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# OBEDIENCE TO THE INWARD ORACLE: AN ANALYSIS OF SOME EARLY QUAKER WOMEN'S PUBLICATIONS*

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## ABSTRACT

An undeniable tension exists in human nature between conscience and external authority. This dichotomy was no less existent in seventeenth-century England, when George Fox began preaching about the inward voice—or Christ's light—as a greater authority than any external entity. His thoughts were radical (anachronistic; *fanatical* or *enthusiastic* would be the seventeenth-century terms) because they challenged the hierarchical framework of Early Modern England. The notion of obeying internal authority was particularly 'radical' for Quaker women, whose gender offered them little opportunity to challenge the roles society imposed on them; by challenging external authority these women were bringing into question societal norms as they pertained to gender.

This paper explores the compositions of three seventeenth-century Quaker women—Hester Biddle, Anne Whitehead, and Elizabeth Bathurst. It considers the obedience they gave to their inward voices, and the obstacles they overcame to be obedient. The practical outcome was literary composition of contemporary and historical import; the theoretical result was a challenge to a patriarchal system of thought. This paper acknowledges both the practical and theoretical results, and proceeds to study the texts in light of each.

## KEYWORDS

Bathurst, Biddle, Anne Whitehead, seventeenth-century, literature, gender

* In quotations from seventeenth-century sources, the archaic 'f' has been replaced with its modern alternative, 's.' The same is true for 'VV' which has been replaced with '[W].' All other spelling and syntax has been maintained. Italics in quotes are original unless otherwise stated.

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In 1660 Richard Blome published a book with the short title, *The Fanatick History*. Amongst sundry charges lay the following glaring statement:

> women, who should be cloathed with modesty, and are prohibited by Apostolicall injunction...to speak in the Church, denuding themselves of all shamefacedness, with brazen faces vent their brain-sick phancies under pretext of impulsion of the Holy Spirit (Blome 1660: 69-70).

This was one of several assertions, found in various publications, that denied women the right to enter the public sector. The propriety of women's public appearances, which had been widely debated in mainstream English society for decades, was experiencing a similar consideration in religious sectarianism. In 1666, Margaret (Fell) Fox, spiritual mother of Quakerism, made an especially eloquent retort against women's imposed silence. Because proclamation from pious women was, in (Fell) Fox's mind, purely the divine usage of a mortal mouth or hand, she failed to see how any human could be so heretical as to challenge a woman's right to inspired expression:

> the Church of Christ is represented as a Woman; and those that speak against this Woman's speaking, speak against the Church of Christ... Those that speak against the Power of the Lord, and the Spirit of the Lord speaking in a Woman, simply by reason of her Sex...speak against Christ and his Church, and are of the Seed of the Serpent...(Fell 1666: 2)

Her second husband, George Fox, spiritual conceiver of Quakerism, frequently supported this assertion in print. He was particularly eloquent in 1675: 'But what spirit is this', he asked, 'that would exercise lordship over the faith of any' (quoted in Ingle 1994: 197).

George Fox consistently defended the right of women to speak, prophesy and minister, both orally and in the form of written word. While Quaker women did not, in general, formally address 'the woman question', as the debate concerning the intellectual capacity and the morality of women was known, their very writings are evidence of their self-confidence concerning the same.[1] It is probably due both to the encouragement of such male leaders as Fox, and to the precedent of publishing women in mainstream society, that Quaker women could progress in the public sector with any particular achievement.[2] Questions could be raised here about the definition of women's

1. '[In the] Reformation...there was talk of the "woman question" and of "the war between the sexes". The theme of male-female conflect crops up in numerous sources...The persistent conflict between men and women constitutes a historical constant whose forms changed in response to changing times and circumstances' (Zemon Davis 1993: 2).

2. Quaker support for female leadership was not unanimous amongst its seventeenth-century leaders. John Wilkinson and John Story were among the loudest opponents, but Fox's opinion carried much weight. For a brief, but informative, history of the Wilkinson-Story controversy, see Lloyd pp. 25-27. William Rogers was arguably the greatest opponent to Fox's equal-opportunity arguments for women—see Ingle pp. 252-55.





liberty if it is dependent on men's endorsement, but it remains historically significant that women were experiencing any liberty at all. The men's endorsement—at least that of Fox—was based on the notion that God was no discriminator of persons. This means that Quaker women felt liberated from conventional masculine authority by submitting to only one leading, that being of no man, but of God.

Only more recently has scholarship seen an abundance of research that considers early Quakerism in terms of a sort of early emerging feminism.[3] Despite the wealth of literature now available on this subject, little has been done in terms of analysis on those texts that offer the greatest insight into seventeenth-century feminine perspectives of Quakerism: the writings by the early Quaker women themselves. There are many essays on gender roles within early Quakerism, which borrow fragments of primary texts for support, but the texts as separate entities have largely been ignored.[4]

The works have been subject to such neglect in part because they have not been viewed as conscious literary efforts. Because Quakers professed to be speaking and writing God's words verbatim, their works are the result of sacred dictation, and to edit them for clarity or technical astuteness would be tampering with the sacrosanct. Also, since Quaker writers were not writing for public praise, they were not necessarily concerned about literary conventions or criteria.

For Quaker writers, therefore, an interesting subversion of literary expectations was emerging. In mainstream society, both sexes of Quaker writers were subjected to criticism by the literate male community. Such adjudication was of no import to Quakers, who ignored public praise and did not write for male endorsement. This was particularly significant in the case of Quaker women. In the words of the twentieth-century scholar Foxton, 'the inner conviction of divine authorization and guidance provided them with motivation, reassurance and defence against criticism' (Foxton 1994: 12); it is with this authorization that women began to write.

Because of the prolific nature of many Quaker women, a great number of

3. Christine Trevett and Phyllis Mack are prominent writers on this subject.

4. This statement made with acknowledgement of *Hidden in Plain Sight*, which anthologizes several Quaker women's texts. It only briefly introduces each genre, however, and I purport to further the important groundwork the editors of this book have made.

publications are still in existence, each of which deserve thorough study.[5] This paper has space only to address a very few; therefore it will consider three of the various genres in which women wrote, and the author begs her reader to consider the wealth of remaining literature so worthy of exploration. I have chosen these three works because of the pattern of obedience to conscience, which emerges from each of these texts, as well as the fact that they represent a chronological cross-section of Quakerism in its early decades of development.

