On October 20, 1743 John Wesley rode into the town of Wednesbury in the West Midlands. As was his custom, he proceeded to the middle of the town and began to preach in the open air. On this particular occasion his text was Hebrews 13:8 (Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, today, and forever) and he remarks in his journal that there was a “far larger crowd than expected.” After preaching, Wesley retired to a local Methodist’s house. There he was engaging in his endless correspondence when a mob beset the house and forced Wesley to come with them to the local magistrate. This is how Wesley describes the scene in his Journal:

To attempt speaking was vain; for the noise on every side was like the roaring of the sea. so they dragged me along till we came to the town; where seeing the door of a large house open, I attempted to go in; but a man, catching me by the hair, pulled me back into the middle of the mob. They made no more stop till they had carried me through the main street, from one end of the town to the other. I continued speaking all the time to those within hearing, feeling no pain or weariness. at the west end of the town, seeing a door half open, I made toward it and would have gone in; but a gentleman in the shop would not suffer me, saying they would pull the house down to the ground. However, I stood at the door, and asked, “Are you willing to hear me speak?” Many cried out, “No, no! knock his brains out; down with him; kill him at once.” Others said, “Nay, but we will hear him first.” I began asking, “What evil have I done? Which of you all have I wronged in word or deed?” And continued speaking for above a quarter of an hour, till my voice suddenly failed: then the floods began to lift up their voice again; many crying out, “Bring him away! bring him away!” (5:418).

What is remarkable about this story is that 1. Wesley was an ordained Anglican priest who always preached (even in the open air) in his cassock and bands, 2. The text and message he presents are completely orthodox – in complete agreement with the Book of Common Prayer and the Thirty-Nine Articles, and 3. the vehemence of the mobs reaction and their willingness to use physical violence against the famous John Wesley.

Such incidents were by no means isolated in the early years of Methodism. Methodists, though legally still part of the established Church, were routinely harassed by fellow citizens who looked upon them with suspicion and contempt. Riots regularly broke out at Methodist meetings, chapels were vandalized and destroyed, preachers were attacked and/or pressed into the army and navy and Charles Wesley was brought before the magistrates on charges of Jacobitism. Clearly toleration had its bounds even within the establishment.

What these brief examples clearly illustrate is that “toleration” and indeed intolerance took on a very different cast in Britain during the years following the Toleration Act of 1689. Though the state officially tolerated religious difference – opening the way for a more individual system of
More than that, though, Rogers' account illustrates how closely intertwined orality and print were in early Methodism. Sprinkled throughout her specter of unbounded enthusiasm and disruption of the social order.

The reaction to the new Methodist preacher in Macclesfield, Mr. Simpson:

An example of this can be found in the Account of the Experience of Hester Ann Rogers. Towards the beginning of her narrative Rogers relates her reaction to the new Methodist preacher in Macclesfield, Mr. Simpson:

“I heard various accounts of a clergyman whom my uncle Roe had recommended to be curate at Macclesfield, and who was said to be a Methodist. This conveyed to my mind as unpleasing an idea of him, as if he had been called a Romish priest; being fully persuaded that to be a Methodist was to be all that is vile, under a mask of piety…. I believed their teachers were the false prophets spoken of in the Scripture: that they deceived the illiterate, and were little better than common pickpockets; that they filled some of their hearers with presumption, and drove others to despair (15-16).”

Thus Rogers' objection to the Methodist Mr. Simpson has very little to do with anything he actually believes or preaches (she has never even heard him) and very much to do with the way in which he disturbs the order of society. As she writes later, “When I came back to Macclesfield, the whole town was in alarm. My uncle Roe, and my cousins, seemed very fond of Mr. Simpson, and told me he was a most excellent man; but that all the rest of my relations were exasperated against him (16-18).” Simply by participating in the discourse of Methodism, then, Mr. Simpson calls up the specter of unbounded enthusiasm and disruption of the social order.

Bearing this in mind, I want to do two things. First, I will lay out some basic background on the controversy over Methodism. Specifically, I will use the complex interplay between orality and print that characterized early Methodism to illustrate how the movement disrupted public space and created what became a developed evangelical public sphere by century's end. Secondly, I will turn to the question of Methodism and gender as a lens through which to interpret the intolerance that Methodists faced — by examining this potent socio-cultural issue I will thus be able to illustrate that the objections to Methodism by the general public had little to do with doctrine and everything to do with the evolving definition of the religious self.

It has long been assumed that the evangelical religion that arose and spread during the Evangelical Revivals in England and America was diametrically opposed to Enlightenment. However as Michael Warner has recently pointed out, “Far from being simply a reaction against an already congealed ‘Enlightenment,’ eighteenth-century evangelical practices came into being through many of the same media and norms of discourse” (Preacher's Footing 368). Thus evangelicalism in fact participated in the same norms of discourse that created what Warner has termed an “evangelical public sphere” during the eighteenth century. This evangelical public sphere operated alongside the secular in ways that “required the space of controversy afforded by competing printers, the compressed and progressive temporality of news, awareness of translocal fields of circulation, and a semiotic ideology of uptake” (Freetought and Evangelicalism 11:00). Thus the Evangelical Revival was in large part made possible by the expanding technologies of print and the increased venues for circulation that the developing capital economy produced. It is to these technologies and products of mediation that we must attend if we are truly to understand the discourse of popular evangelicalism and how this discourse interacted with society at large.

In the case of the discourse culture of Methodism that was fostered by John Wesley there was an inherent relationship between circulating orality, manuscript culture, and print that came to define the Methodist media environment. As Warner puts it, “In a movement context that mixes printed and preached sermons with pamphlets and newspapers, performance and print were densely laminated together” (Printing and Preaching 42:00).

In his published Journal, for example, John Wesley not only records his extensive travels, but also details the sermons he preached — many in the open air to thousands of listeners. However, in contrast to his printed sermons which are composed and arranged specifically for publication, in the Journal Wesley usually only recounts the Scripture passage he preached on and the number of people he preached to. These mostly ext tempore public sermons were shaped by his context and his public audience, and the account of them in the printed journal thus highlights the unbounded nature of his audience and his text and the close relationship between orality and print that defined early Methodism.

However it was this unbounded nature of open air Methodist itinerant preaching that was perceived as the greatest threat to the established social norms. Anglican parish preaching was directed in mostly set language (The Book of Common Prayer and the Homilies) to a very specific and set group of people within a sanctioned public space by an ordained priest — itinerant Methodist preachers, on the other hand, openly operated outside of this established structure. Mostly un-ordained and uneducated, and thus outside of the established structure, they circulated from town to town preaching ex tempore in the open air or unsanctioned chapels. Many of their sermons were never printed, nevertheless the storm of controversy they stirred up (both for and against) clearly made its way into print and informed the national conversation on the Revival. Thus it was this “unauthorized” entrance into the public space of preaching — the claim to be able to address an unbounded audience — that caused much of the animosity towards Methodism. In other words it was the discourse not the doctrine of the revival that was at issue.

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More than that, though, Rogers’ account illustrates how closely intertwined orality and print were in early Methodism. Sprinkled throughout her...
published Account are references to sermons by Mr. Simpson, John Wesley and others. Ostensibly instances of the localized orality of popular religion, evidence of these sermons nevertheless make it into print accounts – the most famous and published of which was Rogers’. Likewise the women who wrote in to John Wesley’s Arminian Magazine participated in this conversation between orality and print – often giving accounts of revivals and sermons for the larger Methodist public. Thus early evangelical media culture worked to form a type of feedback loop within which the genres of public oral sermon and printed discourse were constantly in conversation. And it was this feedback loop of orality and print that threatened to break down the established public boundaries between private spirituality and public life.

To better illustrate how this evangelical public sphere operated and was contested I want to turn to some specific and local examples of the types of intolerance early Methodist converts faced. For, though the generally unbounded (in every sense of the word) nature of the Methodist movement and spirituality was crucial in forming attitudes towards Methodism, these attitudes were shaped and enacted according to local circumstances, customs, and mores. This is especially apparent in the case of Methodist women. Not only do these evangelical women writers illustrate how print could be used to blur gendered distinctions between public and private, they were also the locus for much of the anti-Methodist criticism and satire. In fact the role of gender within evangelical religion and the appeal of evangelicalism to women was one of the roots of the controversy the Revival engendered. Thus the reaction to Methodism was in reality an expression of deeper seeded concerns over the role of marginalized members of society – women, the poor – in organized religion. This anxiety is apparent in Leigh Hunt’s Attempt to Show the Folly and Danger of Methodism in which he states, “We may see directly what influence the body has upon this kind of devotion [Methodism], if we examine the temperament of its professors. The female sex, for instance, are acknowledged to possess the greater bodily sensibility, and it is the women who chiefly indulge in these love-sick visions of heaven” (55). Thus what is really at stake in the print wars over Methodism is not so much the doctrine of justification by faith but the eroding of social boundaries via spiritual experience.

Hester Ann Rogers, for example, faced intense persecution from her mother and family upon her conversion to Methodism. Swayed by rumors about Methodism and Methodist teaching her mother “threatened, if ever she knew me to hear them… [to] disown me. Every friend and relation I had in the world, I had reason to believe, would do the same” (22). Rogers continues to attend Methodist meetings, however and “when my mother heard of it, a floodgate of persecution opened upon me!” (22). Her mother responds by confining her to the house for eight weeks, bringing in her godmother and the local clergyman to council her, and taking her away from Macclesfield, but to no avail. Upon returning home Rogers told her mother “in humility, and yet plainness,” that she “must seek salvation to my soul, whatever is the consequence” (23). She then says that she will leave and become a servant rather than renounce Methodism and goes on to offer her mother a deal:

> Yet if you will consent to it, I should greatly prefer continuing in your house, though it should be as your servant: and I am willing to undertake all the work of the house, if you will only suffer me to attend preaching. She listened to my proposals; and after consulting with her friends, consented to comply on this last condition (23).

Rogers then proceeds to work for her mother as a servant for over a year before finally convincing her of the authenticity of Methodist experience. What was at stake here clearly had nothing to do with the actual content of Methodist belief – Hester goes to great lengths to articulate its orthodoxy to both her mother and godmother – but the erosion of family and community bonds and loyalties through spiritual experience.

