Bible to describe the Israelites' homelessness, whilst 'destroy' is more immediately aggressive. More specifically, 'scattering' can represent those who divide the religious community: Sarah Blackborrow indeed used the word in this sense when condemning those whose spirit is 'impatient and wrathful [which] scatters and not gathers to God.'<sup>50</sup> The allegations against Gargill, then, seem to indicate that her expulsion was justified by those who were against her as being necessary for the survival of the nascent Dutch community. Women could be represented as schismatics who sought to divide the community, and Gargill was certainly one of the women portrayed in this way.

The signs are that early Quakers attempted to distance themselves from people whom they perceived as a threat to the movement's survival, and that this impulse resulted in the rejection of a number of women. Further details can be gathered from the critic Kate Peters' study of the Quaker community, in which she demonstrates that 'the majority of early cases of discipline revolved around women.'<sup>51</sup> For example, the Yorkshire Quaker Agnes Ayrey was deemed by Richard Hubberthorne to be 'not serviceable to go forth'.<sup>52</sup> Ayrey had been ostracised, and relieved of the Quaker 'service', because rumours had been circulating about her sexual reputation. The letter writer alleges that 'lust and filth and darkness rules in her, and there is a filthy scandal raised concerning her

going to [Samuel] Eaton.'<sup>53</sup> It is, of course, impossible to know whether the extravagant charges against her could be substantiated, but arguably there is a pattern to these complaints against women. Another woman deemed to sully the Quakers' reputation was the Friend who addressed Oliver Cromwell, Mary Howgill. Here, too, the language hints at fears over the community's survival. Howgill was admonished by local Friends who explained that there was, 'little servise for the Lord in her ministry, but Rather hurt'.<sup>54</sup> The common factor in the cases concerning both Ayrey and Howgill is that others believed them to be doing the Quaker movement a disservice.

It could conceivably be argued that the ostracisation of these women Friends alienated by the community was a result of their actions, and not their gender; they were treated as such because they brought discredit to the society. The evidence about these women's errors, it could be observed, does not condemn them *as women* since the language used against them is not explicitly misogynistic. To condemn Howgill's ministry or to be critical of Ayrey because of her supposed sexual proclivities is not a definite disassociation grounded distinctly in gender-terms. There is no explicit phrase here to evidence clearly that patriarchal waryness is the root of these anxieties. Moreover, those other women who have been examined, most notably Gargill, were condemned not for being women, but for 'exalting' themselves, or for going 'beyond their measure'. Such judgments might be seen to be neutral in respect to gender. The distinction that is apparently being made seemingly relates to the Quakers' desire to assess the provenance of the prophet's message. Their intention, as stated, is to identify whether or not the person was acting for God, according to His will, and not misguidedly over-exaggerating their own spiritual talents. To discount a gender-angle in this issue might be as simple as asserting that men too were challenged or expelled, as they were similarly accused of self-exaltation, of adultery, of being a disservice to the ministry. All of these observations have a degree of truth. And yet to deny that these allegations against women exhibit elements of gender-anxiety would be to refuse to accept that there can be misogyny even where its not directly stated, that there is bigotry even where inclusiveness and equality is the accepted aim. Since the Quakers are explicit about assessing a prophet's spiritual talents, and since they see this as a proper concern, their views cannot be seen to have an objective basis. How can the assessment of talent be entirely neutral? The judgments being made might reflect seventeenth-century assumptions about hierarchy and order: ideas that socially and culturally preserved and maintained the overall dominance of men. Is it any wonder that the authority of women speaking as God's witnesses was debated with vigour?

One case, the final to be examined here, points to the Quakers' disinclination to accept women's spiritual authority, even when the prophet ardently believes herself to be a true messenger of God. It has been demonstrated that it is rare for Quaker records to preserve the responses of women to their alienation from the movement; but this is not uniformly the case. Martha Simmonds was involved in the events leading to James Nayler's conviction for blasphemy, one of the most controversial events of the 1650s. She spoke out against London

Quakers who had attempted to restrict her expression of prophetic authority. Only the Quakers' assessment of Martha Simmonds' talent can be explored here, and it is not possible to engage with the consequences of Nayler and Simmonds' allegiance – Nayler's enactment of a Christ's entry into Jerusalem and his eventual punishment. This, in any case, has been exhaustively analysed in numerous scholarly works.<sup>55</sup> Instead, the suppression and silencing of Simmonds by London Quakers will be investigated in order to assess how the movement dealt with women in times of crisis.

