

BROKEN-HEARTED MOTHERS: GENDER AND COMMUNITY
IN JOAN WHITROW *ET AL.*, *THE WORK OF GOD IN A
DYING MAID* (1677)

Naomi Baker

University of Manchester, England

ABSTRACT

This article discusses an early modern autobiographical text in which several female Quaker authors narrate the circumstances surrounding the death of Susanna Whitrow. *The Work of God in a Dying Maid* (1677) represents the Quaker community as a largely autonomous group of mothers and daughters, set against negative and disruptive male influences. In its adoption of clear gender boundaries, the text reflects the new emphasis on gender binaries within Quakerism in the 1670s. As well as exemplifying the ambiguous position of women within the movement at this later stage, Whitrow *et al.* renegotiate wider contemporary representations of women, especially mothers, demonstrating the extent to which Quaker structures continued to disrupt dominant gender discourses.

KEYWORDS

Women, mothers, gender, death, autobiography, identity

The Work of God in a Dying Maid (1677) is a collection of accounts by Quaker women relating to the death of Susanna Whitrow, who 'sickened the 5th day of the 3rd Moneth, 1677', aged 15.¹ Rebekah Travers's foreword focuses on the importance of the dying girl's 'wonderful expressions'. Sarah Ellis also transcribes Susanna's final words, including her prayers for her wayward father, while Susanna's mother, Joan Whitrow, relates further biographical

1. Joan Whitrow *et al.*, *The Work of God in a Dying Maid, being a Short Account of the Dealings of the Lord with one Susanna Whitrow, about the age of fifteen years, and Daughter of Robert Whitrow, inhabiting, in Covent-Garden in the County of Middlesex* (London, 1677), p. 8. Subsequent references will be marked within the article.

information, including Susanna's defence of her mother. The volume closes with Joan Whitrow's 'Testimony Concerning the Loving-Kindness of the Lord' and a short narrative of the death of her son Jason. As well as comprising the contributions of multiple authors, the work employs a variety of genres, including testimonies, hymns, psalms, biographical and first-person accounts. The text also vacillates between anticipated audiences, ranging from the public 'Friends and people' of Rebekah Travers's preface, to the God who is directly addressed in Joan Whitrow's prayer following the loss of her children (pp. 3, 41).

Elizabeth Clarke has remarked of this work that 'as in most Quaker pamphlets, it is impossible to detect a gendered approach'.² As she establishes, spiritual orthodoxies in the later seventeenth century demanded that maternal grief at the loss of a child be silenced by an awareness of more spiritual concerns. *The Work of God in a Dying Maid*, she argues, takes this to an extreme. The text makes

no concession [to] womanly grief...there is no internal debate or external dialogue: maternal grief has been eradicated, along with all natural human feeling, and what is left is an ecstatic spirituality which takes the place of the voice of God or of an authoritative male.³

The 'ecstatic spirituality' which is a central concern of the text, and which, as Clarke observes, is conveniently endorsed in its specifically Quaker form through Susanna Whitrow's dying statements, undoubtedly renegotiates gendered self-representations in the text.⁴ It is therefore difficult to read *The Work of God in a Dying Maid* as providing any general insight into the feelings or articulations of women on the death of their children in the seventeenth century. Yet I would nevertheless argue that the Quaker spirituality that frames the subjectivities of the work's female authors remains engaged with gendered categories in their self-representations. The text therefore offers insight into the construction of radical female subjectivities within the context of specific forms of early modern religious identity.

The early years of Quakerism were marked by transgressive gender fluidity, as the Light within disregarded and deconstructed gender divisions. Yet by the 1670s the movement placed an increased emphasis on separate women's meetings, which were responsible for decisions regarding Quaker marriages,

2. Elizabeth Clarke, 'A Heart Terrifying Sorrow': The Deaths of Children in Seventeenth-Century Women's Manuscript Journals', in Gillian Avery and Kimberley Reynolds (eds.), *Representations of Childhood Death* (London: Macmillan, 2000), pp. 65-84 (76-77).

3. Clarke, 'Heart Terrifying Sorrow', pp. 76-77.

4. Clarke, 'Heart Terrifying Sorrow', p. 76 (76-77).

poor relief, the support of prisoners and the regulation of individual Quaker behaviour.⁵ Quaker women began to be idealized in specifically gendered terms as 'mothers in Israel'. This category, as Phyllis Mack argues, valorized the physical and domestic experience of women as the source of their spiritual authority while simultaneously imposing a conservative model of female identity.⁶ Whitrow's tract engages with this trend by primarily representing Quaker women as bereaved mothers. The tract's seemingly conservative celebration of suffering maternal identity nevertheless indirectly challenges contemporary patterns of thought which potentially blamed mothers for the death of their children. *The Work of God in a Dying Maid* therefore exemplifies the ambivalent position of Quaker women in the late 1670s, as increased gender divisions within the sect imposed orthodox boundaries while also generating models of female identity that resisted dominant formulations.