Acknowledgement for the publication of these female-authored texts must be given to the general Quaker support of the Old Testament belief in the democratization of prophecy and social justice. Anne Whitehead's epistle, considered below, serves as an example of one woman who progressed beyond her own alleged notion of a woman's role. Like Hester Biddle and Elizabeth Bathurst, whose works I address and were published before and after Whitehead, respectively, she has transcended patriarchal restraints—the charge of the Light of Christ is greater than the charge of any human, and each of these women were compelled to break the bonds of societal oppression. Early Quakers believed their society was the result of God's curse on earth, and stove to recreate a prelapsarian state, in which women and men were help-meets rather than servants and masters, respectively. They believed in the imminent return of Christ, and their earliest literature is based on this expecatation.

Unlike Biddle's early and fiery exhortation, Whitehead was writing at a time of transition for Quakers.[6] The early belief in the imminent return of Christ was waning, and the religious group was striving to redefine itself in light of

5. Of the 637 titles listed in *Women and Literature of the Seventeenth Century: An Annotated Bibliography Based on Wings Short Title Catalogue* (Smith and Cardinale), 171 are identified as Quaker women. This statistic found in Foxton p. 3.

6. In the years between Biddle's and Whitehead's publications, both internal and external censorship had caused many would-be writers to reconsider their contributions to Quaker literature. Lloyd notes that from 1662–79 and from 1685-1693 printing in England was controlled by *An Act for preventing the frequent abuses in printing seditious, treasonable and unlicensed Books and Pamphlets and for regulating of Printing and Printing Presses.* It is surprising in light of this external censorship that so much Quaker literature was successfully published. Internal 'censorship' began even earlier. Already by 1656 George Fox was advising Quakers against writing and speaking too liberally. In 1672, the first Yearly Meeting of county representatives appointed ten Quakers to oversee the publication of books, so that only 'approved' literature would be distributed. In 1673, the Second Day's Morning Meeting was established to gain tight control over literature that might harm Quakers' cause (Lloyd 1950: 147-150). The nature of the three women's works explored in this paper correspond to the changes in control of publishing that was taking place.





the fact that they still felt they were God's chosen people, but that they had misinterpreted the signs of Christ's short return. The group had grown in number, and communication was integral in order to keep united a group, separated by both distance and persecution. Bathurst, publishing her apologetic many years after Whitehead's epistle, strives to defend Quakers in the face of accumulating external criticism. Margaret Benefiel explains that even though Quakers 'criticized systematic theology as 'empty notions', as 'soaring airy head-knowledge', which distracted people from true faith...persecution forced them to clarify their beliefs and to move toward a systematic statement of them' (Benefiel 1996: 309). Bathurst's apologetic exits to defend a supreme authority; the genre of prophecy, used by Biddle—among other Quakers of both genders—serves to warn those who fail to bow to the same.

Prophecy is a fascinating genre, partially because of its long history in both the oral and literary traditions. Also interesting is its long history specifically amongst women. Prophecy by both genders was always both revered and scorned, but even the most sceptical of listeners was forced to take its impact into consideration. As Dorothy Ludlow explains, 'popular credulity was widespread and hardly confined to the ignorant masses' (Ludlow 1985: 100). She further states this credulity is understandable when one remembers the long Judaeo-Christian and Classical traditions associating women and prophecy: the women vatics in the Old and New Testaments, Greek and Roman sibyls, heretical Montanists, Rhineland mystics, the Beguines—all contributed to a legend of feminine sensitivity to divine visitations (Ludlow 1985: 100).

Prophecy, of course, was not confined to women, but the long history of women in this genre offered an opportunity for early Quaker women to explore their public voices. Most Quakers did not exploit this liberty in order to advance the cause of women; rather, each prophet professed a genuine sense of divine inspiration, from a God who did not discriminate along gender boundaries. Certainly, in the case of the Quakers, the fact that both women and men were prophesying was not only acceptable, but was also biblically sanctioned, and served as evidence to support their eschatological beliefs.

Central to Quaker theology were the words of the Old Testament prophet Joel, echoed again in the Acts of the Apostle. Joel prophesied: 'And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh; and your sons *and your daughters* shall prophesy' (2.28, italics added). The apostle Peter reiterated this prophecy on the day of Pentecost, as evidence that God's spirit moved among God's chosen people (Acts 2.17). Quakers, filled with this same divine calling, were inspired by the peoples of the early church, and believed that the Holy Spirit directed their prophetic activities.

Hester Biddle, a Quaker prophet from the South of England, was amongst many women who based her prophecies on biblical precedent. Her declaration of 1662, entitled *The Trumpet of the Lord Sounded Forth Unto These Three Nations* (*'Trumpet'*) is heavily rooted in biblical prophecy. What is particularly interesting about this work is its dual focus, paralleled with its double-voiced discourse: not only is *Trumpet* a prophecy of judgment against 'these three nations' (Scotland, Ireland and England), but it is also a declaration of the divinely endorsed status of Quakerism. Biddle conveys these themes employing both God's voice and her own. Her double agenda is clear from the work's outset; indeed, it is even suggested in the very title of her publication.

*Trumpet* is a carefully entitled work. The trumpet as sounded forth in her title is borrowed from Joel 2.1-2, in which a trumpet serves as a bidding to all people, and in v. 17, as a warning to priests and ministers of the Lord. Also found in this reference is a call for all the inhabitants of the land to 'tremble', a word frequently cited by Quakers as support for their Spirit-filled tendency to do the same. This would, in fact, be brought up against them in anti-Quaker works that charged them of extracting any reference to trembling in the Scriptures to support their cause.[7] This did not deter Quakers, at least initially, in citing such references to their benefit.

A second Old Testament usage for the trumpet was as a terrorizing blast intended to stir the enemy into panic. One can see it employed as such in Judg. 7, in which Gideon's soldiers sounded the trumpets and 'all the hosts ran, and cried, and fled' (v. 21). Certainly Biddle was attempting not only to call the people of these three nations to repentance, but was also hoping to stir up terror in what she saw as the corruption of the leaders of the Church of England.