Before becoming one of the most infamous women in the Quaker movement, Martha Simmonds' published works directly engaged with the issue of spiritual talent. In her depiction of the prophet's 'calling' to the ministry Simmonds, like Gargill before her, renounced self-will in clear terms. Her published works show that she believed that a person's godliness could be measured by his/her willingness to submit selflessly to God's command. Her approach in 'When the Lord Jesus Came' (a broadsheet [1655]) is instructive; in this publication, she explains that the true believer's task is to 'deny thy self [...] and yeeld [sic] obedience to his will.'<sup>56</sup> This belief in the passive submission of the believer to God is also conveyed in another text where she repeated her concern to transcend self-will. She asserted in *A Lamentation* (1656) that the achievement of selflessness brought union with God: '[then] thou mayest see him to work in thee and thy own works laid aside.'<sup>57</sup> According to these writings, then, Martha Simmonds recognised that it was the prophet's duty to abnegate the self in order to communicate with God, and it is this self-transcendence which she wishes to convey to her readership. Moreover, her tropes for godliness may have been relatively conventional: critics have argued that this kind of representation of the 'selfless' prophetic experience is typical in early Quaker thought.<sup>58</sup>

In London during the spring of 1656, however, Martha Simmonds was criticised repeatedly by others for being too 'forward'. A text written in late-1656, containing her personal account of these events, shows that Simmonds believed that the people who were trying to silence her were repressing God's message. She explained:

Being among the people called *Quakers* in *London*, I was moved to *declare* to the *world*, and often they would judge me exceedingly, that I was too forward to run before I was sent, but nevertheless I loved them well, as being men of *pure life*, but I was moved by the *power*, I could not stay though they sometimes denied me, yet I was forced to go, and *my word did prosper*.<sup>59</sup>

Her repeated sense of being 'moved' indicates that she was responding to the manifestation of God's presence, and this is consistent with her sense of a godly 'calling'. Alternatively, the reputed objections against her (that she was too 'forward') suggest that others believed that she had over-estimated the 'measure' of her talent. 'Too forward' seems to be like self-exaltation, as the words hint at

the fact that she supposedly has not been sent by God. Though Simmonds felt that she was being compelled by God to speak, the veracity of her message was being 'denied'.

Clear evidence of how this denial could take a misogynistic tone comes from another text, this time a contemporary letter that is more explicit about Simmonds' misbehaviour. Martha Simmonds had been told that she had spoken 'in her will'.<sup>60</sup> When she appealed to her friend James Nayler for support, seeking redress for the accusations against her, she was told that because she 'sought to have the dominion' she had better 'goe home and follow her calling'.<sup>61</sup> The language here evidences a willingness to consign women to the private sphere (the home), hence traditional ideas about women's 'proper' place were being mobilised in order to silence her. Even more pointedly, the judgment that Simmonds sought 'dominion', or power, implied that she was perceived as a transgressive woman whose aim was to overturn the natural gender order. It is possible to argue that women's culturally inscribed subordination was never fully challenged by early Friends. By resorting to the language of patriarchy, anxiety about the position of women within the movement is revealed. Ultimately, the group's reputation and survival was paramount. This meant imposing limitations on the expression of the spirit, and the fact that many of the silenced were women is an indication of gender-anxiety.

The cases that have been examined in this study begin to suggest ways in which early Quakerism dealt with its rebellious sisters. Of course, this investigation cannot do more than sketch a few of the cases where gender anxiety seems evident. Prophets could not in fact simply assert that they had an immediate connection to God, and hence an unquestionable right to speak for the movement. Women, particularly, could be represented as schismatics who sought to divide the religious community. It could be argued that the cases of Anne Gargill, Mary Howgill and Martha Simmonds make this clear. On the other hand, Quakerism afforded women the opportunity to express their religious beliefs in the public sphere, and to push against traditional value structures. Precisely why some women were given voice, whilst others were silenced, remains unclear. Perhaps it can never be known why assertiveness was acceptable in some quarters and not in others. Thus, on the basis of her printed texts, Hester Biddle's opinions about spiritual authority were at least as radical, if not more so, than Simmonds' – yet Biddle escaped censure. These further complications suggest profound contradictions at the heart of early Quakerism, and particular ambiguities with respect to women's talents. Gender appears to unlock some of the Quakers' anxieties about their own self-image, and for this reason the rebellious sisters must be considered as exposing the contradictions, and tensions, within the Quaker doctrine of 'equality'.

## NOTES

- 1 Mack, P., *Visionary Women*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994, p. 245.
- 2 Hobby, E., *Virtue of Necessity: English women's writings 1649-88*, London: Virago, 1988, p. 36.