Whatever the ambiguities surrounding female representation in *The Work of God in a Dying Maid*, male figures emerge in an almost entirely negative light. Whether in the shape of fathers or potential lovers, they are ungodly and disruptive influences, alienated from and threatening to the female Quaker community. The men castigated by the text are non-Quakers, indicating the extent to which Quaker concerns overlaid gender binaries in the self-identifications of Whitrow *et al.* Whatever the gender discourses inscribing the female authors' inferiority, both within and outside of the movement, their possession of Quaker truth grants them a sense of superiority to the men who reject this truth. Yet the fact that the boundary between Quaker and non-Quaker is largely drawn along gendered lines reveals the remaining significance of gender to the authors. On a positive note, the work displays the extent to which later Quaker structures generated the potential for, or at least the potential for imagining, autonomous female spiritual communities. Yet the

5. Quaker women's meetings had existed since the 1650s, dealing with some financial and pastoral matters, but Fox did not encourage their establishment on a wide scale until the early 1670s. See William C. Braithwaite, *The Second Period of Quakerism* (ed. Henry J. Cadbury; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2nd edn, 1955), pp. 272-73; Phyllis Mack, *Visionary Women: Ecstatic Prophecy in Seventeenth-Century England* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), p. 285. Margaret Hope Bacon sees women's meetings as fostering 'a spirit of independence' and self-confidence for Quaker women. See her *Mothers of Feminism: The Story of Quaker Women in America* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986), pp. 54, 42-45.

6. Mack, *Visionary Women*, pp. 239, 246, 344-46. Elaine Hobby argues that later Quaker models and defences of women are 'not radical in the way some have argued'. See her 'Handmaids of the Lord and Mothers in Israel: Early Vindications of Quaker Women's Prophecy', *Prose Studies* 17.3 (1994), pp. 88-98 (90).

portrayal of negative masculine intrusions into the women's community perhaps conversely betrays the authors' resentment towards the censorial male leaders within their own movement, to whom both the women's meetings and the authors themselves, as they were soon to discover at firsthand, were ultimately accountable.⁷

Rebekah Travers's preface establishes the focus of the text on maternal Quaker identities. Travers emphasizes the sentiments that she shares in common with Joan Whitrow, stating that 'as a Mother fearing God', she knows 'what Joy it must be to have a Child that had transgressed to turn to the Lord' (p. 3). She further constructs a shared female experience in the maternal loss that forms the volume's central motif:

none but a tender Mother can tell what it is to have hopeful Children so soon taken from them, and see the Lord is Righteous in what he doth...and I, that have drunk this Cup, and more bitter one, must confess, *The Lord is Righteous in all* (p. 5).

While defending her own spiritual credentials in specifically maternal terms, Travers also praises Joan Whitrow for being a 'tender-hearted Mother', as demonstrated by her 'quiet and patient bearing' of the death of her two children (p. 6). It is thus clear from the outset that the forms of female identity celebrated in the work are inextricable from the Quaker structures and doctrines which were increasingly idealizing women in maternal terms in this period. *The Work of God in a Dying Maid* reveals the extent to which such metaphors generated self-representations by Quaker women that conflated their experiences as mothers with their spiritual identities.

As Susanna lies dying, she yearns poignantly to be granted more time with her mother:

O that I could be with my Mother, the Lord is with her, that I might have a little time longer, that my dear Mother and I might go in the Country, and walk in a Wood together, that we might seek the Lord and never lay our Eyes together till we have found him (pp. 20-21).

Her fantasy entails a reconfiguration of Eden, echoing the concerns of much seventeenth-century writing with its theme of a rediscovery of God in nature. Whitrow's vision accords with early Quaker theology in its emphasis on the believer reattaining prelapsarian perfection. The terms in which she envisages an earthly paradise nevertheless diverge starkly from the conceptualizations of this state by male poets of the seventeenth century. Marvell, in 'The Garden',

7. I am grateful to the anonymous reader who suggested that the negative representation of men within the text perhaps constitutes a critique of Quaker male elders in the 1670s.

for instance, presented Edenic bliss as depending upon the exclusion of any female presence.⁸ Milton conversely depicted Eden in relation to heterosexual harmony, yet the presence of a superior masculinity is clearly fundamental to both of these imaginings of paradise.⁹ Whitrow instead remoulds received images of Eden by depicting an exclusively female community in harmony with God and nature. Adam has been expelled from the garden, leaving mother and daughter to exist in sympathy with each other and with a nature which becomes a cathedral of worship for the religious ecstasies that are mirrored in the echoic prose:

O, my dear Mother, if it please our dear and heavenly Father to spare me this time, we will get us into the Country, to some little remote Place, amongst the Woods, where none can hear us; O there shall our Crys pierce thorow the Heavens, which shall make the Earth to ring, and the Birds shall hear the eccho thereof: O there, my blessed Mother, will we sing Praises, Praises, Praises with rended Hearts, and our mouths in the Dust, to the one holy, holy Lord (p. 36).