*Trumpet* fluctuates between threats of judgment, and pleas for a repentant return to what the Quakers viewed as God's original intent for Christianity. Adopting God's voice, Biddle shifts between divine judgment, and reversals of the same; this convention—the reversal of judgment—can be observed in both Joel and Hosea's prophecies. Biddle professes God's words: 'if thou wouldst return saith the Lord Almighty, I will heal thy Back-slidings, and forgive thee all thy sins; I will withdraw my bitter Cup' (Biddle 1662: 10). These words of love are reminiscent of Hos. 11, in which God determines not to 'execute the fierceness of my anger' (v. 9). This compassion is combined with firmness,

7. See, for example, Richard Blome's *The Fanatick History* (1660) which, prior to Biddle's work, stated that 'For the justification of it, [Quakers] abusively allege those Scriptures that mention anything of quaking' (Blome 1660: 67).





both in Biddle's text and in Hosea.[8] Again compatible with Hos. 11 and its juxtaposition of God's relenting and God's wrath, the Lord's voice in *Trumpet* declares, 'I looked down from the Throne of my Glory...my Wrath waxed hot' (Biddle 1662: 10).

*Trumpet* is influenced by Joel and Hosea in other manners. Biddle, like Joel, emphasizes the democratization of prophecy and, like Hosea, the necessity of social justice, both of these, especially the notion of democracy, radical assertions in patriarchal seventeenth-century society. Biddle's text states:

> both the old and young, lame and blind lyeth in your streets...crying for bread, which even melteth my heart, and maketh the soul of the righteous to mourn: did not the Lord make all men and women upon the earth of one mould (13).

The call for an egalitarian society, created through social justice, is reinforced by the Quaker encouragement of the democratization of prophecy, as was previously exemplified by Biddle's title.

While *Trumpet* is significantly rooted in Joel and Hosea, its stylistic and thematic adherence to biblical precedent is not limited to these two prophets. John Sawyer identifies several varieties of Old Testament prophecies, from many of which Biddle extracts various conventions. She most explicitly imitates the messenger speech. This is comprised of a sacred commission to the prophet, followed by a summons to a selected group or place, a description of the present situation, and finally a future prediction of judgment or salvation.[9] *Trumpet* does not relate any clear commission to Biddle in particular; however, Quakers as a group are called to warn the rest of the world, and *Trumpet* reveals this general commission: 'I the Lord of Host [*sic*] hath caused my Sons, and Daughters...to come unto thee...to warn thee, and call thee to Repentance' (Biddle 1662: 8). Here, too, is the Joelesque call for the democratization of prophecy.

Also in the vein of the messenger speech, *Trumpet* includes a summons to the people God is addressing: 'Oh! hearken unto the Light of Christ' (Biddle 1662: 11). Biddle's description of London's present situation, and her utterances of God's future wrath, are not given in any particular order, but both are present in her work. Incidentally, Hosea is also noted for his little regard for literary structure. In *Trumpet*, one highlighted problem concerns England's rulers, who 'spendeth God's Creation upon your lusts, and doth not feed the

8. Sawyer states that 'Hosea's blend of firmness and compassion is unique in eighth-century prophecy, but typical of Deuteronomy and Jeremiah' (Sawyer 1993: 119).

9. For biblical examples of these classifications, see Ezek. 6.2 (commission), Amos 3.1 (summons), Mal. 1.7 (present situation), Amos 1.14 (future prediction).

hungry, not cloath the naked' (Biddle 1662: 13). Biddle prophesies that 'if you will not do Justice and ease the oppressed, and set the Captives free, the Lord will overturn you, and destroy you from being a People... for his sword is in his hand, and it will cut you down' (Biddle 1662: 15).

In addition to the clear prophetic judgment against England's fallen people, Biddle's prophecy contains another form of the messenger speech, which she directs at the Quakers. This is the prophecy of salvation, delivered as an encouragement: 'the Covenant of the Lord is made with you, and his Power and Life shall not depart from you, nor from your Seed forevermore' (Biddle 1662: 16). Not only is this consistent with a messenger speech's salvation utterance; it is also faithful to the Quaker writing style of the period, which often includes a form of friendly exhortation.[10]

*Trumpet*, with its clear message to the people of the nations of England, Ireland and Scotland, is evidently a prophetic messenger speech. However, it employs the conventions of other types of biblical prophecy, such as the woe utterance found in the books of Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, among others. Biddle cries, 'Oh Woe be unto you *Bishops, Priests, Deacons, Friers,* and Jesuites, and all other Officers under you' (Biddle 1662: 15). Also found in the books of Isaiah and Ezekiel are prophetic poems, which Biddle, admittedly poorly, also imitates:

> In this glorious day, in which *Zion* is rayed in beauty bright,
> To stand in her strength against this dark Night
> Whose Clouds are so many, and Skie so dim,
> That *Zions* Beauty can hardly be seen;
> But the Lord is risen in this his glorious Day,
> To sweep *Bishops, Prelates,* and Clouds away (Biddle 1662: 15).

Biddle has not only emulated the biblical prophets stylistically and thematically; she has also adopted psychological similarities. For instance, Old Testament prophets are marked by their inner compulsion to speak, despite their possible unwillingness.[11] Biddle makes no comment on her willingness, but clearly feels the sense of obligation, the calling of conscience, in spite of the

10. Foxton remarks that 'the expression of mutual exhortation, inspiration, and friendly advice' is characteristic of early Quaker writing (Foxton 1994: 24). One example can be found in the letter from the *Country Women's Meeting in Lancashire* c. 1675–80, which includes the celebrated reminder that 'though wee be looked upon as the weaker vessels, yet strong and powerfull is God, whose strength is made perfect in weakness, he can make us good and bold, and valliant Souldiers of Jesus Christ' (quoted in Brown and Stuard 1989: 28).