- 3 Braithwaite, W., *Beginnings of Quakerism*, York: William Sessions, 2nd edn, 1981, p. 146.
- 4 Library of the Society of Friends (LSF), Swarthmore (SM) MSS, transcripts II. 527. Richard Hubberthorne to George Fox, 7 day 2<sup>nd</sup> month [April] [1656]. See also LSF, SM MSS, transcripts II. 593. Richard Hubberthorne to George Fox, London, 1656.
- 5 Also see Trevett, C., *Women and Quakerism*, York: The Ebor Press, repr. 1995.
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- 34 See Ingham, M., 'Ridings, Rough Music and Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe', *Past and Present*, 105 (1984), pp. 79-113.
- 35 Howgill, in Sanders, 'The Quakers in Chester', p. 49.
- 36 To my knowledge, there are no quantitative studies comparing women's sufferings to men's. However, the frequency of their detention can be seen at a glance in the standard volume of Quaker martyrology: Besse, J., *A Collection of the Sufferings of the People Called Quakers*, London: Luke Hinde, 1753.
- 37 The Quaker Sarah Tims was informed by magistrates that 'sweeping the house, and washing the dishes was the first point of law to her', see Audland, A., *The Saints Testimony*, p. 8. Two women were put in the stocks in Evesham with their legs spread, and they were told that 'they should not have that between their legs that they should have, & other uncivil words', see Smith, H., *Something Further [...] Evesham*, London: n.pr., 1655, p. 6. When Elizabeth Fletcher and Elizabeth Holmes debated with some scholars, they 'proffered to put their hands under the womens aprons, and asked whether the spirit was not there?', see Haward, J., et al, *Here Followeth a True Relation*, n.pl.: n.pr., n.d., p. 3. Margaret Killam (or Killin) was tried in Cornwall, and 'when they were not able to lay any breach of the law to their charge, they thought to have blemished her with being [absent] from her husband', see Pyot, *The West*, p. 164. Dorothy Waugh was placed in the scold's bridle in Carlisle, see Parnell, *The Lambs Defence*, pp. 29-30. Jane Holmes had been punished as a scold before she joined the Quakers, see Trevett, *Women and Quakerism*, p. 26.
- 38 Braithwaite, *Beginnings*, p. 310. In the Cambridge Journal this letter reads: 'such as are Tender, if yea should be moved to bubble forth a few words & speake in ye seed & lambs power suffer & beare yt that is ye Tender, & if yea should goe beyond their measure beare it in ye meeting for peace sake & order yt ye Spirits of ye world be not moved against you, but yt when ye meeting is done Then if any should be moved of any one to speake to them betweene yourselves or one or twoe of you yt feell it in ye life in ye love & wisdome yt is pure and gentle from above [...] soe in this you have order you have Edification.' See Penney, N. (ed.), *The Journal of George Fox*, 2 vols. Cambridge, University Press, 1911, I, pp. 222-23.
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- 45 Gargill, A., *A Warning*, London: Giles Calvert, 1656, p. 3.
- 46 Gargill, *A Brief Discovery*, London: Giles Calvert, 1656, p. 3.

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- 48 For the Portuguese mission see Cadbury, H. J., 'Friends at the Inquisition at Malta', *Journal of the Friends' Historical Society (JFHS)*, 53:3 (1974), pp. 219-225 (p. 224). See also Hull, W. I., *The Rise of Quakerism in Amsterdam 1655-65*, Philadelphia: Patterson and White, 1938, pp. 272-78.
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- 50 Blackborrow, S., *A Visit to the Spirit in Prison*, London: Thomas Simmonds, 1658, p. 5. Blackborrow's text is in Garman, M., et al, *Hidden in Plain Sight: Quaker women's writings 1650-1700*, Wallingford, Pennsylvania: Pendle Hill, 1996, pp. 47-57 (p. 49).
- 51 Peters, M. K., 'Quaker Pamphleteering and the Development of the Quaker Movement 1652-1656', unpublished University of Cambridge Ph.D. thesis, 1996, p. 209.
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- 53 Nuttall, 'EQL', p. 65.
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- 55 See Damrosch, *The Sorrows*; Bittle, W. G., *James Nayler 1618-1660*, York: William Sessions, repr. 1986; Crawford, P., *Women and Religion in England 1500-1720*, London: Routledge, 1996, pp. 160-82; Carroll, K. L., 'Martha Simmonds, a Quaker Enigma', *JFHS*, 54:2 (1977), pp. 70-84.
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- 57 Simmonds, M., *A Lamentation for the Lost Sheep*, 1655, p. 2.
- 58 Phyllis Mack argues this at length in *Visionary Women*.
- 59 Cited in Farmer, R., *Sathan [sic] Enthron'd*, London: Edward Thomas, 1657, pp. 10-11. Farmer was a vocal critic of the Quakers, so the text must be carefully assessed. This quotation is apparently a transcription of the answers that Martha Simmonds gave to Bristol magistrates following the accusation that she was a witch.
- 60 LSF, Caton MS 3/116, pp. 364-68. Richard Hubberthorne to Margaret Fell, 26.6 [August] 1656.
- 61 LSF, Caton MS 3/116, pp. 364-68.

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