Such communion with nature and God is dependent on the absence of men, whose intrusions into the lives of the women spell loss and disruption. In one example of the negativity surrounding female relationships with men in the text, Joan Whitrow relates the rumours that have circulated in relation to the true nature of Susanna's illness:

Concerning that False Report that was raised by some Envious persons, which she formerly kept Company with, hearing of her Change from that Vain Conversation that she had formerly lived in, they reported, *That she was in Love*, and that *that was the Cause of her Distemper* (p. 16).

Joan offers Susanna her consent to marry the man in question, yet Susanna's response emphasizes the threat that male influences pose to female intimacy:

that Man is no more to me than one I never saw with my Eyes, neither will I ever have him, if he had all the Possessions of the Earth: It's true, there was something betwixt us, he being very urgent with me upon the Account of Marriage, proffering to settle a considerable Estate on me, and my Father being at that time a little harsh to me, I thought I would set my self at Liberty (p. 17).

8. See Elizabeth Story Donno (ed.), *Andrew Marvell: The Complete Poems* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1972), pp. 100-102.

9. See John Milton, *Paradise Lost* Bk IV, ll. 287-324, 440-91 (ed. Alastair Fowler; London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1968), pp. 212-14, 220-490. Aemilia Lanyer's defence and celebration of Eve and her female descendants in *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* (1611) provides one exception to this rule. See M.H. Abrams (ed.), *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, I (New York: W.W. Norton, 6th edn, 1993), pp. 1059-1067.

Paternal harshness combines with the lover's persuasive rhetoric to threaten Susanna's relationship with her mother, encouraging her to establish her 'liberty' from familial ties. Yet her 'better consideration' entails a recognition of her mother: 'I told him, I would do nothing without my Father and Mother's advice' (p. 17). Consideration of her father alone encourages her to consent to marriage, yet the presence of her mother introduces a contradictory impulse of familial loyalty. In light of this bond, the 'liberty' represented by the male lover becomes altogether less appealing. The suitor is 'unwilling' to recognize the role of her parents, further signifying his disruptive influence. Susanna concludes that

in that and some other things I was dis-satisfied; I considered, if I should have him, I should be ruined; so, that small Affection I had to him, I with-drew: and before I fell sick this last time, I did desire, never to see him more: and now, my Mother, I am clear of him, and all men living (p. 17).

Rather than a simple rejection of a particular individual, the final comment elevates the episode into a recognition of the destructiveness inherent in all relationships with men. Instead of precipitating a retreat into solipsism in the manner of Marvell's male speaker in 'The Garden', Susanna's separation from the opposite sex is seen to facilitate a greater intimacy with her female companions. The questionable 'love' represented by her non-Quaker father and suitor is displaced by a depiction of the spiritually wholesome love of Quaker women, as the narrative proceeds from Susanna's emancipation from 'all men living' into an ecstatic account of her emotional and spiritual empathy with her mother: 'Oh, my bowed down and broken-hearted mother! What hath been thy sufferings in this Family?' (p. 18).

The text imposes meaning on the deaths of Whitrow's children by representing the losses as divine judgements against Joan's husband, Robert Whitrow. The dying person in early modern death scenes has privileged access to truth, and it is Susanna herself who points the finger at her father: 'Ah! how often hast [my mother] told my Father, *The Lord would visit him with sore and grievous Judgements, if he did not Repent, and turn from the Evil of his Wayes?*' (p. 18).

Such allegations of the father's moral responsibility for the suffering of the family displace any blame for the deaths away from the mother. Pamela Hammons notes that the death of children was potentially associated with inappropriately assertive maternal behaviour in this period, resulting in bereaved mothers writing poems which paradoxically renounced or sought to disprove the author's 'creative intellectual agency', as well as avowing her reconciliation to God's will.¹⁰ Ben Jonson's poem 'On My First Son' never-

10. See Pamela Hammons, "If Once That Harp be in my Hand": Unconventional

theless reveals that the shouldering of responsibility for the loss of a child was not unique to women in the era. Jonson confesses his 'sin' of having 'too much hope' for the boy in terms that suggest that his transgression is directly connected to the child's demise.¹¹ Mildmay Fane, Earl of Westmorland, similarly represents the near-fatal sickness of a child as God's reproof, 't'cause me turn a new leaf o'er'.¹² While bereaved parents of both sexes could therefore relate the fate of their children to their own moral condition, motherhood was particularly prone to association with monstrous and 'unnatural' figures in this era, suggesting that transgressive mothers were a subject of particular cultural anxiety.¹³ Discourses surrounding the death or deformity of children often tapped into this anxiety, as the fate of a child potentially provided tangible evidence of the mother's true nature. The exoneration of Joan Whitrow's parental role at the expense of her husband's in *The Work of God in a Dying Maid* thus embodies a radical challenge to popular stereotypes and superstitions surrounding maternal identity and responsibility.