Likewise the intense persecution that Mrs. A.B. experienced following her decision to become a Methodist illustrates the localized nature of Methodist experience and the ways in which persecution was very much tied to the disruption of social and culture norms. Mrs. A.B. was born to a Catholic family on an island of Lough Key in Ireland. Through the influence of an old Protestant woman who boarded with the family during Mrs. A.B.’s childhood, she was convinced of the error of the Catholic Church and the necessity of salvation by faith. When she was fifteen, Mrs. A.B. was sent to the local priest for religious instruction – she refused to take part in Catholic rituals and openly defied both the priest and the Bishop, to whom she was sent to cast the “witchcraft” out of her. When she was twenty-one she came in contact with the Methodists and was sensibly converted. She then publically recanted the Catholic Church, causing the parish priest to say he “would make hawk’s meat” of her. After this she applied to the Rector of the Church of England parish for admittance and protection, but was rejected due to her belief in the ability to sensibly know her sins were forgiven. She then applied to another clergyman, who agreed to receive her into the Church. After this her friends and family attempted to marry her to a Catholic by force – rather than comply she fled, covering over seventeen miles by foot in a single day and contracting a life threatening fever. Eventually she was taken into the house of a local Methodist and eventually married a Methodist man. What is crucial to recognize here is that Mrs. A.B. was an obscure, young woman who dared subvert local cultural norms because of her evangelical conversion. She was willing to stand up to religious authorities up to and including a Bishop and flee her family and friends rather than marry someone against her will.

In becoming Methodists these women were in essence declaring their allegiance to a new spiritual family that was set in direct opposition to mainstream British culture. Henceforth their primary allegiance was to God and the Methodist community and, as Hester Ann Rogers’ and Mrs. A.B.’s testimonies illustrate, they were willing to give up everything to do so. This disruption of social and cultural norms was then reflected in the concern on the part of fathers, mothers, husbands, and communities. By developing a grassroots system of classes, bands, and select bands in order to foster a unique Methodist social community, Wesley created and organization that operated with what Gail Malmgreen describes as a “centrifugal force” which brought individuals together across wide distances and “broke down the narrowness of provincial life” (62). For this very reason, though, these bands were seen as profoundly threatening to existing social and religious structures; thus it should come as no surprise that the early years of Methodism were accompanied by intense persecution in the form of riots, press gangs, and family pressure to renounce Methodism.
What these concerns indicate is that controversy over religious doctrine in eighteenth century England was rooted in the discourses of religion, gender, and publicity. The average layperson may not have understood why Wesley's doctrine of justification by faith and insistence on immediate sensible conversion caused such uproar within the Church establishment, but he or she surely understood that such doctrines threatened social order in radical ways. Implicit in Wesley's assertion that God's grace was a free gift and salvation was available to all was an understanding of doctrine that exploded static categories of rich/poor, male/female, public/private. Furthermore, by emphasizing that the experience of salvation could be sensibly experienced outside of Church walls, Methodism offered a fundamental redefinition of self based on personal experience with God and interaction with a new community of faith. Thus, under the guise of toleration religious belief became individualized, localized, and incorporated into a developing consumerist media culture. Individuals were now free to choose belief from a variety of options, but it was precisely in this move towards general toleration that localized intolerance became tolerable.

Works Cited


Disciplining the Self in Methodist Women’s Writing

First published in the Arminian Magazine in 1787, it is easy to become captivated by the raw spirituality and genuine piety on display in Rachel Bruff's conversion narrative. Following the conventions of the evangelical conversion narrative form, Bruff lays out what her life was like before her involvement with the Methodists and the goes on the express the profound change that her experiences with God wrought in her sense of self and orientation toward the world. I have written elsewhere about how these spiritual experience came to define a new sense of subjectivity for evangelical women, how they incorporated the conventions of the conversion narrative to suit their spiritual goals, and how these narratives entered and interacted with a vibrant evangelical public sphere. Here, though, I want to engage a different set of questions. Specifically I want to look past the blinding white hot piety of these experiences and ask how these seemingly mystical encounters with the divine were elicited. Upon first glance it may seem as if they spring out of nowhere – but a careful study of the language of these texts reveals that this is simply not the case. Instead, these women engaged in systematic spiritual disciplines, what Wesley termed “means of grace,” that helped elicit spiritual experience. In Rachel Bruff's case, she is engaged in intentional prayer and meditation when she has her experience with the Divine. Following the conventions of the evangelical conversion narrative form, Bruff lays out what her life was like before her involvement with the Methodists and the goes on the express the profound change that her experiences with God wrought in her sense of self and orientation toward the world. I have written elsewhere about how these spiritual experience came to define a new sense of subjectivity for evangelical women, how they incorporated the conventions of the conversion narrative to suit their spiritual goals, and how these narratives entered and interacted with a vibrant evangelical public sphere. Here, though, I want to engage a different set of questions. Specifically I want to look past the blinding white hot piety of these experiences and ask how these seemingly mystical encounters with the divine were elicited. Upon first glance it may seem as if they spring out of nowhere – but a careful study of the language of these texts reveals that this is simply not the case. Instead, these women engaged in systematic spiritual disciplines, what Wesley termed “means of grace,” that helped elicit spiritual experience. In Rachel Bruff's case, she is engaged in intentional prayer and meditation when she has her experience with the Divine. Instead of an inner act of will eliciting spirituality – external attitude influences internal orientation.

Answering these questions does more than help us understand the nature of women’s spiritual experience, however; it also helps us understand how the physical and embodied actions of these women came to shape their subjectivities and in turn their writing. In other words, the question becomes: if women's inner spiritual experience ends up working outward into the world, what is the role of their writing? Does the activity of writing itself act as a form of spiritual discipline that helps elicit spiritual experience? Or is their writing a result of spiritual experience? I will argue that the answer to these questions is that writing in fact operates in both ways. In fact, analysis of the conversion narratives in the Arminian
The Means of Grace and Spiritual Experience

At least part of the common misapprehension about the separation between outward act and inner experience can be traced to modern assumptions about the nature of spiritual experience that have their very roots in the evangelical revival. Dissatisfied with what they saw as the dead formality of the established churches, revivalists like John Wesley, George Whitefield, and Jonathan Edwards placed an emphasis on directly apprehended spiritual experience and justification by faith alone as opposed to salvation through adherence to a set of prescribed actions. In this they not only broke from the establishment, but also incorporated Enlightenment notions of the autonomous individual subject into a theory of personal salvation. Though (as I will explore later) none of these men rejected the sacraments and forms of worship as important elements of religion, they nevertheless emphasized belief and personal salvation (being “born again”) as the necessary components of saving faith. This led in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to belief, narrowly defined as assent to a set of principles, becoming regarded as almost synonymous with religion. Elements of this idea still persist to this day, especially in the west, though in many ways a theory of religion as ideology has come to replace it in many circles (for more on these shifts see Jager 202-207).

This is not to say, however, that men like Wesley neglected the importance of the spiritual disciplines and sacraments. As a young man Wesley was deeply influenced by works like Thomas a Kempis’ *Imitatio Christi*, and indeed, one of the defining conflicts of the early evangelical revival was over whether these disciplines or “means of grace,” were in fact necessary for salvation. The Moravians, with whom Wesley was closely allied at the beginning of his career, held that a human could do nothing for her salvation and instead had to hold herself in “stillness” until God extended His grace towards her. Wesley, as a good Anglican, would have none of this arguing that in fact the means of grace, while not saving in themselves, could nevertheless be used by God to save the individual. This disagreement ultimately led to a split within the early revival – with Wesley going his own way to form Methodism proper while the Moravians formed their own congregations throughout the country.

In his sermon titled “The Means of Grace” Wesley defines the means as, “prayer, whether in secret or with the great congregation; searching the Scriptures (which implies reading, hearing, and meditating thereon); and receiving the Lord’s Supper, eating bread and drinking wine in remembrance of Him: And these we believe to be ordained of God, as the ordinary channels of conveying his grace to the souls of men.” He goes on to encourage his listeners to practice these disciplines as means to an end and none as ends themselves. Of special interest to Wesley is the receiving of the Lord’s Supper, which had fascinated him since his days at Oxford with the Holy Club. Wesley himself was a frequent communicator – as often as once a week – which was slightly unusual by the standards of the day. He also believed that the Lord’s Supper could in fact be a “converting ordinance,” or the means through which an individual was converted. In fact in his published *Journal* he includes the account of a woman, believed to be Susannah Wesley, who was converted through communion (see Rack 402-409 for a lengthy discussion of this). All this to say that, however it may have been interpreted in the future, Wesley fully recognized the role of spiritual disciplines in forming the spirituality and subjectivity of his followers – believing that act could form experience just as authentic experience manifested itself in action. As Peter Böhler advised the young Wesley upon his return from Georgia he should “Preach faith until you have it; and then, because you have it, you will preach faith” (82).

It is this disciplinary aspect of seemingly spontaneous religious expression that is most easily overlooked when considering spiritual experience accounts. In part this is because such disciplines can seem conventional or contrived whereas the spontaneous overflow of religious emotion in contrast seems original and deeply felt. Again, though, this critical attitude reflects definitions of religion that originated during this time period in both the evangelical revival and Romanticism that tended to privilege directly apprehended experience above convention. However as Amy Hollywood has pointed out, “for many religious traditions, ancient texts, beliefs, and rituals do not replace experience as the vital center of spiritual life, but instead provide the means for engendering it. At the same time, human experience is the realm within which truth can best be epistemologically and affectively (if we can even separate the two) demonstrated.” In other words, outer discipline forms inner orientation which in turn affects how that orientation is made manifest in the world.

In her book, *The Politics of Piety*, Saba Mahmood demonstrates how this outer/inner relationship works in the personal piety of the members of the Egyptian women’s mosque movement. These are women who gather together on a regular basis to be taught the practices of piety by (largely) female religious teachers. According to Mahmood, these “women learn to analyze the movements of the body and soul in order to establish coordination between inner states (intentions, movements of desire and thought, etc.) and outer conduct (gestures, actions, speech, etc.)” (31). An example she gives of this is the duty to rise before dawn for morning prayer. In one encounter she analyzes an older Muslim woman is instructing younger in the proper cultivation of the discipline of prayer. Interestingly, she does not recommend “trying” harder or strengthening willpower, but action and emotion:

> Performing the morning prayer should be like the things you can’t live without: for when you don’t eat, or you don’t clean your house, you get the feeling that you must do this. It is this feeling I am talking about: there is something inside you that makes you want to pray and gets you up early in the morning to pray. And you’re angry with yourself when you don’t do this or fail to do this (125).