11. See Exod. 4.1, Jon. 1.3, Isa. 6.8—Moses and Jonah were unwilling prophets, while Isaiah was eager to deliver God's message.





possible consequences: 'I am moved of the dreadful and terrible God to warn you' (Biddle 1662: 16), and 'this the Lord hath put into my Heart, and I cannot forbear but Write' (Biddle 1662: 17) are the most explicit examples of her sense of responsibility.

Biblical prophecy was insistent upon fulfillment; false prophecy was legislated against as inscribed in Deut. 18.9-22. A false prophet is she or he who speaks in the name of the Lord, but whose prophecy does not come to pass. To these God executes fierce judgment. Early Quakers upheld this criterion for distinguishing divinely inspired from false prophecy, and Biddle meets expectation. The prophecies of judgment uttered before 1665 were considered fulfilled by the Great Plague of 1665–66, and the Fire of London in 1666.

*Trumpet* is soundly rooted in biblical prophecy; however, its importance as an historical text is not dependent on its prophetic tendencies. As a literary work, it is also worthy of examination. Most evident is Biddle's lavish imagery, particularly depicting the city of London. In every instance, London is in a dependent or humbled position; she is one who needs either taming or healing, and God is That which redeems. Interesting to note about the imagery is its feminine nature—not only are the wanton or weak things depicted as feminine, but also are the images of God.[12] Except for the image of God as conqueror, each image suggests a healing figure, an attribute commonly associated with women, or even an image which is wholly female. Of London, Biddle warns Quakers to beware of this City 'for her works are Vanity and falsehood, the Poyson of Aspes is under her tongue, and Deceit is in her hands' (Biddle 1662: 17).

Not only is London a dangerous woman; she '*sitteth as a Queen*' whose Glory extends to 'the end of the Earth' and who perceives herself to be unconquerable. However, God here appears in the image of Conquerer, and London 'shall know his terrible stroak' (Biddle 1662: 9). Juxtaposed to the lofty image of Queen is the disreputable image of harlot whose 'Bed is defiled' but who is nonetheless 'famous and beautiful' (Biddle 1662: 9). Biddle prophesies that her 'Glory shall perish, thy beauty shall be turned into ashes... because thou art covered with a dark Cloud of Sin and Transgression' (Biddle 1662: 9). Less beautiful still, London is a leper 'full of running sores', but God is a healer who can 'bathe and make thee white' (Biddle 1662: 8).

More affectionate images of London also appear in the text. London is an

12. Phyllis Mack explains that both male and female prophets employed a repertoire of symbols weighted with images of masculine authority, and that, most often, 'womanhood' was used metaphorically to identify those who could not preach (1992: 174). Biddle's feminine imagery becomes more interesting in light of this.

infant, and God is the 'tender Father and loving Nurse even from thy Cradle' (Biddle 1662: 8). London is also a 'Sheep without a Shepherd' and a 'Dove, devoured by the Lyons' (Biddle 1662: 10). Each image, positive and negative, depicts a city that needs correction or redemption, and God is juxtaposed with each of these images as the medium for such salvation. God is also depicted as a refresher whose 'sweet showers' and 'pleasant rains' fall 'from his Throne like silver drops' and 'doth distil upon our Hearts' (Biddle 1662: 18). This image is created, however, to depict God's relationship with the Quakers, who appear in this text as 'Lights in this dark City', God being the source of this Light, the 'glorious morning Star' (Biddle 1662: 16).

Imagery paints a clear picture while, simultaneously, rich alliteration offers a lively aural experience. Biddle despairs over London: 'mine Eyes as a Fountain Floweth forth' (Biddle 1662: 8), and she laments that the Quakers have been 'Bruised, Beaten, Knocked down, Killed' (Biddle 1662: 9). Later in the text she entreats London to leave off 'your old wayes and Worships' and to 'learn the *new* and *living way*, which is the way in the Wilderness, though a wafering man...shall not err' (Biddle 1662: 13).

A subtler rhetorical device in Biddle's text is the use of paradox, particularly in reference to God. God doles out firmness and compassion, ruination and redemption. God is also a counsellor who hides comfort, and a Prince of Peace who takes away peace: 'The Everlasting Counsellour and Prince of Peace is come, and coming to take Peace from thee, and to hide comfort from thine Eyes' (Biddle 1662: 7). He is also simultaneously a consuming and refining fire: 'that which will not remain in the Furnace, must be consumed by the Fire of the Lord; for the most high and Glorious King is a trying and purifying his Children in the Furnace...that they may come forth as...well refined Gold' (Biddle 1662: 12).

Also to be commended is the literary balance of Biddle's work. She matches her dual focus, discussed above (p. 140), with a dual-voiced discourse, which utilizes the voices of God, and Biddle-as-God's-messenger. She fluctuates between these two voices without much attention to proportional representation of each, but they both emerge as strong voices, both condemning religious laxity and praising Quaker determination. *Trumpet* is not exclusively a prophecy; it is also a piece of Quaker defence literature, juxtaposed with its prophetic attacks. The defence, however, is not due so much to external opposition, as to an absolute assuredness of its rightness.

The clear indication throughout *Trumpet* is that Quakers are called by God, as demonstrated above in the messenger's allusion to a general Quaker commission. Biddle further states: 'the Lord is on our sides, and we fear not'





(Biddle 1662: 11). Biddle charges London of being misled, by Envy, into persecuting Quakers (Biddle 1662: 9), and that God is against London because of its inhabitants' persecution of Quakers: 'I *am the* Quakers *God*...I am utterly against all that do oppose them' (Biddle 1662: 11). She remarks further, adopting a derisive tone: 'do you think that the Lord is such a one as your selves? or are you so vain to believe, that he winks or joyns with you in Perssecuting, Knocking down, and spilling our blood in your Streets' (Biddle 1662: 13).

This same derision can be observed in her exaltation of Quakers: 'we are not like the World, who must have a Priest to Interpret the Scriptures to them' (Biddle 1662: 12). Not only are they superior exegetes; they also have a superior morality to the priestly apathy towards the three nations' conditions (Biddle 1662: 9). Biddle cannot help but comment on the irony that the laxity of the magistrates and priests goes unpunished, while God's chosen people 'are they that are Punished by thee, and whose Sufferings are deeper than any People upon the Earth' (Biddle 1662: 9). To further ally Quakers with God, Biddle superimposes Quaker morality and simplicity of style onto God, creating, perhaps unconsciously, an image of a Quakeresque God: 'the Lord of Heaven and Earth loaths your *Worships,* your *Singing,* and the noise of your *Organs* doth the Lord abhor' (Biddle 1662: 15).