Modes of Resistance in Seventeenth-Century English Women's Verse' (Unpublished PhD thesis, Cornell University, 1997), pp. 18, 27. Hammons cites examples such as Mary Carey's 'On ye sight of my abortive Birth' (1657), which asks 'the reason why [God] tooke in hand his rodd?/What he doth spy; what is the thinge amisse/I faine would learne; whilst I ye rod do kisse' (repr. Germaine Greer et al. [eds.], *Kissing the Rod: An Anthology of Seventeenth-Century Women's Verse* [London: Virago, 1988], pp. 158-61 [159]).

11. See Hugh Maclean (ed.), *Ben Jonson and the Cavalier Poets* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1974), p. 8.

12. 'To Kiss God's Rod; Occasioned upon a Child's Sickness', l. 18, in Maclean (ed.), *Ben Jonson*, p. 201.

13. Milton's Sin and Spenser's Error are obvious examples of grotesque maternal monsters in the era. See *Paradise Lost*, Bk. II, ll. 778-95 (Fowler edn, pp. 126-27); *Faerie Queene*, Bk. I, ll. 130-33 (Abrams [ed.], *Anthology*, p. 523). Diane Purkiss discusses the popular perception of a link between a child's deformity and the transgressive intrusion of its mother's agency in 'Producing the Voice, Consuming the Body', in Isobel Grundy and Susan Wiseman (eds.), *Women, Writing, History 1640-1740* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1992), pp. 139-58. Mack also notes that the death of a child could be linked to the mother's sin (*Visionary Women*, p. 37). Toni Bowers comments that figures of the maternal were the 'site on which battles over agency and authority were fought', noting the Augustan obsession with images of failed motherhood as a sign of anxiety regarding unstable systems of authority in society as a whole. Concentrating on the eighteenth century, she nevertheless cites the previous century as the point of origin for many of these anxieties, which were popularly played out in relation to figures of the murderous mother. See her *The Politics of Motherhood: British Writing and Culture, 1680-1760* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 14, 17-18. For details of the ways in which women could be blamed for the deformity or death of their children, see also Olwen Hufton, *The Prospect Before Her: A History of Women in Western Europe, 1500-1800* (London: Fontana, 1995), pp. 179-80, 201.

Whitrow's final prayer appears wholly orthodox as she articulates her submission to God's will. Yet the prayer also continues to defend her role as a Quaker mother, deflecting the criticism potentially invited by her situation:

Oh Lord! did I ever ask Riches or Honour of thee... did I ever ask Silver or Gold, or Houses or Lands for my Childrens Portion? but I have asked for the Fear of the Lord; for I know right well, if they had that, they had all Treasures (p. 41).

Susanna also repeatedly exonerates her mother from any shadow of moral blame:

Come my blessed Mother, I have something to say to thee, Thou art *Mary*, thou art *Mary*, my Mother thou hast chosen that good part which shall never be taken from thee; thou shalt sit continually at the feet of the Lord, Ay, this is my Mother's portion; O, what portion is like this, this is more then to sit in the Thrones of Princes (pp. 32-33).

Despite its apparent conservatism, Susanna's comparison of her mother with the intellectually curious biblical figure of Mary refutes the denigration of women's intellectual agency often inscribed in discourses surrounding demonic or 'failed' motherhood.¹⁴ Susanna's defence of her mother at times becomes still more explicit:

They say, I have heard them say, that *my Mother is so grounded in her Religion that it is impossible ever to turn her*. My Mother is grounded indeed, she is established upon the Rock that shall never be moved; my Mother shall never be moved; her Name is written in Heaven; yea, in the Lamb's Book of Life; it is sealed, it is sealed, the Lord hath told me so, and bid me tell her; *There should none be able to pluck her out of his Hand* (p. 32).

Rather than being responsible, perhaps through a transgressive intelligence, or, as suggested by this passage, because of a certain religious stubbornness, for the loss of her daughter, Joan Whitrow's exemplary religious identity is seen to facilitate her daughter's spirituality. Susanna acknowledges her mother's influence in terms that conflate the vindication of Joan and her Quaker beliefs with which the text is concerned: 'how great hath been thy Care and Pains, which thou hast taken to bring us into the Fear of the Lord!' (p. 18).

Susanna's prophetic outbursts are profuse, sometimes lasting for four or five hours at a time, and are dependent on the presence of her mother. The dying girl is said 'hardly [to] suffer her mother to be from her, if she could help it' (p. 13). Once again, it is her father who is the negative influence. When her father alone remains at her bedside, her ecstatic speech is abruptly stemmed: 'in which time she uttered little or nothing, but lay Groaning' (p. 13). Her speech returns only when she is able to address her mother once more: 'Ah!