This linking of emotion and action to spiritual practices thus reverses the liberal Western model of spiritual experience. Instead of the individual...
Interestingly enough, this theory of how action and emotion operate accords with what we have come to know about the neurological mechanisms of emotion and will. As far back as the late nineteenth century William James famously argued that, when it comes to emotion “we feel sorry because we cry, angry because we strike, afraid because we tremble, and not that we cry, strike, or tremble, because we are sorry, angry, or fearful, as the case may be.” What James realized without benefit of modern neuro-imaging techniques, was that emotion was intimately connected to bodily action and bodily actions were in turn intimately connected to cognition and action. Indeed, in The Will to Believe James goes further, arguing that faith is actually synonymous with act: “Faith means belief in something concerning which doubt is still theoretically possible; and as the test of belief is willingness to act, one may say that faith is the readiness to act in a cause the prosperous issue of which is not certified to us in advance” (524). The example he gives of this is a mountain climber who gets into a position where he/she can only escape by a terrible leap. “Refuse to believe,” James says, “and you shall indeed be right, for you shall irretrievably perish. But believe, and again you shall be right, for you shall save yourself” (500). In other words it is the act of faith that forms the internal disposition and the internal disposition that creates the desired result.

In thus linking body, emotion, and act James anticipates recent developments in neuro-science which have largely confirmed the role of emotion and body in the making of decisions and indeed in the formation of consciousness itself. For example in Descartes’ Error, neuro-scientist Antonio Damasio details how he used neuro-imaging to examine brain-damaged individuals who seemed to have lost the ability to make reasonable long term decisions or plans. These otherwise healthy individuals seemed to reason and function normally except for the loss of any ability to use reason to prioritize tasks. What Damasio found was that all of these individuals had some type of damage to a part of their frontal lobes that largely controls decision making – in other words they had lost the ability, not to reason, but to use the underlying bodily feedback of emotion to make reasonable decisions. As Damasio puts it in his later The Feeling of What Happens, “the presumed opposition between emotion and reason is no longer accepted without question…. emotion is integral to the processes of reasoning and decision making, for worse and for better” (40-41). Thus the body and emotions are not inherently “unreasonable,” but are utilized to better help us understand the world around us and make decisions. The damage these patients experienced to their frontal lobes disrupted the bodily systems of reasoning, thus leading them to make unreasonable decisions. This view of the body as an interconnected system or organism not only allows for a more nuanced understanding of emotion, but also calls into question the very structure of the unified subject itself. Furthermore, in the case of spiritual disciplines, it bears out the idea that an outward bodily act could affect the inward state.

More importantly for our purposes, however, is what all this tells us about how the disciplinary practices of piety affect women’s formation of a sense of self within a patriarchal structure. Mahmood, for example, argues that “the mosque participants did not regard authorized models of behavior as an external social imposition that constrained the individual. Rather, they viewed socially prescribed forms of conduct as the potentialities, the ‘scaffolding,’ if you will, through which the self is realized” (148). In other words these women did not see their adherence to outward forms of behavior as constricting, but ultimately liberating – as a means to becoming God’s agent in the world. This definition of agency, though, requires that we situate agency within the particular discourse in which it operates. In this case that means, as Mahmood puts it, we think of “agency not simply as a synonym for resistance to social norms but as a modality of action.” Doing so:

raises some interesting questions about the kind of relationship established between the subject and the norm, between performative behavior and inward disposition. To begin with, what is striking here is that instead of innate human desires eliciting outward forms of conduct, it is the sequence of practices and actions one is engaged in that determines one's desires and emotions. In other words, action does not issue forth from natural feelings but creates them (157).

In thus situating agency within local discourse and as a “modality of action” we can better understand how religious women view the formation of the self, how spiritual discipline helps form inward orientation, and how this ultimately works its way out into the public sphere. For the women Mahmood studied this sometimes meant going against the wishes of their husbands and fathers when their wishes conflicted with what they saw as God’s calling. In this the women of early Methodism were very similar and it is to them that we must now turn.

**Disciplining the Self in Methodist Women’s Narratives**

As I have argued elsewhere, careful attention to Methodist women’s writing reveals a powerful symbiotic relationship between internal spiritual experience and outward action in the public sphere. This action clearly includes writing, as much of the writing we have by evangelical women comes in the form of published conversion narratives, diary extracts, or letters. Many of these were published in John Wesley’s Arminian Magazine while others, like the famous Account of Hester Ann Rogers, were published as independent books. Women clearly saw writing and publishing as part of their call to action that followed spiritual experience. What I have not theorized, however, is how the actual disciplines of reading and writing came to foster spiritual experience and how the publication of such writing both acted as a result of spiritual experience and an impetus for others to imitate the spiritual disciplines of the author.

As I have already pointed out, the actual experience accounts by women are filled with references to participation in spiritual disciplines – prayer, fasting, scripture reading, attending religious meetings, listening to sermons, taking communion – and these spiritual disciplines are explicitly linked to the spiritual experiences that result. Here, however, I want to focus on spiritual reading and writing themselves as disciplines – disciplines that ordinary lay women used worked to subtly resist these binaries through their writing. In other words, it is both through their writing and because
of their writing that the sense of subjectivity women form after conversion fundamentally works to break down binaries between self and other, body and mind, emotion and reason. Thus, in tracing this transformation I will focus on each of these fundamental elements, reading evangelical women's writing in terms of how this inner emotional experience worked outwards into the rapidly developing public sphere — for the two rely on one another and any attempt to read them separately fundamentally misses how evangelical women viewed and wrote the self during the eighteenth century.

By and large very little writing by evangelical women written specifically for publication has survived (see Krueger 69-70). This is in part due to the nature of most of the printed discourse in early evangelicalism. What was valued most was the printed sermon or religious discourse and, though there were female preachers in Methodism, their sermons were not published like men's were. The exception to this is the prolific Mary Bosanquet Fletcher who, though none of her sermons were published, succeeded in getting some of her religious discourses into print. As a result most of the writing by women that we have comes in the form of diary extracts, spiritual letters, or conversion narratives written in letter form to John Wesley or another male interlocutor. In fact the “Letters” pages of the Arminian Magazine, especially during John Wesley's lifetime, are dominated by letters from female correspondents.

What is important about this is that clearly this writing was not necessarily meant for print — though it may have ended up there — instead it was largely devotional in nature. Imitating devotional forms and practices imbibed from works like Wesley's own Journal women clearly used diary and letter writing as a form of spiritual discipline — incorporating scripture passages, hymns, prayers, and sermon notes into their writing as a means of forming spiritual experience. Clearly it was in the act of writing that these disciplinary practices were somehow solidified.

This is especially evident in women's experience narratives, a genre which is itself highly disciplined. In fact, as I have argued elsewhere, the evangelical conversion narrative relies on a common pattern — evident in works from Bunyan to Wesley to Whitefied — consisting of 1. Consciousness of sin; 2. Acquaintance with Methodism and search for salvation; 3. Justification; 4. Opposition from within and without; 5. Search for “Christian Perfection”; 6. Achievement of perfection; and 7. Evidence of God's grace in life and community. In exhibiting this pattern, these narratives perform the mimetic function that John Wesley hoped to instill through his own Journal. Furthermore, they also indicate that these women saw themselves as part of a larger community of readers and writers, all of whom were pursuing the same spiritual goals. As Hindmarsh has pointed out:

*Through these communal practices they learned what was commonly expected in religious experience, and what was common became, in literary terms, conventional…. In expectation of conversion, evangelical discourse acted like a map, identifying the sort of terrain one might cross and the sort of destination one might arrive at if one chose to venture out (157).*

Of course, as Hindmarsh also makes clear, just because these narratives were conventional, does not mean that they lack originality or insight. Instead, Methodist women appropriated readily available genres as a means to relating their own experience in a way that would be better understood by the broader Methodist community. It was precisely by using these conventions that women were able to form a unique sense of identity grounded in the broader religious culture. For, as Somers and Gibson have argued, narrative structures are powerful, illustrating that “stories guide action; that people construct identities (however multiple and changing) by locating themselves or being located within a repertoire of emplotted stories; that ‘experience’ is constituted through narratives” (38). Much like the women of the women's mosque movement in Egypt, these Methodist women found agency within disciplinary structures precisely by using those outward acts to alter the inner sense of self.

Thus it is because of the disciplinary nature of the conventional narrative convention that women came both to form a new sense of self after conversion and through them that they were able to reach a wider public through publication in venues like the Arminian Magazine. In this the discipline of writing came full circle — working outward as a result of spiritual experience and in turn working mimetically to form the spiritual experiences of others in the Methodist community. One of the main reasons John Wesley published spiritual experience accounts in the Arminian Magazine was in fact to illustrate that spiritual experience was available to all and that by imitating the examples of pious men and women, others could come to know God as they did. Women's writing was thus crucial to the formation of a developed evangelical public sphere within which the discourses of piety, spiritual discipline, and religious experience interacted powerfully in forming the evangelical subject.

References


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In these extracts from John Wesley’s Arminian Magazine we see the complex interplay between orality, spiritual experience, belief, conversion, and

print that characterized early Methodism. This complex nexus worked to produce a developed culture of evangelicalism during the period that

worked to form a fully developed religious public sphere. Since the publication of Jurgen Habermas’ Structural Transformation of the Public

Sphere the concept of the public sphere as a freestanding institution of bourgeois society has been progressively modified, including by Habermas

himself. What has emerged since that time is the conception of multiple public spheres that often overlapped and sometimes conflicted. Of

particular interest to me is the way that a religious public sphere (something Habermas never even considered) emerged and matured over the

course of the long eighteenth century in conjunction with the liberal “secular” public sphere. As Jon Mee has pointed out:

Habermas’s notion of the bourgeois public sphere, with its newspapers being discussed in coffee houses and clubs, its periodicals encouraging the
circulation of sound knowledge and banning disputation in religion from its pages, had an alter ego in the heterotopias of chapels, field
meetings, and the huge circulation of popular religious pamphlets and sermons. Eighteenth-century notions of civility were almost defined by
the exclusion of this kind of religious literature with its tendency to rancor, disputation, and ecstasies (72-73).