Quakers are God's chosen people, and Biddle identifies them with the chosen peoples of the Old Testament. She reminds London that 'God hath a remnant in thee' (Biddle 1662: 10), and encourages herself and other Quakers that 'the Lord will go along with us, as he did with *Abraham* in a strange Land' (Biddle 1662: 11). She likens their rescuing from God to 'the gathering of the Exiles into *Abraham's* bosome' (Biddle 1662: 16). Biddle even declares a covenant between God and Quakers that is steeped in Old Testament imagery. This covenant is an excellent sample of Biddle's writing style, both as prophecy and as a defence of Quakerism, and so deserves to be quoted at length:

> This is my Decree, and it shall live forever, and remain World without end; and if thou canst cause [*sic*] the rain from raining, or the Stars from shining, or the Sun from going her Course, or giving light to the Nations, then mayest thou alter my Decree with my People, whose seed shall be for number as the sand upon the Sea shore, and for Multitude as the Stars of Heaven, and they shall shine in Glory more brighter than the Sun at noon day, in the Firmament of my Power, when the generation of the wicked, shall be cast into the Lake, which is prepared of God, for the king of darkness and his Subjects (Biddle 1662: 11).[13]

13. Compare this with the very similar covenants between God and Abram and Sarai in Gen. 13-17.

Quakers were adamant that they alone were God's people with whom such a covenant was made. Certainly their assuredness was not endorsed by the Church of England, nor by the other emerging religious sects. Because of the opposition and persecution they faced, it was imperative that they communicate with their adversaries, in order to persuade them to relax the ferocity of their opposition. It was also essential that they communicate with each other. The importance of communication grew proportionately to Quakerism's numeric and spatial growth.

Barbour makes the claim, which remaining evidence supports, that the epistle was one of the genres most frequently used by early Quaker women. Indeed, the history of women and epistles is a long one, and Early Modern women may have written in this genre because of the security of precedent. However, letter-writing ought not to be regarded patronizingly simply because there was a precedent for it. The epistle is integral for communication, and by it Quaker women wielded power and influence.

What is unique about early Quakers' letter-writing is the fortitude with which they advanced in this genre. Quaker women were not writing letters solely to pass on trivial information. On the contrary, they wrote letters to make public their opposition to various laws, to encourage monarchs and priests to reconsider their authority in light of their subordinate position to God, and to question the attacks of their opponents. It does not seem to be the case that early Quaker women wrote in this genre because it was 'safe'. Rather, they used this as an effective medium by which to communicate God's message to the world. It is interesting to note the shift in genre from Biddle's 1662 prophecy, an offensive (as opposed to defensive) outpouring of words, with little regard to the 'impediment' of her gender; this came from an assurance held in the early, more egalitarian days, untempered by internal schism and external persecution.[14] Foxton notes that, with the realization that 'the end' was not necessarily so near, more practical tracts were published (Foxton 1994: 28), as opposed to fiery early work like Biddle's (see footnote 6).

The message that prompted Anne Whitehead to write her portion of *An Epistle for True Love, Unity and Order in the Church of Christ* (*'True Love'*), published in 1671,[15] concerned the schism within Quakerism. Although she begins

14. Much of this internal schism was due to the deaths and imprisonments of many of the outstanding Quaker leaders of the early years (such as James Nayler, Edward Burrough, Francis Howgill, William Dewsbury, and George Fox). The successors were at first too inexperienced and unknown to offer significant help to those societies threatened with extinction due to the lack of united leadership (Lloyd1950: 6).

15. Mary Elson wrote the latter portion of this letter, but, for the sake of length, her worthy contribution will not be addressed in this article.





her epistle with a call for unity and order 'so that none may take our Crown' and so to set 'good Examples and wholesome Paterns in our Practices' (Whitehead 1671: 3), *True Love* is not exclusively an encouraging exhortation. What makes it so interesting is the philosophical question it raises about the liberty of conscience. Whitehead evidently sees the 'discord, disorder and confusion' within Quakerism to be in part due to the opposition some Quakers have to a set of 'imposed' rules, which they see as infringing on their liberty of conscience. Whitehead has prepared an eloquent defence against such opponents. Through addressing three common complaints about Quakerism, Whitehead articulates her understanding of the conscience. It is ironic that her conscience necessitated her cross-examining the attack on the infringement of individual conscience within Quakerism.

Whitehead maintains that conscience is not a subjective essence, fostered, formulated and ruled by the individual. Rather it is an autonomous essence, bestowed upon a person in a particular measure, and ruled by Christ. The first complaint by which Whitehead exemplifies her definition follows: 'Women's Meetings are imposed: why do you compel any contrary to their Freedom' (Whitehead 1671: 6)?[16] Whitehead maintains that nothing is imposed, that 'all are left to the Measure of Truth in them' (Whitehead 1671: 6). Truth, however, is not subjective, a notion that will also be maintained in Bathurst's *Truth*, examined below; if one feels her liberty is being infringed upon, it is merely that her Measure of Truth, which is given 'according to our Measure of Light of Christ Jesus' (Whitehead 1671: 6), is smaller.

Conscience is not subjective, because Truth, which lies in the conscience, is 'one and the same in all' (Whitehead 1671: 6). Why, then, does it appear that conscience is being infringed upon? This Whitehead addresses through the example of a second complaint: 'It is Imposition...for Marriages to offer their Intentions to the Consideration of the Women's Meeting' (Whitehead 1671: 6).[17] The complaint seems not to derive from the fact that the meeting is one of *women* (although there was a complaint against Women's Meetings, which

16. Around 1659 in London, the first Women's Meeting began; during earlier persecution women had found some comfort and influence as a group, and so it was encouraged that they continue to work corporately towards various projects, supplementing the work of the men. Obviously, there are liberating and marginalizing sides to such a notion, but such an exploration would be another paper in itself.