14. See Hammons, 'If Once That Harp', p. 18.

My dear Mother, O my blessed Mother, the Lord has shewed me, my Mother shall have a double Portion of his Spirit' (p. 14).

Susanna repeatedly asks her mother to pray on her behalf, emphasizing further the spiritual importance of the Quaker mother: 'My dear Mother, pray for me; for, whatsoever thou askest of the Lord, it shall be given thee' (p. 22). The displacement of the role of the Virgin Mary within reformed thinking is therefore countered here, at least, by an alternative elevation of Quaker mothers as spiritual intercessors. Milton reproduced gender hierarchies through describing Eve as mediating her experience of the divine through Adam ('He for God only, she for God in him'), yet Susanna displaces such models with an exclusively female chain of worship, in which the mother connects the daughter with the divine.¹⁵ 'Now is that Vision fulfilled, which the Lord shewed thee [that is, her mother] concerning me, *That my soul should bless thee, and thy Soul should bless the Lord*' (p. 19).

Prophetic utterance from one woman to another forms a recurrent motif in the work. Susanna receives a revelation of the 'upright' heart of Rebekah Travers, and Joan Whitrow relates an earlier prophecy concerning her daughter's godly status (p. 19). The intimacy engendered by the women's articulations is evident as Susanna proclaims her love for Travers and her desire for her companionship (p. 19). The volume thus consistently portrays a female Quaker community as a spiritual and emotional haven where nurturing and suffering mothers and daughters are able to project their voices and exercise their spiritual authority.

It is significant, however, that this idealized community is represented in the text in relation to scenes of death and loss. Tarter notes the large number of death narratives by Quaker authors in the later seventeenth century, when female Friends in particular are increasingly likely to portray themselves in connection with death scenes.¹⁶ She argues that such representations signal a reaction to the suppression of enthusiasm within the sect from the 1670s onwards, which repressed the earlier feminized radicalism that had located divine and prophetic expression in the female body. Later male leaders '[ex(or)cised] the feminized discourse of their religion, violently "cutting out" the authority of women's bodies and voices from Quakerism's corpus with their editorial knives'.¹⁷ Death narratives nevertheless

15. *Paradise Lost* IV, l. 299 (Fowler edn, p. 213).

16. Michele Lise Tarter, 'Sites of Performance: Theorizing the History of Sexuality in the Lives and Writings of Quaker Women, 1650-1800' (Unpublished PhD thesis, Cornell University, 1993), pp. 205-206.

17. Tarter, 'Sites of Performance', p. 205. See also, pp. 28-42, 78-81; Michele Lise

became women's sites of resistance to the revised Quaker theology, for in them their bodies again become the site of divine prophecy... Through the corporeal theatrics of death, these women... used their prophetic albeit decaying flesh as a sign of disruption in the new Quaker order.¹⁸

Tarter's analysis points to the ambivalence surrounding female Quaker self-representation in these later decades of the seventeenth century, when increasingly constrained models of female identity nevertheless potentially provided the terms of resistance to increased male control within the movement. While envisaging female community and prophecy only within a context of passivity and death, *The Work of God in a Dying Maid* turns the experience of loss into the terms by which Joan Whitrow and, by extension, her Quaker beliefs and community, are defined and valorized.

The Work of God in a Dying Maid therefore presents a radical model of female identity, drawing on Quaker celebrations of the spiritual importance of 'mothers in Israel' in order to resist the wider culture of blame that surrounded bereaved mothers, while representing women, even within the ostensibly 'private' and passive context of the deathbed, as the mouthpieces of God, with authority to speak out against men and public institutions. Joan Whitrow warns her husband of the Lord's imminent judgement, commanding him to repent, while Susanna indicts 'That Church, as they call it, in *Covent-Garden*' (p. 25), of which she used to be a member. She is unrestrained in her condemnation, which is recorded through the cooperation of another woman: 'She was exceedingly filled with the indignation of the Lord against the Priests, and spoke very much against their idle Practices and their Abominable Wayses... these words the Maid-Servant writ down as she spoke them' (p. 28).

Susanna identifies herself with Old Testament prophets in the text, citing Moses, Jeremiah and Habakkuk as her models, and thus signalling the extent to which Quaker concepts of the Light within potentially transcended received gender identifications:

O then I will speak of thy wonderful Power; yea my Voice shall be as the sound of the Trumpet, which shall convert Sinners unto thee; yea I will sit in the Dust, and Cover my Head with Ashes, and put on Sackcloth within and without (pp. 24-25, 27).