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Of course, it has long been assumed that the evangelical religion that arose and spread during the Evangelical Revivals in England and America was
diametrically opposed to Enlightenment. However as Michael Warner has recently pointed out, “Far from being simply a reaction against an already
concealed ‘Enlightenment,’ eighteenth-century evangelical practices came into being through many of the same media and norms of discourse. What we now call evangelicalism can be seen as the transformation of older strains of pietism by public sphere forms…. Indeed, it is not clear that enlightenment and evangelical religion were recognizable to contemporaries as opposing forces” (Preacher's Footing 368). Thus evangelicalism in fact participated in the same norms of discourse that created what Warner has termed an “evangelical public sphere” during the eighteenth century. This evangelical public sphere operated alongside the secular in ways that “required the space of controversy afforded by competing printers, the compressed and progressive temporality of news, awareness of translocal fields of circulation, and a semiotic ideology of uptake” (Freethought and Evangelicalism 11:00).

In other words, evangelicalism was not a reaction to Enlightenment, instead the two were in many ways mutually constitutive, relying on many of the same foundations. One of the most crucial foundations was the advent of the public sphere. By only positing the public sphere in terms of secularization and liberalization scholars have thus overlooked the fact that the evangelical revival of the eighteenth century participated in a robust public sphere of print and periodical literature that still dwarfed secular publications throughout the century. By 1830, for example, The Sunday School Magazine had sold over 30 million copies far more than any other contemporary title, while the Arminian Magazine and its successor Methodist Magazine regularly outsold the better known Gentleman’s Magazine. Whitefield and Wesley’s print empires dominated the literary marketplace of the eighteenth century with their published journals going through hundreds of editions on both sides of the Atlantic.

Furthermore, aside from their own publication successes, the journals of Whitefield and Wesley provoked further writing and further print in the mode Clifford Siskin has detailed in The Work of Writing – turning readers into authors (163-170). Individual converts imitated Wesley’s confessional style and utilized the burgeoning print culture to transmit their experience to a much wider, and much more socially variegated, audience. Drawing upon the “private” diary and letter form, spiritual experience authors oriented their texts towards a specific audience – probing the developing space that was opening up in print. As Habermas writes, “From the beginning, the psychological interest increased in the dual relation to both one’s self and the other: self observation entered a union partly curious, partly sympathetic with the emotional stirrings of the other I” (49). By thus appropriating these forms in print, early eighteenth century conversion narrative writers (like novelists) began to develop a complex internal subjectivity that was both rooted in internal experience but oriented towards a public space. People like John Wesley published their spiritual experiences not only or primarily for their own sakes, but in order to elicit mimetic spiritual experiences in rapidly expanding reading public.

This proliferation of print that the Evangelical Revival spawned was, of course, in direct conversation with the “secular” public sphere – indicating not so much a binary relation, but a close, symbiotic relationship tied together through mediation and circulation. In conjunction with attacks on Methodist preachers and meeting houses, anti-Methodist literature proliferated during the period. Novels by Smollet (Humphry Clinker) and Fielding (Joseph Andrews) lampooned Methodists as deranged enthusiasts. Pamphlets by religious leaders like the Bishop of London compared them to Catholics and cheap print like The Story of the Methodist-lady; or, The Injur’d Husband’s Revenge: A True History, cast Methodists as disturbers of the social and domestic order. As Fielding’s character Parson Adams says in Joseph Andrews men like Wesley and Whitefield, “set up the detestable Doctrine of Faith against good Works… for surely, that Doctrine was coined in Hell, and one would think none but the Devil himself could have the Confidence to preach it” (70). As strange as it may seem to a post-modern audience, such questions of religious discourse were very much part of the public conversation in the eighteenth century in large part because of the medium of print.

However I would argue that it is exactly the discourse that is at stake here, not the actual doctrine of justification by faith. As Michael Warner has argued, we must attempt to understand evangelicalism “not by the doctrinal emphasis which has so far dominated the intellectual history of evangelicalism since almost all of these doctrinal elements could be found almost anywhere, anytime,” and instead move toward an approach that examines the “discourse culture of evangelicalism” (Printing and Preaching 31:00). To do so we must examine the discourse of popular evangelicalism more broadly – moving beyond print to the relationship between print and orality in early evangelicalism. As Warner puts it, “In a movement context that mixes printed and preached sermons with pamphlets and newspapers, performance and print were densely laminated together” (Printing and Preaching 42:00).

In the case of Methodism this confluence between print and orality was inherent in the Methodist media culture. In his published Journal, John Wesley not only records his extensive travels, but also details the sermons he preached – many in the open air to thousands of listeners. However, in contrast to his printed sermons which are composed and arranged specifically for publication, in the Journal Wesley usually only recounts the Scripture passage he preached on and the number of people he preached to. These mostly ex tempore public sermons were shaped by his context and his public audience, and the account of them in the printed journal thus highlights the unbounded nature of his audience and his text. Nevertheless, the fact that an account of the sermon made it into the Journal and that some version of it was eventually printed illustrates the closely intertwined nature of Methodist public space.

However it was the very unbounded nature of open air Methodist itinerant preaching that was perceived as the greatest threat to the established social norms. Anglican parish preaching was directed in mostly set language (The Book of Common Prayer and the Homilies) to a very specific and set group of people within a sanctioned public space by an ordained priest – itinerant Methodist preachers, on the other hand, openly operated outside of this established structure. Mostly un-ordained and uneducated, and thus outside of the established structure, they moved from town to town preaching ex tempore in the open air or unsanctioned chapels. Many of their sermons were never printed, nevertheless the storm of controversy they stirred up (both for and against) clearly made its way into print and informed the national conversation on the Revival. Thus it was this “unauthorized” entrance into the public space of preaching – the claim to be able to address an unbounded audience – that caused much of
Hindmarsh, worked to mimetically produce both spiritual experiences and spiritual experience accounts by lay people, thus creating a kind of important to Wesley as validations of his ministry. His published It is in this context that Wesley solicited personal religious experience accounts for the argument, but also through the personal experiences of actual Methodist men and women. This real-life experience was proof positive for Wesley that the salvation experience was available to all.

One of the main outlets for women’s writing during the Evangelical Revival was John Wesley’s Arminian Magazine. Wesley founded the Arminian Magazine in 1778 in direct response to growing tensions within the evangelical revival over the question of predestination. However the real purpose of the magazine, for Wesley, was to defend “universal redemption” against predestination not only through polemic and theological argument, but also through the personal experiences of actual Methodist men and women. This real-life experience was proof positive for Wesley that the salvation experience was available to all.

An example of this can be found in the Account of the Experience of Hester Ann Rogers. After confessing her childish sins of card playing and dancing, Rogers relates her reaction to the new Methodist preacher, Mr. Simpson:

I heard various accounts of a clergyman whom my uncle Roe had recommended to be curate at Macclesfield, and who was said to be a Methodist. This conveyed to my mind as unpleasing an idea of him, as if he had been called a Romish priest; being fully persuaded that to be a Methodist was to be all that is vile, under a mask of piety. These prejudices were owing to the false stories which from time to time I heard repeated to my father, when about seven or eight years old; and also many more which my mother heard after his death, and to the present time: so that I believed their teachers were the false prophets spoken of in the Scripture: that they deceived the illiterate, and were little better than common pickpockets; that they filled some of their hearers with presumption, and drove others to despair: that with respect to their doctrines, they enforced chiefly, that whosoever embraced their tenets, which they called faith, might live as they pleased, in all sin, and be sure of salvation: that all the world besides must be damned without remedy: that they had dark meetings, and pretended to cast out devils, with many other things equally false and absurd; but all of which I believed. I heard also, that this new clergyman preached against all my favourite diversions, such as going to plays, reading novels, attending balls, assemblies, card tables, &c. But I resolved he should not make a convert of me; and that if I found him, on my return home, such as was represented, I would not go often to hear him (15-16).

Thus Rogers’ objection to the Methodist Mr. Simpson has very little to do with anything he actually believes or preaches and very much to do with the way in which he disturbs the order of society. As she writes later, “When I came back to Macclesfield, the whole town was in alarm. My uncle Roe, and my cousins, seemed very fond of Mr. Simpson, and told me he was a most excellent man; but that all the rest of my relations were exasperated against him (16-18). Simply my participating in the discourse of Methodism, then, Mr. Simpson calls up the specter of unbounded enthusiasm and disruption of the social order. In fact, after Hester becomes a Methodist she receives an ultimatum from her family and ends up working as her mother’s servant for over a year just so she can remain in the house after she is in essence disowned.

More than that, though, Rogers’ account illustrates how closely intertwined orality and print were in early Methodism. Sprinkled throughout her published Account are references to sermons by Mr. Simpson, John Wesley and others. Ostensibly instances of the localized orality of popular religion, evidence of these sermons nevertheless make it into print accounts – the most famous and published of which was Rogers’. Likewise the women who wrote in to the Arminian Magazine participated in this conversation between orality and print, often giving accounts of revivals and sermons for the larger Methodist public. Thus early evangelical media culture worked to form a type of feedback loop within which the genres of public oral sermon and printed discourse were constantly in conversation. And it was this feedback loop of orality and print that threatened to break down the established public boundaries between private spirituality and public life.

To better illustrate how this evangelical public sphere operated and was contested I want to turn now to the role of women writers within the Evangelical Revival. For not only do these evangelical women writers illustrate how print could be used to blur gendered distinctions between public and private, they were also the locus for much of the anti-Methodist criticism and satire. In general the women of early Methodism used their private, internal experience as a way to disrupt the categories of public and private. Religious experience in this sense gave them the language to enter a public space and explode any distinction between inner emotion and outer action. Thus it was not so much that evangelical religion appealed to women because it was inherently more suited to private and domestic consumption, but because it allowed for participation in a conversation beyond those bounds.

In this context I would argue that the role of gender within religion was at the root of the doctrinal controversies that the Revival engendered. Thus the debates over doctrines like justification by faith or religious “enthusiasm” were in reality expressions of deeper seeded concerns over the role of marginalized members of society – women, the poor – in organized religion. This anxiety is everywhere apparent in Leigh Hunt’s Attempt to Shew the Folly and Danger of Methodism in which he states, “We may see directly what influence the body has upon this kind of devotion [Methodism], if we examine the temperament of its professors. The female sex, for instance, are acknowledged to possess the greater bodily sensibility, and it is the women who chiefly indulge in these love-sick visions of heaven” (55). Thus what is really at stake in the print wars over Methodism is not so much the doctrine of justification by faith but the eroding of social boundaries via spiritual experience.

Women’s Conversion Narratives and the Arminian Magazine

One of the main outlets for women’s writing during the Evangelical Revival was John Wesley’s Arminian Magazine. Wesley founded the Arminian Magazine in 1778 in direct response to growing tensions within the evangelical revival over the question of predestination. However the real purpose of the magazine, for Wesley, was to defend “universal redemption” against predestination not only through polemic and theological argument, but also through the personal experiences of actual Methodist men and women. This real-life experience was proof positive for Wesley that the salvation experience was available to all.