17. Because Quakers rejected the authority of clergy, marriage was carried out unconventionally—the procedure involved appearances before both Women's and Men's monthly meetings, in order for members to examine the motivation behind and the rightness of the potential union.

will be addressed below), but rather that going to more than one meeting is superfluous.

Whitehead's argument is that self-will blinds conscience, and therefore one cannot be too cautious when decision-making. The weightier the matter, the more devotedly one must seek the guidance of the autonomous conscience. A couple's reasons for getting married might be selfish and wrong, but the reality of this will be marred by their desire; therefore it is good that they should have help in making a right decision by people whose judgment is not spoiled by self-will. Whitehead's reasoning here becomes weak; she states that it was no burden to come once, so coming a second time should also be non-problematic. Despite this, her argument supports the work as a whole, and her point in this second part remains clear: those who feel their liberty of conscience has been trampled have merely falsely identified conscience, through the blinding desire of self-will.

Whithead's consideration of conscience continues, using a third complaint as an example. This is that Quakerism is not the same as it was originally; Quakers have 'gone from the beginning' (Whitehead 1671: 7), and have implemented Quaker Meetings, which were not part of its original ideal. Acknowledging this, Whitehead takes this opportunity to comment on the strength conscience gains in numbers. Some are blinded by self-will, as in the case of a hopeful couple. It would follow from this that they are 'weak in the light' (Whitehead 1671: 9), meaning they have not fully grasped the notion of their 'inward Oracle', and so their access to conscience is smaller. Therefore, they need guidance by those whose conscience is stronger, because they have a greater measure of the Light (Whitehead 1671: 9), this of course being found within the stronghold of the Quaker Meetings.

Meetings were not essential in the beginning because the organization was so much smaller that they were not necessary for the maintenance of unity (Whitehead 1671: 7-8). However, in order to maintain unity now that the group is so big, Meetings are integral. Whitehead contends that these Meetings do not stifle conscience, because they are 'no other but what is consonant to the Conscience, swayed and regulated by the Light of Christ Jesus, in which is the true Liberty of the Conscience' (Whitehead 1671: 8).

Despite it being steeped in Quaker terminology, *True Love* has articulated a notion that would stimulate the interest of Quakers and the larger society. A second theme emerges in Whitehead's work which is less steeped in Quaker terminology, and more frequently addressed in this Early Modern world: the role of gender. Why did Whitehead address gender roles in her work? Perhaps one can view Whitehead's tentativeness concerning the role of women to have been imposed on her by the criticism she anticipated for this capable work.





Perhaps she was foreseeing that which she would be forced to defend, and chose to stave off the extra criticism sure to come if she failed to put her sex in an 'acceptable' place.

Whitehead has already dared to defend the role of women in Meetings, especially as it pertains to marriages, stating that 'it is reasonable to consider...a Marriage hath an equal Concern in the Woman, as in the Man; and 'tis as reasonable to consider the Woman may have as near a Concern in that matter with the Woman, as the Men on the other Part' (Whitehead 1671: 6). Whitehead chooses not to overstep her oppressive boundaries too far, by clarifying a woman's role in and outside of Women's Meetings. Quaker women are allotted a nurturing role, visiting the sick and the destitute; this, then, should and would be the main goal for Women's Meetings. In no way are they trampling on the authority of 'the men Friends, who discharge their places, to whom the gladly women always give the pre-eminence' (Whitehead 1671: 5).

Interestingly, Whitehead furthers this comment with an egalitarian thrust: *both* the Brethren and Women Friends are to be 'in their places, not seeking Rule over one another, but that we may be Furtherers of one anothers Joy, and be each others Crown' (Whitehead 1671: 5-6). Again, perhaps knowing she is treading on thin ice, Whitehead outlines the role of women outside of Meetings: they are to keep at home, where they can be discreet, chaste and sober, and love their husbands and educate their children (Whitehead 1671: 6). Curiously, whilst she consents to the necessity of loving a husband, she has left out the common command that follows, which is to obey.[18] Perhaps this simply went without saying, or perhaps in the omission lies the point.

For the most part, Quaker women, like Whitehead, limited themselves to select genres, despite the number of women writing. The modern critic Barbour indicates that 12.5 per cent of early Quaker authors were women (in Stoneburner 1986: 62-63).[19] Most of these Quaker women writers composed prophecies, epistles, and memorials for dead friends. While some of these compositions were a means to keep in contact with the extended network of Quakers, some had a more complex agenda. In the hands of Whitehead, for example, the epistle has become a tool of subtle attack, and blatant defense—not so unlike later theological work by other Quakers. In general, theological

18. A scriptural citation which juxtaposes love and obedience, and was commonly used in Early Modern English publications, was Eph. 5.21-25. A very common scriptural quotation, which emphasized a woman's subjection to a man, without addressing the man's duty to love her in return, was 1 Cor. 11.3-13.

19. Other studies show the disproportionate number of publishing women who were Quakers. Crawford estimates that 20 per cent of women's output for the whole seventeenth-century was by Quaker women, who did not begin publishing until the 1650s.

tracts and other polemics were men's domain. However, certain women did venture into the stereotypically men's sphere of apologetic, the reasoned defence, Margaret Fell Fox being among the most celebrated of such authors. Another Quaker woman who crossed this gender divide was Elizabeth Bathurst, whose writings include *Truth Vindicated by the Faithful Testimony and Writings* (*'Truth'*), published first in 1683.

Despite the unusual nature of this venture into deliberate apologetic, one could argue that many of the early Quakers' testimonies could in fact be read as vindications of their faith. There often seems to be only a fine distinction between the two genres, and *Truth* serves as an example of this. Whilst it is explicitly an apologetic, the entire last third is written as a testimony of Bathurst's own journey into Quakerism. She perhaps proved more bold in her overtly apologetic style, but the truth remains that female Quaker apologetics are not so rare. Other women, fearing inevitable criticism, merely concealed their apologetics in the autobiographical and biographical genres. The greatest difference, then, lies in the deliberate and systematic approach to Bathurst's work, a necessary development due to further cynicism from the inside and greater persecution from without.