Tarter, 'Quaking in the Light: The Politics of Quaker Women's Corporeal Prophecy in the Seventeenth-Century Transatlantic World', in Janet Moore Lindman and Michele Lise Tarter (eds.), *A Centre of Wonders: The Body in Early America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001), pp. 145-62.

18. Tarter, 'Sites of Performance', p. 211.

Susanna's mimicking of Old Testament figures remains imaginary as a result of her early death: such possibilities were contingent upon God restoring her to her 'former strength' (p. 23). Yet the fact that a young girl could figure herself and her voice in such terms indicates the powerful potential of Quaker structures, even in this later period, to generate unconventional formulations of the female self. Susanna also intercedes for her father in prophetic terms which frequently include spiritual commands, for instance, 'there is no way for him but to watch and pray continually, lest the Tempter prevail' (p. 10). Her anguished prayers for her father at times involve her identifying herself in messianic terms. She offers to take his sins upon herself ('let me bear them Lord' [p. 9]), while figuring her suffering as a form of crucifixion: her head must be 'nailed' to the pillow, in order to 'overcome the tempter', while her victory is signified with the cry 'It is finished' (pp. 34, 35).

As well as representing Quaker women's authoritative prophetic voices, imitating male models with which they implicitly assert their equivalence, the text also exhibits the capacity of female Friends to project their voices into the public arena. Rebekah Travers's preface implies that her own role was critical to the publication of the text, which appeared to her to be 'worthy to be known and retained' (p. 6). Travers's account is succeeded by testimonies by Sarah Ellis, while Joan Whitrow's account is 'witnessed' by the maidservant Ann Marting (p. 16). The quasi-legal diction of the 'witnesses' who 'testify' in support of Whitrow's narrative betrays a desire for the work to transcend merely private circles. The mutual efforts of the friends are indispensable in the effort to achieve public credibility. Instead of constructing an image of a chastened, repentant and muted mother, or effacing female authorial agency in the manner identified by Hammons as characteristic of maternal-loss poetry, the volume thus conversely celebrates the public and collective female Quaker voice, even in relation to the death of children.¹⁹

The Friends' emphasis on the internal location of the divine, together with the semi-independent role carved out for women within the movement, as women's meetings took responsibility for significant pastoral and financial management, enabled the female Quaker to imagine herself as to some degree 'autonomous', free from the necessity of defining herself in relation to earthly men. Women's meetings nevertheless remained in an ambiguous relationship with the men's meetings to which they were ultimately accountable, an inconsistency noted by Hugh Barbour as he highlights the 'independent, separate and almost equal status of women's meetings'.²⁰ Joan Whitrow's repre-

19. See Hammons, 'If Once That Harp', p. 18.

20. Hugh Barbour, 'Quaker Prophetesses and Mothers in Israel', in J. William Frost and

sensation of God's role in her family betrays the contradictions surrounding the position of Quaker women at this historical moment, as she retains ideologies of female reliance on male support and provision while nevertheless revealing the potential of Quaker belief to render earthly male figures redundant: the Lord tells her that he, instead, 'will be a Father unto thy Children, and an Husband unto thee' (p. 44).

The process by which the text came to be published also highlights the complications surrounding gender structures in the movement in the 1670s. The publication of the tract indicates the extent to which Quaker women's writing often escaped the silenced, private sphere which, as Clarke observes, was allotted to the writings of most bereaved mothers in the era.²¹ *The Work of God in a Dying Maid* was nevertheless subject to the editorial powers of an all-male Quaker censorship committee. Following the severe persecution of the Quakers and other Nonconformists in the Restoration period, the Society of Friends became increasingly concerned to regulate the image that they were presenting to the wider society through their prolific writings. In 1672 they consequently began to censor their own publications, rejecting more extreme elements within texts.²² Records show that Whitrow's text was censored by the committee, which ordered her to edit certain sections deemed to be 'to her own praise'.²³ As well as reinforcing the impression that the text is as concerned with Joan Whitrow's defensive self-representation as it is with the death of Susanna, such information is a vital reminder that we rarely have unmediated access to the articulations of early modern women. While Whitrow's Quaker context appears to have inhibited her self-representation, and has certainly restricted our access to her writing, it is nevertheless important to recognize that rather than distracting from, or suppressing, some 'authentic' female identity or voice, Quaker frameworks are conversely fundamental to the terms of Whitrow's identity. The intrusion of male censors nevertheless suggests a possible parallel between the negative influence of male figures within the tract—whose presence disrupts the prophetic output of the women—and the perceived impact of the male leaders of Whitrow's own movement. The fact that Whitrow later left the Friends, and subsequently

John M. Moore (ed.), *Seeking the Light: Essays in Quaker History* (Pennsylvania: Pendle Hill, 1986), p. 53. Bacon notes that in principle men's meetings could overrule the women's decisions, 'Mothers of Feminism', p. 44.