It is in this context that Wesley solicited personal religious experience accounts for the Arminian Magazine. Religious accounts had always been important to Wesley as validations of his ministry. His published Journal not only served as an apologia for Wesley’s ministry but also, according to Hindmarsh, worked to mimetically produce both spiritual experiences and spiritual experience accounts by lay people, thus creating a kind of
Especially under Wesley's editorship, which he maintained until his death in 1791, the widely circulated Magazine, served as an ideal outlet for women's writing. Tolar Burton has estimated that, of the 238 biographical accounts in the Arminian Magazine, 79 are about women (200). Interestingly enough, 113 of these accounts were published between the inception of the magazine in 1778 and Wesley's death in 1791 (Jones 275), at which time men's and women's accounts were almost equally represented (Tolar Burton 200). Wesley also regularly published stand alone pamphlets by women that detailed their conversion and spiritual experiences – the most famous being the Account of the Experience of Hester Ann Rogers, which remained in print on both sides of the Atlantic until the end of the nineteenth century. What is especially interesting about these narratives is that the majority of them are by or about Methodist lay-women – ordinary women who wrote to Wesley about their conversion and experience of faith. Thus, not only did Methodism offer the women a space within the burgeoning public sphere, their accounts in turn worked to expose the very binaries that constructed this sphere as inherently gendered spaces in need of subversion.

For example after her conversion Elizabeth Scaddan relates how her family gave her an ultimatum, telling her she “should no longer remain with them; that they would disown me; and accordingly I had only till the next morning to determine what answer to give them” (XIV: 187). Eventually her family backed down, but it was not atypical for family members to be distressed at their daughters or wives becoming Methodists. This concern reflected not only contemporary prejudices against the doctrine of justification by faith, but also the prevalence of false rumors that were widely spread about the Methodists accusing them of Popery and even sponsoring orgies at their “love feasts,” or communal gatherings.

What these concerns indicate is that controversy over religious doctrine in eighteenth century England was rooted in something far deeper than scholastic arguments over the nature of salvation and redemption. The average layperson may not have understood why Wesley’s doctrine of justification by faith and insistence on immediate sensible conversion caused such uproar within the Church establishment, but he or she surely understood that such doctrines threatened social order in radical ways. Implicit in Wesley’s assertion that God’s grace was a free gift and salvation was available to all was an understanding of doctrine that exploded static categories of rich/poor, male/female, public/private. By emphasizing that the experience of salvation could be sensibly experienced outside of Church walls, Methodism offered a fundamental redefinition of self based on personal experience with God and interaction with a new community of faith.

Furthermore, early Methodism was in many quarters considered profoundly countercultural. As Clive Field’s comprehensive survey of early Methodist membership lists tentatively suggests, the perceived threat to social structures reflects the fact that a disproportionate number of Methodist members tended to be drawn from the skilled trades – mining, carpentry, weaving, etc – though this could vary by locality (165). In this type of local economic activity families had a vested economic interest in their sons and daughters remaining in the family trade (Malmgreen 64). The concern on the part of fathers, mothers, and husbands was that if their daughters or wives were out participating in Methodism meetings they would not be at home helping raise the family or contributing financially (Field 157). Likewise, by developing a grassroots system of classes, bands, and select bands in order to foster a unique Methodist social community, Wesley created an organization that operated with what Gail Malmgreen describes as a “centrifugal force” which brought individuals together across wide distances and “broke down the narrowness of provincial life” (62). For this very reason, though, these bands were seen as profoundly threatening to existing social and religious structures; thus it should come as no surprise that the early years of Methodism were accompanied by intense persecution in the form of riots, press gangs, and family pressure to renounce Methodism.

In becoming Methodists these women were in essence declaring their allegiance to a new spiritual family that was set in direct opposition to mainstream British culture. Henceforth their primary allegiance was to God and the Methodist community and, as Elizabeth Scaddan’s testimony illustrates, they were willing to give up everything to do so. They did so not to make a political or feminist statement, but because they felt they owed allegiance to a higher moral authority. Such self-determination in the face of vigorous opposition from friends and family defined many women’s experience with Methodism, especially in the early days of the movement, and it partially explains why they felt compelled to speak out in public about the true nature of their religious experiences.

Conversion not only operated to break down social and cultural bonds, however, it also granted a sense of liberatory agency that licensed Methodist women to disrupt the public/private binary in print. For example, Rachel Bruff describes writes:

\begin{quote}
One day I bowed myself at the Redeemer's feet, and determined not to let him go without the blessing. And glory be to his Name! in a moment my burden was gone. My soul was now so enraptured with a sense of his love, that I was constrained to praise his name aloud. From that time he has been constantly with me, and has borne me up above all my sins, temptations, and sufferings (X:192).
\end{quote}

Likewise, M. Taylor states, “There is now a free and open intercourse betwixt God and my soul…. My soul cries out for love, and hungers and thirsts for more, and to be more united to him who is my all in all” (XIV: 619). Mrs. Planche similarly uses the language of liberation to describe her experience:

\begin{quote}
He came into my soul with such a display of his grace and love, as I never knew before. All my bands were loosed, and my spirit was set perfectly free. I felt an entire deliverance from all the remains of sin in my nature; and my precious Jesus took full possession of my heart (XIV: 421).
\end{quote}
Thus in each case these women represent conversion as an overwhelming experience of God’s love that destroys sin by entering into them and taking possession of their hearts. Furthermore, they tend to represent this experience in almost erotic terms – using the language of love and affection to describe the sensory feeling of sanctification. This would seem to suggest that these women view this experience in much the same terms as a human relationship – their relationship with Christ is cemented in Christian perfection through the mystical union of their soul and body with Christ. Unlike similar accounts by men, perfection for these women is an intensely embodied experience that licenses public action.

Thus it appears that women, more than men, saw their sanctifying submission to God as an empowering or agency-granting experience in the sense that their primary allegiance was to God, not men. The experience of sanctification empowered them to speak and act in ways that would have been inconceivable before because they believed they were operating as God’s agent in the world. In fact at the end of her narrative Elizabeth Scaddan explicitly asks her audience to “excuse what difficiencies [sic] you will find.” Despite these perceived “difficiencies,” however, these women overcome their reservations because they see themselves as called to speak out and testify to the broader Methodist community about what God has done in their lives. This has the radical effect of opening up a space in discourse within which lay-women can use religious experience as a means of participating in a fully developed religious public sphere that calls into question the very nature of the public/private, inner experience/outward action binary itself.

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Agnes Bulmer – Methodist Poetess

When most people think of “Methodism” and “poetry” together they naturally think of Charles Wesley. Indeed, it could rightly be argued that the great poet and hymnist shaped the Methodist movement at least as much through his poetry as his more famous brother did. However, scholarship on Methodist poetry (scanty as it is already) rarely moves beyond Charles and, when it does, it mainly considers such religious poets as curiosities – it generally makes no attempt to regard such poets in their own terms and take them seriously as poets – it most certainly never considers women. Of no one is this truer than Agnes Collinson Bulmer.

Agnes Bulmer was the most notable poet of second generation Methodism – her epic Messiah’s Kingdom runs to twelve books and over 14,000 lines, a scale of ambition rarely seen since Milton. It is certainly one of the longest poems of the nineteenth century and perhaps the longest poem ever written by a woman. And yet this magnificent and important poem has received no serious scholarly attention. This is due, in part, to long-standing elision of explicitly religious eighteenth century poetry in general and religious poetry by early evangelical women in particular. Though feminist critics have done an admirable job of reintegrating women into the canon over the past thirty years, religious women continue to be written out or, when they are included (as in the case of someone like Hannah More) their writings are largely considered primarily in terms of gender, class, or politics and rarely in terms of the more primary category of religion.

This is especially true of writers like Bulmer who wrote almost solely on religious topics and who dared to do so in an epic poetic genre largely dominated by men. Instead of being considered for their own literary and cultural merits, these works have largely been laid to the side as the cliché moralistic devotional poetry of the religious fanatic. Indeed this is too often the case as religious writers of lesser talent (both women and men) often turned to scripture and sentimental cliché as a substitute for poetic vision; but it is not true of Bulmer, who used the materials she was given craft a cohesive and original poetic vision that speaks beyond its limited religious sphere to address the key moral, social, and political questions of the day in an original and powerful voice. That subsequent critics have not recognized this has more to do with our preconceptions than the actual content of the text.

Agnes Collinson was born in London on August 31, 1775 to Edward and Elizabeth Collinson. Both her parents were devout Methodists and personal friends of John Wesley. She was baptized by Wesley and received her first Methodist class ticket from him in 1789. By this time Wesley was a venerated figure both within and without Methodism and London had become the one of the key centers of the Methodist movement. Here Agnes would have rubbed shoulders with the Methodist elite, her first class leader was Hester Ann Rogers and she also became acquainted with Elizabeth Mortimer – both major female leaders of early Methodism who present at Wesley's death.

Early on Agnes exhibited a keen intellect and a marked talent for writing. Her favorite book, aside from the Bible was Young’s Night Thoughts, a work that would have a profound influence on her later work. She also began composing poetry early in life and her first poem, “On the Death of Charles Wesley,” was published in the Arminian Magazine in 1788, when she was just fourteen. It is hardly great poetry, but it exceptional for a fourteen year old girl. She also contributed a longer, more polished poem, Thoughts on a Future State, to the posthumous 1794 edition of Hester Ann Rogers’ famous Account. It is a far more developed poem and one that indicates the direction her poetic vision was taking – incorporating a thoroughgoing knowledge of Scripture with a keen ear for poetic diction.

In 1793 Agnes married Joseph Bulmer, a London merchant and one of the stewards of the famous City Road Chapel. By all accounts the marriage was a happy one and Joseph's relative wealth allowed Agnes the leisure to pursue both poetry and deep involvement in the Methodist societies. She was a frequent contributor to the Arminian Magazine, the later Methodist Magazine, and Youth’s Instructor. She also carried on an extensive correspondence with the luminaries of the second generation Methodism, some of which was published after her death as Select Letters (these are currently unavailable in an electronic edition – I have a copy and will be transcribing at a later date). Some of her notable friends included the prominent Methodism theologian Adam Clarke and Jabez Bunting, the powerful leader of the Wesleyan Methodist Connection.