Even if it is the case that other Quaker women couched their divinely-compelled writings in 'softer' genres in order to avoid patriarchal opposition, such boldness as it was can be applauded.[20] Foxton remarks: 'the existence of these critical tracts indicates that given the incentive of profound religious conviction women writers of the period were prepared to take full advantage of the right to individual thought and expression which the doctrines of Dissent had extended to women' (1994: 30). But even if the Reformation heritage had somewhat eased a woman's journey into critical writing, these same women were still addressing a more hostile, non-dissenting society, and had to remove their sandals in order to tread more softly on the holy ground of men.

Bathurst would certainly have been aware of her opposition, from both within and outside of Quakerism. However, *Truth* does not directly address a question of gender; in this work, Bathurst is more interested in other matters.

20. Patriarchal opposition was an issue both internally and externally to Quakerism. The 'feverish level' of female involvement in Quakerism, as Ludlow (1985) points out (Ludlow 1985: 112) was stifled from its early days. She remarks that 'the general trend during the last decasdes of the [17th] century was towards channelling female energy and enthusiasm into the institution of Women's Meetings'. This was due to the criticism of 'women's sometimes wild behaviour' (Ludlow 1985: 113), and because 'they stirred up local hostility to male Quakers...the definition of 'inappropriate' was extended to less frenzied exhortation' (Ludlow 1985: 113). The Quakers, faced with external criticism and persecution felt that 'if female forwardness could hurt the cause, then it...must be suppressed' (Ludlow 1985: 116).





Part One is an 'answer to some controverted Points, ranked under Ten Heads' (Bathurst 1695: Contents page). The first of these 'ten heads', and the one this paper will address, concerns the Scriptures and how they are 'said by some, This People called Quakers do not own' (Bathurst 1695: 1). This she addresses, along with a variation of this criticism, which admits that Quakers do acknowledge Scriptures, but strictly as a moral history, and not as 'the [W]ord of God and the Rule of Faith and Life' (Bathurst 1695: 2).

One example of such an attack can be found in *The Fanatick History* by Richard Blome. In this work Blome charges Quakers with Popish, heretical, and hubristic tendencies. In Blome's view, Quakers contend 'that it is dangerous for the ignorant and unlearned to read the Scriptures', and says this is not far removed from Papal prohibition of the same (Blome 1660: 126). Also according to Blome, Quakers claim 'Scripture is not the word of God, nor a standing rule'. He calls them 'grosely Ignorant, or wilfully malicious, or both'. He says that by exalting Christ over Scripture Quakers 'debase the Scriptures and deifie the light within them' (Blome 1660: 127).

In response to claims such as Blome's, Bathurst launches an eloquent defence against the misunderstanding of Quaker approach to Scripture. She first maintains, *'they do believe all things that are written in the Law and the Prophets'* (Bathurst 1695: 2). However, she urges readers to reconsider their exegesis. Bathurst contends that God, who was the original inspirer of the Scriptures, remains the inspirer; therefore, Quakers acknowledge the present inspirer as superior to the authority of the Scriptures. Her point is that God as an entity, and not the Bible, is the Word; it follows that God—and not the Bible—is the final authority: 'Jesus did Inspire his Prophets and Apostles, in writing of the Scriptures: But still, *he is the Word*' (Bathurst 1695: 2, italics added). This is why she is compelled to write—the living God has stirred her conscience and she must obey this inner voice, and write.

Bathurst foresees opposition to the assertion that the living God may take preference over that God's very words, as found in the Scriptures. She realises that some people would say the biblical prophets call their *actual* written prophecies by the name of 'the word of the Lord'. She argues rather that 'the Prophets did not call the Prophecies and Writings the [W]ord of the Lord (for they were the Lord's Words) he being the [W]ord of the Lord thet [*sic*] came and said unto him: The Prophecy was *that which he said*' (Bathurst 1695: 3, italics added). She then identifies various Scriptural references for support, including Gen. 15.1 and Rev. 19.13, both of which indicate the living God being the Word, not the Scriptures in and of themselves.

Bathurst then argues that one must 'distinguish between the *written Words,* the *Writing* or *Letter,* and the *living Word*, which is a *quickening* Spirit' (Bathurst

1695: 6). The Scriptures, she says, merely *signifies* a writing. Therefore, divine authority comes not only from the Scriptures but also from the Word itself, which is 'in Christ Jesus, whom his People do believe; and his is the Rule by which they live' (Bathurst 1695: 6-7). She draws support for this principle from Gal. 2.20 and 1 Cor. 2.10, which each maintain that it is the Spirit, or Christ himself, that reveals truth to people. Bathurst's original exegesis, and her compelling of others to do the same, were still fairly foreign fields to the English woman writer.

*Truth* articulates another point concerning Scriptures, radical for the period in which Bathurst wrote, although fundamental to Quaker belief. In an age terrified of eternal damnation, Christendom maintained the need to evangelize to 'heretics' who were otherwise doomed to live in ignorance of Christ and a consequent eternity in Hell. Quakers were active evangelists, and their missionary journeys were extensive. However, Bathurst and others maintained that Christ's Light (God's communicative and guiding aspect) could dwell even within the 'pagans and heretics'. Due to the fallibility of the humans who are burdened with the great commission to evangelize to the world, it is utterly necessary for Christ's Light to extend beyond that which humans can achieve. Bathurst urges her readers to understand how this relates to the Quakers' less-emphatic stand on Scriptures:

> yet can I not think, that the God of infinite Wisdom and Grace, whose Mercy is over all his works, would leave Mankind in so great a Concern, whereon their Eternal Salvation is depending, to such a Rule alone for *guidance* therein, as is subject to Concealing, Mis-translation, Mis-interpretation, False-Application, as we find the Scriptures have been by Corrupters of them (Bathurst 1695: 9).