21. Clarke, 'A Heart Terrifying Sorrow', p. 65.

22. See Braithwaite, *Second Period*, p. 280. See also Luella M. Wright, *The Literary Life of the Early Friends 1650–1725* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1932), pp. 97–108.

23. Morning Meeting's Book of Records, July 1677, fols. 17–18.

published outspoken tracts that would almost certainly have fallen foul of the censors, adds further weight to the suggestion that *The Work of God in a Dying Maid* may express some level of resentment towards the increasingly patriarchal structures within Quakerism.²⁴

Later Quaker structures therefore contained inherent contradictions, as they celebrated female autonomy, even generating radical assertions of female superiority, while nevertheless increasingly subordinating this 'autonomy', at least in textual form, to censorial male authority. Whitrow *et al.*'s work also exhibits tensions in relation to the unified community of women that it ostensibly constructs. Rather than consistently celebrating the feminine, the text differentiates sharply between godly Quaker women and fashionable 'Jezabel[s]', a religious divide that is overlaid with class nuances (p. 41). In terms that echo the condemnation of worldly gendered fashions contained in Fox's *Journal*, Susanna launches into a tirade against women who waste their time 'in adorning themselves, like *Jezabel's* Patching and painting, and curling their monstrous Heads' (p. 30).²⁵ Fashion-consciousness was inextricable from social standing and rank, as Susanna discovered to her detriment when she attended a fashionable church in Covent Garden:

How often have I adorned my self as fine in their fashions as I could make me yet they have looked upon me with scorn and dispised my dress, and said unto me, *How like a Taudrey you have drest your Self, you are not at all in the mode* (p. 26).

In response to such snobbery Susanna went 'immediately up into my Chamber, and locked the Door, and altered all my laces, and so I have gone to their Worship in the afternoon drest in their mode, and then I have pleased them' (p. 26). The pressure to be 'in the mode' of desirable gender and class coordinates is nevertheless transcended through her later conversion to Quakerism, which subsequently sets Susanna against the vain and materialistic women of her former acquaintance: 'O what matter for fine houses, or silken apparel' (p. 36).

24. In 1689 Whitrow was apparently no longer affiliated to a religious organization, stating that she was 'one that is of no sect or gathered people whatsoever...so I walk alone as a woman forsaken; I have fellowship with them that lived in caves, and in dens, and desolate places of the Earth, of whom the world was not worthy'. *The Humble Address of the Widow Whitrowe to King William* (London, 1689), p. 8. She published several other tracts, including *Faithful Warnings* in 1697, which criticized the fact that 'poor silly souls...labour hard, to maintain the pride and luxury of the rich'. 'To the King and Parliament', n.p., *Faithful Warnings...to the Several Professors of Christianity in England, as Well as those of the Highest as the Lowest Quality* (London, 1697), cited in Mack, *Visionary Women*, p. 386.

25. For Fox's discussion of fashion, see J.L. Nickalls (ed.), *The Journal of George Fox* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1952), p. 205.

Instead of speaking on behalf of all women, *The Work of God in a Dying Maid* therefore constructs its definition of ideal femininity in opposition to 'worldly', upper-class and, most importantly, non-Quaker 'modes' of womanhood. The vindication of Joan Whitrow as a mother, for example, does not apply to all bereaved mothers. The terms by which she defends herself in her final prayer establish a contrast between herself and the implied figure of a mother concerned only with her child's earthly status. For such a mother, implicitly, the loss of a child is deserved; it is only because Whitrow requests the 'fear of the Lord' (in specifically Quaker terms) for her children, rather than money, that she is able to escape the blame for their deaths (p. 41).

It is only within Quaker ranks that Whitrow's text is able to envisage a community of women that transcends social and economic divides. Despite the remaining difference in textual status afforded to different women's words (Rebekah Travers writes her own account, whereas the servant Ann Marting merely testifies to the validity of another's), the text implicitly presents the testimony of all of the women as vital to the cooperative female discourse generated around the bed of Susanna. This interaction does not, however, extend to women outside of Quaker circles.

The increasingly passive, suffering ideal of the self which emerges in Quaker writing of the era, including the later pages of Fox's *Journal*, is also a relevant backdrop to the particular image of endurance celebrated in *The Work of God in a Dying Maid*. The apparently 'feminine' model of suffering, patience and self-sacrifice that is idealized in the text is aligned with a perhaps politically necessary Quaker model of the self, formulated within a context of severe persecution, rather than simply a female identity.