It seems, however, than much of Bulmer’s greatest poetry revolved around and was spurred on by the experience of death. Her husband Joseph died in 1822 and her mother in 1825. It was after this second experience of nursing her mother during her final illness that Bulmer began her magnum opus: Messiah’s Kingdom. Published in 1833 in twelve books, Messiah’s Kingdom is a momentous achievement by any standards. At 14,000 lines it is 4,000 lines longer than its most obvious literary forbearer, Paradise Lost, and only 2,000 lines shorter than one of the longest poems of the Romantic period, Don Juan. Its scope is tremendous, beginning (like Milton) with the fall of man and proceeding through the major events of the Old and New Testaments, the establishment of the Church, the Reformation, and up to the contemporaneous evangelical fight against slavery and social ills. Its overriding theme is the establishment of Christ's kingdom on earth, first through his redemptive work on the cross and then through the actions of the individual Christian in society.

Length and scope, however, are not necessarily the best indicators of poetic worth. This, combined with the fact that the subject matter of the poem is so explicitly religious, no doubt explain why it has been overlooked by serious scholars for so long. Nevertheless, careful attention to the poem
clearly indicates a marked poetic talent – a clear grasp of both content and form that are married together seamlessly. As late nineteenth century biographer Annie Keeling put it, Bulmer composed the poem, "with a rare fervour and depth of conviction, with impassioned eloquence, and a style always musical and graceful, often rising in power. The whole poem presents an attractive unconscious picture of a high, pure spirit delighting itself in the loftier regions of thought and speculation; and in the frequent lyrical outburst which break the flow of its rhymed heroic verse there is a certain swift and fiery quality, an airy grace of flight..." This quality is best exhibited in the lyric sections, like this one which links God's promise to Noah to his promise to redeem humankind through the coming Messiah:

GLOOMY cloud, that, lowering low,
    Shadowest nature's lovely light,
Wide thy deepening darkness thrown
    Catch the sunbeam bursting bright;
Gently on thy humid breast,
Bid its soften'd splendours rest.

Wild the wind, and fierce the flood
    Foaming, roaring, raved, and rush'd;
Thunder's roll'd, – the voice of God: –
    Now the angry storm is hush'd,
Now the eddying whirlwind sleeps,
Ocean seeks its barrier deeps.

...Hush! the word of promise breaks,
    Not in thunders hoarse and loud:
Lo! the covenant Saviour speaks
    Softly from the symbol'd cloud.
Rise! the storm of wrath is pass'd;
Judgment shall not always last.
...

From the cross, where darkness shrouds
    Him who suffer'd there for me,
In the fearful tempest clouds,
    Resting, dread, on Calvary,
Mercy's beaming sign appears,
See, believe, and dry thy tears!

Not all passages of the poem are (or could be) this moving, but even Milton had his bad lines. This style may not be to everyone's taste, and Bulmer is no Milton, but the fact that Milton's epic religious poem has been endlessly dissected and connected so clearly with social and political events, while Bulmer's has not, says more about the state of scholarship on religious women poets than it does about Bulmer's poetry. Bulmer is just as much of an engaged social poet as Milton was, she just exhibits this engagement in different terms in a different time and place.

However Messiah's Kingdom was not what Bulmer was most famous for, even during her lifetime. In 1836, after the death of her friend and Methodist fore-mother Elizabeth Mortimer, she edited the Memoirs of Elizabeth Mortimer, which became a bestseller on both sides of the Atlantic. She also wrote several volumes of Scripture Histories, prose re-workings of Biblical stories mainly targeted to children. Indeed, all of these works were picked up by the formidable Methodist publishing machine and circulated widely. This alone makes her a writer who deserves considerable attention. Methodist membership in England and America during the 1830's was sky rocketing and it would be no exaggeration to say that a fair portion of the population was familiar with her work.

Agnes Bulmer died on August 20, 1836 on the Isle of Wight. Her funeral sermon was preached by William Bunting, the son of Jabez Bunting, who later wrote that Bulmer was "one of the most intellectual and holy women, probably, whose presence ever adorned this world," while Adam Clarke wrote, "That woman astonishes me. She takes in information just as a sponge absorbs water.... Whether it be philosophy, history, or theology, she seizes upon it, and makes it all her own."

These tributes are touching, but they also clearly reveal the crucial tension between official Methodism and the role of women in the movement during the nineteenth century. During John Wesley's lifetime women like Hester Ann Rogers, Elizabeth Mortimer, and Sarah Crosby were given prominent roles in the movement – allowed to preach publically and express themselves in official publications. After Wesley's death official Methodism moved quickly to proscribe the roles that were available to women within the movement and under Jabez Bunting women were further confined to a space of Victorian domestic piety. This move is revealed in the tributes to Bulmer after her death. Both William Bunting and Adam
Clarke treat Bulmer as an anomaly – the intellectual woman – not the rule. The fact that Bulmer was largely confined to the private world of correspondence with other women and poetry instead of public speech and preaching indicates just how far the Methodism of the early nineteenth century had moved from its roots. Indeed, at the end of the century, Annie Keeling frames Bulmer in explicitly domestic terms:

This beautiful nature, rich in thought and in love, shy and retiring as regarded all public manifestations, yet abounding in the beneficent activities of private life, has a right its own peculiar place among our types of Methodist womanhood, exemplifying as it does the union of high intellectual gifts with a saintliness no less pure and true than that of any martyred and canonized virgin, though displayed in the quiet, sheltered station of an ordinary English matron.

According to Keeling, Bulmer was skilled in the “activities of private life,” and an “ordinary English matron.” The fact that she was a serious intellectual and poet is secondary to her role as faithful Methodist wife and matron – it is just an added benefit.

We cannot know for certain what Bulmer herself thought of this tension between gender and religion because she left no written record. After her death her Memoirs were edited and published by her sister, but they are mainly a collection of her extant pious letters that tell us little about her inner life. What we are left with, then, are her impressive literary productions which reveal a woman of deep learning, keen intellect, and immense poetic talent. If this record is any indication, Bulmer found a way of expressing herself despite a religious culture than confined women to a private domestic piety. It is my hope that, by drawing more attention to Bulmer and her poetry, religious women poets in general will begin to receive more attention from the scholarly community.

For this reason I am embarking on sustained scholarly work on Agnes Bulmer on this blog. In addition to research on her life and work, I will be slowly transcribing and posting the entirety of Messiah’s Kingdom. Through the magic of Google Books, an entire facsimile text of Messiah’s Kingdom is now available online. However, this is truly a poem that deserves more scholarly and critical attention – attention that would be much assisted by a modern annotated critical edition. Since such an edition is unlikely to appear anytime soon and I am currently in no position to make that happen, I am in the process of making the complete text available here. As of today both the Introductory Stanzas and Book I are posted under “Primary Sources.” Over time I will also be creating eBook versions of the text (currently unavailable through Google), working up some annotations, and posting some of her letters and minor works. My hope is that making this fascinating poem more readily available will encourage more scholarship on Bulmer in particular and on early evangelical women poets and writers in general.

References and Additional Resources

**Primary Sources:**


**Secondary Sources:**


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Conceptualizing an 18th Century Religious Public Sphere

Since the publication of Jurgen Habermas’ *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* the concept of the public sphere as a freestanding institution of bourgeois society has been progressively modified, including by Habermas himself. What has emerged since that time is the conception of multiple public spheres that often overlapped and sometimes conflicted. Of particular interest to me is the way that a religious public...
It was within this religious climate that the Evangelical Revival arose in England for, though Methodism itself began as a movement within the Church of England, it quickly located itself within the developing religious public sphere. The fact that there was so much anti-Methodist literature from writers ranging from Smollett to Fielding to people like the anonymous pamphleteer who wrote *The Story of the Methodist-lady; or, The Injur'd Husband's Revenge: A True History* indicates the extent to which religious debates were very much a part of the public consciousness. As Fielding's character Parson Adams says in *Joseph Andrews* men like Wesley and Whitefield, “set up the detestable Doctrine of Faith against good Works... for surely, that Doctrine was coined in Hell, and one would think none but the Devil himself could have the Confidence to preach it” (70). As strange as it may seem to a post-modern audience, such questions of religious doctrine were very much part of the public conversation in the eighteenth century.

On the other end of the spectrum spiritual experience diaries and narratives proliferated as people like John Wesley and George Whitefield cannily utilized print as a means of spreading their message. Both men's journals were best sellers and indeed religious literature as a whole dominated the literary marketplace. Of course, this spiritual experience genre no doubt existed well before the eighteenth century. Catholic mystics like *St. John of the Cross* and *Teresa of Avila* on the continent and *Julian of Norwich* in England recorded powerful, intimate, and deeply symbolic mystical experiences that continue to influence generations of readers. However their writings, beautiful though they may be, are largely bound up in the representational symbolism of the established church. They are internal spiritual experiences first and though are presented largely as models for spiritual devotion. In this sense these religious experience accounts largely mirror Habermas' category of the “representational” public sphere. The authority of the church largely mediated how spirituality was transmitted and experienced by the public at large and as a result relatively few members of the general population ever got to read about these great saints.

The evangelical conversion narrative, however, is a different story and, as I have argued elsewhere, it largely follows the general eighteenth century trend towards the development of a complex internal subjectivity that interacts in innovative ways with the developing public sphere. Starting roughly with Bunyan's *Grace Abounding*, the evangelical conversion narrative in fact acted like a spiritual solvent – eroding the artificial divide between private and public. Unlike earlier spiritual experience account the evangelical conversion narrative is clearly oriented towards a broader audience embodied in a specific religious community. Individuals like John Bunyan, John Wesley, and Hester Ann Rogers were not and never claimed to be part of the spiritual elite, instead they represent their experience as a constant struggle. For the tinker John Bunyan there is nothing of the heavily symbolic spiritual rapture of St. John of the Cross, only honest struggles with sin, doubt, and oppressive local authorities. Just as Addison and Steele attempted the reform and democratize manners in the emerging bourgeois public sphere so Bunyan brought legitimate spiritual experience and struggle to a much wider swathe of the British population – a population that was still largely dependent on the representational forms of worship and not the subjective experience of religious faith.

