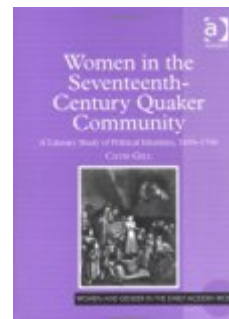


Catie Gill. *Women in the Seventeenth-Century Quaker Community: A Literary Study of Political Identities, 1650-1700.* Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005. xii + 243 pp. \$99.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7546-3985-5.



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The execution of Charles I and the establishment of a republic in January 1649 were followed by challenges to other British institutions. The 1650s witnessed an explosion of radicalism--economic, social, cultural, political, and religious. As Christopher Hill entitled his 1972 study of the English Revolution, it indeed seemed that *The World Turned Upside Down*.^[1] Groups like the Quakers took advantage of these uncertain times to promulgate their religious beliefs and practices, and Quaker women's writings were integral to this process of "writing the community." Like Hill, author Catie Gill--a lecturer in English Studies at Loughborough University--writes primarily about English radicalism in the seventeenth century and studies sectarian groups that flourished during the Interregnum. As a literary scholar and a feminist, she is particularly interested in what the structure and language of Quaker texts reveal about the role of gender in the creation of the Quaker sense of self and society. As someone focused on the intersection of history and literature, she believes that an analysis of Quaker women's

writings demonstrates that women played a significant part in the evolution of Quakerism.

In the sheer volume of their writings, "female Quakers had few rivals" (p. 1). This is particularly the case if one includes women's contributions to multiple-authored texts. Not only are multiple-authored texts the mode among Quakers in the Interregnum, but they also incorporate the voices of the rank and file of believers. Scholars who focus on prominent women such as Margaret Fell--one of the few woman leaders in the Quaker movement--and their personal writings may miss the contributions of the many other, but lesser-known, women who "wrote *for* and *to* their religious community" (p. 184). In addition, "collectively authored texts produce an impression of community, since they implicitly unite Friends around an issue, or series of concerns, within a single work. The effect of such writing is that it offers a way to explore women's relationship to the wider Quaker body" (p. 7).

Gill's first four chapters deal with the radical decade of the 1650s, the formative period for Quaker concepts of self and society. Three genres

characterize Quaker women's writings in this period: prophecy, sufferings (prison) narratives, and petitions. Of these three, prophecy is by far the most prevalent. Regardless of genre, the voices are gendered. Quaker ideology may stress the equality of souls, but Quaker practice and writing reflect a society in which the discursive authorities are male. Besides the laws and customs subsuming married women's identities to those of their husbands, Gill contends that the narrative form itself muffled women's voices. In Quaker prison narratives, for instance, "a common formal approach finds the woman's experience being described secondhand, after the event, by an author (or authors) whose task is to profile the sufferings of Quakers within a particular locality" (p. 53). Gill finds this male dominance ironic since it "reads against the texts' commonly stated ideological argument: that Quakers suffer together as one, eschewing gender distinctions" (p. 63). Women are most likely to be heard when they speak/write as "we" rather than "I."

One chapter looks at prophets, contending "women aimed simultaneously to *write the community* whilst also depicting the inwardly understood relationship to god" (p. 114). Prophecy gave women the opportunity to speak as inspired individuals, although the voice they employed was not their own, but God's. Gill believes "Female Quakers wrote and spoke from a position of connection to the godhead, and their sense of revelation was due, in large part, to the community's method of writing about the spirit's immediacy within the believer, whether they be male or female" (p. 123). Thus, the writing of women prophets brought together Quaker concepts of the self and of society. "Prophecy was a type of writing that could be used to establish women's collective experience of god's working within the movement, and within themselves" (p. 145).

Speaking out when they saw the light and enduring prison for their beliefs were ways in which individual women established their identities in

the Quaker community. However these actions may have challenged the Commonwealth authorities, they were not overtly political. Petitioning the government and refusing to pay tithes, on the other hand, were unquestionably political acts. Gill's examination of Quaker women's 1659 petition against tithes, *These Several Papers*, is one of the most important contributions of her book.