Further, not only ought the embracing of Truth not depend on mere mortals' fallible efforts and finite knowledge; it is also essential that Christ's Light (which is Truth) extend itself on the parts of the world that Christendom has failed to reach (Bathurst 1695: 9). Therefore, rather than using Scripture as the final Authority, one must be able to obtain access to 'that inward Oracle (which is a Measure of God's Spirit, whereby we obtain access to him...)' (Bathurst 1695: 10).[21]

Because the first part of *Truth* refers so frequently to the notion of Truth, Bathurst devotes the second part of her work to defining Truth's principle, also called the Christian Principle. Bathurst defines Truth as the light and life of Christ, which is placed in the Conscience of each human being, an

21. Bathurst is not making a new claim. She is maintaining the fundamental idea to Quaker thought, articulated by other apologists, such as Robert Barclay in his *Apology*, a major seventeenth century text.





assertion not contradictory to those of Whitehead, above. It is this Conscience, directed by Christ, 'which opens the Understanding, enlightens the Eyes of the Mind, discovers Sin to the Soul, reproves for it, and makes it appear exceeding sinful' (Bathurst 1695: 71). This Truth, or inward Oracle, as it is referred to in Part One, 'quickens such as accept and believe in it, though they were dead in Trespasses and Sins, makes them alive to God...that he may be the *First born among many Brethren*' (Bathurst 1695: 71, italics added). Here Bathurst supplies numerous verses as Scriptural support, including Rom. 8.29, from which she has directly quoted in her text (italicized portion).

Bathurst's frequent reference to Scripture is indicative not only of the nature of seventeenth-century apologetic, but also of Bathursts's consciousness of her exercise, which is in part to defend Quakers' alleged antipathy to biblical authority. By repeatedly quoting from the Scriptures, she is depending upon that which people have charged Quakers of scorning. Even whilst Quakers revere Scriptures, and their writings are replete with biblical quotes, it is evident still that Quakers bow first to the authority of the 'inward Oracle'. Certainly Bathurst was aware of the dangers of the subjective interpretation of such inspiration; other sectarian groups were more notorious for their taking advantage of the same.[22] It is probably in order to prove that Quakers adhere to some objective metanarrative, that Bathurst refers so often to Scripture in all three parts of *Truth*.

The third part of *Truth* shifts in tone from its preceding sections. Bathurst adopts a testimonial style, the imagery becomes richer, and the language more personal. Quakers bestowed a great importance on testimonies, and so it is not surprising that Bathurst includes her own. Testimonies preserved for posterity the experiences and sufferings of early Quakerism, and also provided inspiration and exhortation for contemporary readers (Foxton 1994: 14). Further, while promoting intellectual understanding—and therefore writing in the apologetic form—was encouraged out of necessity, Quakers viewed inward experience, driven by Christ's Light, as the essential ingredient in their argumentation (Huber 1979: 157).

Even while *Truth* acts as testimony, it has not abandoned its original apologetic intent. Part Three commences by addressing the argument that Quakers are enchanters, who convert by 'Craft and Cunning Collusion' (Bathurst 1695: 164). Bathurst states that such charges have 'been fixed as a *Scare-Crow, or Ghostly Apparition*, to affrighten People from so much as looking towards this Religion', (Bathurst 1695: 159) and that their only craft is biblical. Here again

22. The Ranters, for example, are particularly noted for their social and moral anarchy in the name of freedom of interpretation (Cherry 1984: 14).

she has defended Quaker belief in the power of the Scriptures. The imagery that appears in this section is extracted from both the Old and New Testaments. Bathurst, when she was a non-Quaker, was part of 'a Remnant who have not been so affrighted...but have drawn near to see and feel, whether there were any Substance in the same' (Bathurst 1695: 159). The Old Testament image of Remnant is a popular theme in Quaker work (exemplified in Biddle, above p. 145). Bathurst refers to Quakerism as 'the Substance of Life' which hath 'lain hid under this dark Reflection' (Bathurst 1695: 150). She also makes reference to passing through a 'cloudiness of the Understanding' (Bathurst 1695: 159). Both these images are borrowed from the apostle Paul who claims that the world sees through a 'glass darkly' (1 Cor. 13.12).

Bathurst, at the outset of *Truth*, likens her writing act to a journey: 'when I set about it, I saw a Field before me, which cost me some spiritual Travel before I got thorow'. This journey imagery is continued in her testimony, in which she refers to herself as 'a Spiritual Traveller for Souls Eternal Welfare' (Bathurst 1695: 179), and by which she relates her view of Quakerism: 'for though it may be granted, we did feel an inward and effectual Call...to come out of Spiritual Egypt's Land, yet must we travel through the Spiritual Wilderness, before we arrive at the Heavenly Canaan' (Bathurst 1695: 175).

Bathurst's testimony proceeds to attack another argument: Quakers promise outward advantage and worldy good. Here she 'brings the matter a little nearer' (Bathurst 1695: 165), offering an example from personal experience. She explains she could not have been coerced into Quakerism by promises of greatness, because she did not desire greatness. Bathurst was drawn to Quakerism because it offered inclusion in God's kingdom; this was all she was offered (Bathurst 1695: 169-70). Despite the honest nature of Quakers' work, in which they make no false promises of glory, they have been 'made a Mock to the Scoffing Ishmaels of our Age' (Bathurst 1695: 176); here again she employs Old Testament imagery.

Bathurst has forged persuasively into the 'men's domain' of apologetics, artfully blending her work with the genre of testimony so important to Quakerism. By entering the intellectual debate on equal ground, she has overstepped the imposed gender boundary, and is consciously aware of this. She asks at the closing of *Truth* a question which appears to defend both male and female Quakers' religious approach, but gains further significance when considering the gender of the author: 'Their Tongues are their own, who is lord over them?' (Bathurst 1695: 178). The question is obviously rhetorical; however, were the question posed with the intent of being answered, the vast majority of Quakers would claim that the only being justified to exercise authority was God, and that each person must be obedient to that authority alone.





Even the seventeenth-century Quaker William Rogers, who was opposed to the leadership of women, spoke of a Church that 'doubtless consists of Women as well as Men' (Rogers 1680: 52). Quaker theology created an opportunity for women to redefine themselves outside of the previous thousands of years of history, and so Quaker women, against all odds, held firmly to this theology, which demanded them to obey their consciences, their inward voices. Charged by a divine authority greater than any other within that fallen history, these seventeenth-century women emerged, not brazen faced and with brain-sick fancies, as they had been charged by Richard Blome, but rather golden, with stimulating ideas that have set the stage thus far for another three hundred years of enthusiastic debate.

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