Furthermore, these authors utilized the burgeoning print culture to transmit their experience to a much wider, and much more socially variegated audience. Drawing upon the “private” diary and letter form, spiritual experience authors oriented their texts towards a specific audience – probing the developing space that was opening up in print. As Habermas writes, “From the beginning, the psychological interest increased in the dual relation to both one's self and the other: self observation entered a union partly curious, partly sympathetic with the emotional stirrings of the other” (49). By thus appropriating these forms in print, early eighteenth century conversion narrative writers (like novelists) began to develop a complex internal subjectivity that was both rooted in internal experience but oriented towards a public space. People like John Wesley published their spiritual experiences not only or primarily for their own sakes, but in order to elicit mimetic spiritual experiences in rapidly expanding reading public.

As the century progresses, however, this divide is almost entirely erased (especially for women) as individuals begin to see religious experience, and especially writing about religious experience, as a means to entering into a developing public conversation about the role of religion in British life. John Wesley, for example, published his *Earnest Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion* as an explicit response to the early criticisms of Methodism. Even more interesting, however, is how the women of the early evangelical revival used the space they found within religious experience to express themselves publicly. I have written about this at length elsewhere, but in general the women of early Methodism used their private, internal experience as a way to disrupt the categories of public and private themselves. Religious experience in this sense gave the women the language to enter a public space and explode any distinction between inner emotion and outer action. Thus it was not so much that evangelical religion appealed to women because it was inherently more suited to private and domestic consumption, but because it allowed for participation in a conversation beyond those bounds.

In this sense a new sort of religious “public sphere” emerges during the eighteenth century within which gender and the role of gender within religion become part and parcel of more abstract discussions about doctrine and theology. Thus I would argue that the debates over doctrines like justification by faith or religious “enthusiasm” were in reality expressions of deeper seeded concerns over the role of marginalized members of society – women, the poor – in organized religion. Over the course of the nineteenth century the roles of these women were gradually circumscribed as religious movements like Methodism became centralized institutions. Once again women were used as representational religious
In his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, Edmund Burke begins his polemic by likening prominent Dissenter Richard Price's sermon in favor of the French Revolution to the worst religious excesses on the *English Civil War*:

“...That sermon is in a strain which I believe has not been heard in this kingdom, in any of the pulpits which are tolerated or encouraged in it, since the year 1648, when a predecessor of Dr. Price, the Reverend Hugh Peters, made the vault of the king's own chapel at St. James's ring with the honour and privilege of the Saints, who, with the “high praises of God in their mouths, and a two edged sword in their hands, were to execute judgment on the heathen, and punishments upon the people; to bind their kings with chains, and their nobles with fetters of iron.” Few harangues from the pulpit, except in the days of your league in France, or in the days of our solemn league and covenant in England, have ever breathed less of the spirit of moderation than this lecture in Old Jewry.... This pulpit style, revived after so long a discontinuance, had to me the air of novelty, and of a novelty not wholly without danger (13-14).

In rhetorically linking the Civil War to the French Revolution Burke thus calls up the ghosts of that turbulent time — ghosts that still haunted the public at large. More importantly, Burke suggests that part of the problem with the rhetoric of the Civil War was the blurring of the lines between preaching and prophecy — the overtaking of reasoned discourse and scholarly Biblical interpretation by ranting “enthusiasts,” who prophesied a world turned upside down. It was this threat that Burke saw threatening England once again.

This threat was exacerbated (in Burke's mind) by the proliferation of cheap printed prophecies that were distributed to the general population. Thus Burke’s harangue is also a testament to the long life of prophecy in print. By drawing up the specter of the Civil War prophets Burke is also drawing attention to the complex connections between printed prophecy then and the perseverance of those prophecies throughout the eighteenth century — prophecies that would be echoed in the millenarian works of people like Richard Brothers.

The millenarian prophecy of the Civil War has been amply examined by people like Christopher Hill who, in his foundational *The World Turned Upside Down*, illustrates that religious groups like the Familialists, Ranters, Quakers, and Diggers were an integral part of creating the political landscape of the 1640's and 50's. Absent from this work, however, is much recognition of prophetesses who proliferated during this time period. As Phyllis Mack puts it, Hill has a tendency to, “subsume the category of ‘woman’ within that of class and would interpret the prophet’s attack on the enrobed Anglican priest as one aspect of a wider and more significant dynamic of class conflict” (3). This does not to say that class does not figure into the equation — during the turbulent 1640's this was unavoidable — but it is to say that many of these prophetic women have been overlooked as important thinkers and writers of the time period. For example, one of the most prolific prophets of the time period, Lady Eleanor Davies, is practically relegated to a footnote in Hill's book, where he notes that she was “an eccentric personality who regarded herself as a prophetess [and] deserves more space than she can be given here” (128).

Furthermore, though modern feminist scholarship has done much to rescue these important women from the dustbin of history, relatively little work has been done on women as prophetic printers and writers — women who used the medium of print (often illegally) to project a prophetic voice. In the case of Lady Eleanor Davies, her prophetic voice operated *only* through illicit print — print laden with her prophetic ideology. As such her vision of millennium was as much a product of its mediation technology as its actual prophetic content, a fact that she herself acknowledges. In the case of a prophetess like Fifth Monarchist Anna Trapnel, on the other hand, her prophecy undergoes multiple layers of outside mediation before reaching the printed page, thus calling into question the very notion of a stable authorial persona. As Lisa Maruca argues, in cases like this the printing process itself operated as a gendered space within which multiple subjectivities could be negotiated (15). It is within this space that the prophetesses Davies and Trapnel thrived, working to create an alternative, gendered, public space that was gradually regulated and shut down over the course of the century.

References


17th Century Women and the Perserverance of Prophecy in Print

In his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, Edmund Burke begins his polemic by likening prominent Dissenter Richard Price's sermon in favor of the French Revolution to the worst religious excesses on the *English Civil War*:

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References

Lady Eleanor Davies

Lady Eleanor Davies (1590-1652) was the fifth daughter of Baron Audeley, the first earl of Castlehaven. She was married in 1609 to Sir John Davies, an attorney in the King's service. Until 1625 there was nothing particularly remarkable about her life. However on July 28, 1625 she heard the voice of the prophet Daniel from heaven saying, “There is Ninteene years and a halfe to the day of Judgement and you as the meek Virgin.” She interpreted this as a prophetic call and began publishing prophesies proclaiming the impending judgment that specifically criticized both the King (who acceded to the throne the same year Lady Eleanor heard the voice from heaven) and the governance of the Church of England under Archbishop William Laud. She gained even more notoriety when she correctly predicted both the death of her husband in 1626 and the Duke of Buckingham in 1628. She quickly remarried Archibald Douglas, who claimed to be Charles II's older brother and thus the rightful heir to the throne (Cope xi-xii).

In 1633 Lady Eleanor was arrested and sent to prison by Archbishop Laud for the illicit publication of her prophecy, Given to the Elector, which he burnt in front of her. She remained imprisoned in the Gatehouse for two and a half years and upon her release she promptly destroyed the altar-hanging at Litchfield Cathedral and was committed to Bedlam. She was later transferred to the Tower of London and remained in prison until 1640 (Cope xv-xvii). In 1645 she interpreted the trial and execution of Archbishop Laud as the fulfillment of her prophecy of judgment made in 1625. She continued to prophesy the coming kingdom of God until her death in 1652 and the printed prophecies she left behind represent one of the largest collection of writing by a seventeenth century woman.

What is particularly interesting about Lady Eleanor's prophecies, however, is that they were meant for print. Unlike the other prophets of the Civil War Lady Eleanor did not prophesy on street corners, walk naked as a sign, or fall into prophetic trances. In fact her only real public demonstration (the destruction of the altar hanging at Litchfield) was largely a wordless event. Instead Lady Eleanor focused her attention on print and her books. However, as Lisa Maruca has pointed out, “print is a site in which the book as a tangible object meets the meaningful text contained within its pages” (4). In other words, the production of print extends beyond the post-Romantic notion of the solitary genius author to the print technologies that made the book possible (the type, the press, etc) and the print workers that transferred words to type. In fact she argues that, prior to the mid-eighteenth century the author was equally important as the printer, bookseller, hawker, etc. In the case of Lady Eleanor, she and the printers she worked with took on substantial risk as, before the Civil War, it was illegal to print anything outside the Stationer's Guild monopoly. For this reason Lady Eleanor traveled to Holland early on in her career to print her most controversial prophecy, Given to the Elector, an event she describes in Everlasting Gospel:

> And so pursuing the Prophetical History in the next place, That it might be fulfilled out of the Low Countreys, &c. as the Virgin when undertook her voyage, she fleeing for the Babes preservation thither; also constrained for printing the same, to go into Holland, those plain swathing-bands for wrapping it in, pretending in her husbands behalf the Spaw obtained a License, since none for printing to be had here, inquisition and hold such, among them imprisoned about it formerly, till afterward all as free, Cum Privilegio out of date become (288).

This passage is particular interesting in that, not only is she describing the “birth” of her most controversial prophecy – the one that got her imprisoned and condemned by Archbishop Laud – she is doing so in gendered terms and in the language of print. Her books are her “Babes” – a term that takes on special resonance considering her prophetic identification as a virgin. She goes to Holland because she cannot obtain a license to print in England and works with printers there to produce a religio-political text that lives on in print, despite being burned by the archbishop.
This gendered imagery of giving birth to the printed word also ties in closely to the physical production of her texts. As Lisa Maruca argues, seventeenth century printing manuals often described the printing process in embodied and gendered terms. So, for example, Joseph Moxon’s Mechanick Exercises describes the casting of letters thus: “[t]he Female Block is such another Block as the Male Block, only, instead of a Tongue running through the length of it a Groove is made to receive the Tongue of the Male-Block” (qtd. in Maruca 40). Thus the mechanistic work that these letters then perform, Maruca argues, “is an essential part of the creation of words…. So, apparently, from the sex of machinery, a unit of language is born” 40-41). In the case of Lady Eleanor, her printed works really are her “babes,” created through the illicit intercourse of radical prophet and underground printer. The printed text that results is dangerous and destabilizing to the ruling hierarchy precisely because the prophetic message has found voice in the printed word.