Despite (or perhaps because of) the disestablishment of the episcopal Church, religion and politics continued to be intertwined during the Interregnum. This was especially evident in the debate over tithes. Religious dissenters had long opposed paying for a Church that did not encompass their beliefs or practices. But, because many gentry had come to see tithes as property rights, Commonwealth governments continued to collect them. The historical background to the women's petition was the re-calling of the Rump Parliament after Cromwell's death. Initially, sectarian groups hoped that the Rump would respond favorably to what was a popular issue and repeal the tithe tax. But even after the government had decided against repeal, the women nonetheless decided to publish the text of their petition. Entitled *These Several Papers*, the document is signed by approximately 7,750 women from all over England. There is a preface by a London Quaker, Mary Forster, and the title page notes the text was printed for Mary Westwood. As Gill's facsimile illustrations of the text demonstrate, great care was taken to maintain the personal and geographical identities of the signers.

The right to petition was one of the rights and privileges of Englishmen, and the document clearly showed the women's commitment to public action. Yet as radical as this stance was, their petition was profoundly conservative in many ways. Women's private concerns as members of family units appear the main impetus for their actions. "Women's role in the family economy is ... the single most significant element influencing their response to the tithe. Whether employing the idea

of family membership, by implicitly indicating that their anti-tithe protest supports the domestic unit, or whether, as widows, they were directly liable, women's protest maintains the sanctity of the home from outside threat. Their position on tithe-resistance maintains the status within the family's economic unit, and it does so by attacking the fundamental claims of church and state for maintenance" (p. 107).

Not surprisingly, the Restoration of the Monarchy and the Church of England stifled the voices of sectarian groups such as the Quakers. The egalitarian possibilities of the 1650s all but disappeared. In the years that followed the Restoration, Quaker women's writing changed in both tone and form. The key genre by the 1680s, the decade examined in a later chapter, is the memorial, and the "domestic role represents perhaps the most frequently memorialised subject position for adult women" (p. 147). In these deathbed testimonies, women are memorialized as wives and mothers, not as prophets or preachers. In fact, "community consciousness [seems] shaped around notions of gendered difference" (p. 148). There are few multiple-authored texts uniting Quakers--male and female--behind an issue. Nor do these testimonies reveal much about women's political identities (except in their absence).

The Quaker community itself becomes increasingly divided along gender lines. It becomes rare for men and women to "see the light" together. The "central public role for women in the post-Restoration period [is] no longer the ministry, but the women's meetings" (p. 158). These separate meetings give women a space of their own where they can be independent of male leadership, but such gatherings are considered auxiliary to the meetings held by Quaker men. As a result, Gill argues, Quaker identity became "less collective" and more "individualised rather than communitarian" (p. 181). Women's writings seem to focus more

on their private and personal selves than on their social identities as Quakers.

The diversity of voices that characterized Quaker women's writings in the 1650s is largely absent from the texts of the 1680s. In 1673 the Quakers established internal censorship through the "Second Day's Meeting ... whose responsibility it was to oversee texts before publication" (p. 172). The freedom to speak for God and, as a consequence, to "write the community" was gone. The texts that emerged from the women's meetings of the 1680s were much more focused on traditional gender roles and relations than the texts of the 1650s. "Collective female action was certainly espoused in writings produced by those involved in the separate women's meetings, but collectively held beliefs now included the need for women to act as models of domestic virtue" (p. 186).

As part of a series on Women and Gender in the Early Modern World, *Women in the Seventeenth-Century Quaker Community* is a good introduction to the contributions of women to Quaker thought and practice. The texts support Gill's thesis that the Quaker experience was influenced by gender conceptions of self and society. The literary analysis seems more developed than the political, however. It would be useful to have more contextualization of women's writings from the 1680s. After all, Quaker women were not the only English subjects, nor was gender the only social construct, to be negatively affected by the Restoration of the monarchy. The subtitle implies an examination of political identities from 1650 to 1700, but there is no discussion of how the Glorious Revolution impacted gender identities and roles or the Quaker conception of self and community. Some readers will find the literary theory and modern feminist perspective obfuscating at times, but, generally speaking, the volume is well organized and well argued. It is certainly well-researched.

Gill's bibliography is most impressive. By cross-referencing multiple-authored texts of sev-

enteenth-century women's writings, she is able to bring to light considerable numbers of "minor" women whose contributions were in works where the lead author was a man. Her secondary sources are quite diverse as well--there are pieces on politics, culture, and society during the Interregnum and Restoration eras; articles on gender identities, roles, and relationships; essays on contemporary publishing and literary conventions; and monographs on Quakers and Quakerism.

Because of its interdisciplinary approach, the volume would be of interest to undergraduate and graduate students in literary, British, gender, and religious studies. At \$100.00, however, this is likely to remain a book to be put on reserve rather than purchased.

Note

[1]. Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas during the English Revolution* (New York: Viking Press, 1972).

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