The brief narrative of the death of six-year-old Jason at the end of the volume also indicates the manner in which the 'feminized' Quaker ideal of identity constructed in the text potentially transcends sex divides. Jason, along with Susanna, articulates a desire to be with his mother in paradise, stating 'Mother, I shall Dye; oh that you might Dye with me that we might both go to the Lord together' (p. 50). He also rejects his father in order to engage with God, as he asks 'his father to let him turn from him to the wall, to pray' (p. 48), mirroring the apparently anti-paternal sentiments of his sister. The work therefore concludes with the possible suggestion that masculinity is capable of being refigured within Quaker circles.²⁶ Quakerism rejected contemporary idealizations of masculine rationality and self-control, celebrating instead the ecstatic forms of spiritual knowledge and relationship associated

26. I am grateful to the anonymous reader who suggested that Jason's inclusion potentially pointed to an alternative male identity in the text.

with the female body and, in this text, with the Quaker community itself.²⁷ The final hint in the text that Quaker male identities can be redeemed through an alienation from normative masculine models complicates the gender binaries around which the work is ostensibly constructed, pointing towards the possibility of a Quaker identity that ultimately transcends biological difference.

It is therefore important to qualify the emphasis on biological sex that *The Work of God in a Dying Maid* appears on one level to construct: the gendered subject of Whitrow's text is clearly inextricable from its Quaker context. Yet the fact that the ideal Quaker self is represented in the work in almost exclusively female terms nevertheless attests to the potential ease with which female Friends of the later seventeenth century reconciled their gender with their religious allegiance.²⁸ Fox's *Journal* articulates similar 'feminized' ideals towards its conclusion, and struggles to reconcile such patterns with contemporary forms of masculinity.²⁹ Yet Whitrow, Ellis, Travers and Marting are explicitly able to identify the Quaker subject with a biologically female and particularly a maternal self, even as they renegotiate the implications of this location.

Susanna has turned from a 'vain' life of romantic heterosexual interest and fashion-conscious sensuality, both characterized by a regard for male opinion, into an involvement with a female community, a movement indistinguishable from her conversion in the narrative. She recalls with disbelief her former ignorance, especially her previously restricted opinion of womankind, indicating the new horizons of possibility opened up by her Quaker allegiance: 'O, how have I been against a Woman's speaking in a meeting? But now, whether it comes from Man, Woman or Child, it is precious indeed' (p. 20).

While the ecstatic nature of a Quaker identity has the power to transcend gender divides, *The Work of God in a Dying Maid* illustrates the extent to which, especially in the later decades of the seventeenth century, such radically dissident frameworks were placed in dialogue with more orthodox discourses of the self. Whitrow and her fellow authors resist orthodox feminine models, as they refuse to be silent, celebrate an autonomous female spiritual community, and defend a bereaved mother against the potential criticisms invited

27. For a discussion of the 'feminized' nature of the early Quaker movement, see Tarter, 'Sites of Performance', pp. 28-42, 78-81. For analysis of the impact of Quakerism on masculinity, see my "'Out of the Paths and Steps of Solid Men": Masculinities in George Fox's Journal', *Literature and Theology* 14.2 (June 2000), pp. 145-59 (published under Naomi Winter).

28. See Mack, *Visionary Women*, p. 246.

29. See my 'Out of the Paths and Steps of Solid Men', *passim*.

by her position. In its consistent denigration of male influences, the text further undermines the dominant ideologies of male primacy which were becoming increasingly evident within the Quaker movement itself at this time. Yet such reworkings of gender hierarchies do not preclude the work from largely reproducing gender binaries, in which Quakerism validates a separate, suffering, female identity. The formal organization of the Quaker movement into men's and women's meetings in the 1670s thus generated representations of female identity from within the sect that differ significantly from the ecstatic, fluid and de-gendered identities that characterize the early writings of the Friends of both sexes. Such developments illustrate the extent to which articulations of gendered identity are inextricable from precise social and cultural locations. Whitrow *et al.*'s text also reminds us that despite the apparently increasingly conservative nature of the Society of Friends as the century progressed, the movement continued to generate authoritative, autonomous female voices, enabling women (as well as men) to resist orthodox gendered models of self-representation.

The specific religious preoccupations of *The Work of God in a Dying Maid* may initially seem alienating in their resistance to what we might view as an 'authentic' human response to the death of a child, yet the text demonstrates the extent to which such apparently 'universal' human experiences and sentiments are shaped by and in relation to historically and culturally specific frameworks. While illustrating the cultural difference that inevitably characterizes early modern Quaker self-representations, the work also reveals the interaction between apparently ecstatic, religious discourses of the self and categories such as gender and class in the self-representation of early modern women. *The Work of God in a Dying Maid* therefore demonstrates the specific strategies of self-representation employed by female Friends in the 1670s, while its renegotiation of dominant categories of gendered, religious and maternal identity highlights the remaining radical potential of Quaker discourses even in these later decades of the movement.

AUTHOR DETAILS

Naomi Baker is British Academy Postdoctoral Fellow in the Department of English and American Studies at the University of Manchester.

Mailing address: Department of English and American Studies, University of Manchester, Oxford Road, Manchester, M13 9PL.

Email: naomi.baker@man.ac.uk