All of these elements are on clear display in Given to the Elector, the only one of Lady Eleanor’s prophecies written in ballad form. It was published in 1633 and then again in 1648 – on both occasions in sought to address specific socio-political circumstances. The content of the prophecy conflates the events of Daniel 5, specifically Belshazzar’s feast, with what she sees (in 1633) as Charles I’s impending doom. What is most interesting, however, is not so much the content of the text, but how it is printed. On either side of the main body of text, Lady Eleanor has had glosses printed that sometimes help interpret the prophecy and at others simply obscure it further (see below). For example, the body of the text conflates the writing on the wall that disturbs Belshazzar’s feast with the failure of Charles I to amend his ways. In two places the marginal notes repeat the three words written on the wall predicting Belshazzar’s doom, “Mene Tekel Upharsin” and in one Lady Eleanor transfers the words to an anagram reading, “Parlement House King: in number about 666,” thus further tying corrupt government to apocalyptic prediction.
This particular passage is significant in that it was precisely her Biblical interpretation applied to current events that got her in the most trouble. In fact when Lady Eleanor was brought before the Archbishop he overlooked her slights on King Charles and identified her most grievous offenses as claiming to be able to interpret prophecy and then (worst of all) having it printed without a license. This is the account Lady Eleanor gives of his accusations in her *Blasphemous Charge*:

*That she had lately compiled and written, and caused to be printed and published, the three several Schedules annexed to the said Articles, some containing Expositions of divers parts of the Chapters of the Prophet Daniel, But forasmuch as she took upon her (which much unbeseemed her Sex) not only to interpret the Scriptures, and withal the most intricate and hard places of the Prophet Daniel, but also to be a Prophetess, falsly pretending to have received certain Revelations for God, and had compiled certain Books of such her fictions and false Prophesies or Revelations, which she had in person carried with her beyond the Seas, and had there procured them to be printed without License, and after brought them over here into England, and here without License, vented and dispersed them, or some of them, contrary to the Decree of Star-Chamber* (252-253).

That a woman would claim to be able to understand the prophecies of Daniel was bad enough, but that she would dare to publish such prophecies in print and that there was a printer willing to do it testifies to the dangerous destabilizing effect such works could have. For once in the public space such work was uncontrollable – the Archbishop could burn all the books he could find, but copies still remained and Lady Eleanor herself survived long enough to have *Given to the Elector* printed again in 1648. Her work, then, is a testament not only to the power of prophetic discourse in the seventeenth century, but to the power of print technologies and printers in the turbulent times leading up to the Civil War. During and after the War a new type of prophetic voice would arise, a voice that is best represented by Anna Trapnel.

Anna Trapnel

Anna Trapnel was the daughter of a shipwright. Her mother died when she was nine after praying that the Lord would “Double thy spirit upon my child” (Trapnel 7). Unlike Lady Eleanor, who was not associated with any of the major religious movements of the English Civil War, Anna Trapnel was one of the most prominent Fifth Monarchist prophets. The Fifth Monarchists interpreted the prophecies of the book of Daniel as predicting four successive corrupt empires to be succeeded by the glorious reign of King Jesus, who would come to earth to restore his kingdom (Hinds xxvii). As such, Fifth Monarchists welcomed the overthrow of the monarchy and initially embraced Oliver Cromwell as God’s chosen tool to restore his kingdom – many prominent Fifth Monarchists even served in the Barebones Parliament. However, after Cromwell was named Lord Protector, many Fifth Monarchists became disillusioned and it was in this political atmosphere that Trapnel made her most famous prophecy, *The Cry of a Stone* (Hinds xxxi-xxxii).

Also unlike Lady Eleanor, Anna Trapnel did not write her prophecies; they were recorded as she spoke in a trance then edited and printed later. The particular trance that resulted in *The Cry of a Stone* occurred in January 1654 and lasted eleven days and twelve nights. The fact that it occurred in Whitehall (the center of government) is significant, as is the fact that the Barebones Parliament had been only recently dismissed and Cromwell made Lord Protector. In fact, Trapnel specifically singles out Cromwell, figuring him as the Biblical Gideon, for special condemnation for what she sees as his abdication of his divine role. Thus, though the prophecy is not written by Trapnel, it is clearly in her own voice and reflects her interpretation of current affairs. In fact, Trapnel was considered so disruptive that, while prophesying later in Cornwall, she was arrested and
brought before the magistrates, a fascinating account that is laid out in her Report and Plea.

The co-construction of A Cry of a Stone by prophet, relator, editor, and printer allows the printed text to operate on multiple levels. At the same time that it engages in radical social critique of the Cromwell Protectorate it also carves out a gendered space in print and works to further elide the category of the author. Anna Trapnel is simultaneously the author and subject of her own text – it is within the editing and printing process that her subjectivity is recursively shaped just like the letters on the page.

The first level of mediation that occurs in A Cry of the Stone is between Trapnel herself and the (likely male) relator of the text who writes down her prophecy and ostensibly helps edit it for publication. This is a situation already fraught with interpretative difficulty as Trapnel was ostensibly not even conscious at the time of her speech. However the situation is further complicated by the fact that the relator's transcript of the prophecy is incomplete. He frequently comes into the room late, having missed part of the prophecy and at other times “because of the press of people in the chamber” (18), or Trapnel's dying voice he is unable to transcribe all of her words. At other times he seems to silently edit out passages that do not relate to the current political situation. This elision seemingly occurs at times of little importance as much as at times of tremendous moment. For example towards the end of the prophecy, right as Trapnel is beginning to elaborate her magnificent vision of the New Jerusalem, the relator maddeningly writes, “Having uttered many other things, she sung of the glory of the New Jerusalem, which escaped the relator's pen, by reason of the lowness of her voice, and the noise of the people; only some pieces were taken here and there, but too broken and imperfect here to relate” (63). Thus the relator functions both to relate the prophecy and shape the reader's view of the prophet. This is not to say that his/her view is inaccurate, only that both are working to co-construct the text.

A further level of mediation occurs, however, at the level of printing the text. After the Civil War the monopoly of the Stationer's Guild was broken and pre-publication censorship fell to the wayside. This was not to say that a person could print anything without consequence, but in the chaos that followed the Civil War the amount of print exploded and became increasingly difficult to regulate. In the case of Trapnel there is no printer listed on her text, but it is clear that it was printed quickly and cheaply, that the printer had editorial input, and that the materiality of the text shapes the content.

Of particular interest is that way in which the printer navigates the multiple voices and genres of the text – shaping reader perception through his choices of font, type, and spacing. In the figure below, for example, we can see the printer navigating three very distinct textual spaces. The page to the left includes the end of one of Trapnel's prose prophecies, in this case one that includes biographical details. The text here is small, closely printed, and in a regular font type. On the top of the next page, however, the printer has to transition into the voice of the relator and for this he selects a larger font that frames the following section of Trapnel's verse prophecy. This prophecy in verse is printed in two columns of italic font which are roughly separated into stanzas of four – though this would seem to be primarily for ease of reading as the stanzas to not exhibit any consistent rhyme pattern.
Each of these seemingly small details are nevertheless important to how we understand the text. Especially in the use of the italic stanzas the printer is clearly intervening in the text – suggesting how it should be read. As Lisa Maruca has illustrated, in the eighteenth century such italic fonts were considered more “feminine” (51). Thus even at the level of the printing process Trapnel’s gendered subjectivity is being shaped by forces outside her direct control. The fact that we do not notice these types of details when reading itself indicates the extent to which our reading practices have been informed by the post-Romantic theory of authorship. The material text has become transparent to us to the point that we find it difficult to read a text as it would have been read at the time. As Maruca points out, this transparency must be interrogated for, “that which is the most ‘internalized’ or ‘intuitive’ is that which is also the most ideological” (6).

In the case of Davies and Trapnel I am by no means suggesting that they lack their own agency or voice. Both women clearly had a distinct vision for their public role. In fact if at any time there was a relatively open space for women to express themselves publically it was during the turbulent decades of the 1640’s and 50’s. In fact after the Restoration we see women’s participation in print gradually diminishing – a story that is admirably related in Catherine Gallagher’s Nobody’s Story. Ultimately, though, I would argue that the modern difficulties that these texts produce in terms of understanding how these women thought, spoke, and acted reflects more on our culture than theirs. Religious and prophetic discourse was one of the dominant forms of public expression in the seventeenth century and it would not have seemed to strange at the time. Thus, as Paula McDowell suggests, “By pursuing what makes us uncomfortable in early modern print culture… we may begin to understand not only our own literary values and agendas, but also… those values’ original socio-cultural functions and consequences” (16). Furthermore, the perseverance of Davies and Trapnel’s prophecies in print is a testament to the power of the medium. Despite attempts to limit, control, or destroy it these women’s words lived on long enough in print that Edmund Burke could draw upon cultural memory to condemn them afresh in 1790 and worry over the return of enthusiastic prophets to “England’s green and pleasant land.”

References.


Spiritual Senses in the Evangelical Conversion Narrative: From Bunyan to Wesley

As I dig deeper into the history and structures of the Evangelical conversion narrative, I have been continually struck by how, as one of my professors constantly reminds me: “genre is a powerful thing. Especially in the case of the conversion narrative, these stories come to inform how men and women relate to their faith, form their identity, and relate that identity to a broader religious community. As Somers and Gibson have argued, such narrative structures are powerful in showing that “stories guide action; that people construct identities (however multiple and changing) by locating themselves or being located within a repertoire of emplotted stories; that ‘experience’ is constituted through narratives” (qtd. in Brown 70). Furthermore, these narratives reach out and arrest the reader (then and now) by using a profoundly embodied sense of spiritual perception to represent their experience with faith and the divine. In these they simultaneously anticipate, appropriate, and interrogate the empirical philosophy of the Enlightenment (especially John Locke) that bases human understanding on sense perception.

In thus examining religious experience as primarily affective and embodied, we confirm William James’ assertion in The Varieties of Religious Experience that to understand religion in its own terms we need to turn to emotion and experience:

> If religion is to mean anything definite for us, it seems to me that we ought to take it as meaning this added dimension of emotion, this enthusiastic temper of espousal, in regions where morality strictly so called can at best but bow its head and acquiesce. It ought to mean nothing short of this new reach of freedom for us, with the struggle over, the keynote of the universe sounding in our ears, and everlasting possession spread before our eyes (46-47).

And indeed most, if not all, of James’ assessment of religious experience is dedicated to judging emotional perception and the role this plays in the development of a religious subjectivity. What James hypothesized at the beginning of the twentieth century and what has been confirmed by modern neuroscience is that emotion plays a far greater role in perception, understanding, reason, and even subjectivity than has hitherto been recognized.

John Bunyan’s conversion narrative is a prime example of how these different philosophical and theological ideas play themselves out in narrative. Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners, is widely considered to be the forerunner to the evangelical conversion narrative of the eighteenth century. Though writers before Bunyan (most notably the Catholic mystics) had written about their conversion experiences, Bunyan elevates the genre to an entirely new level, integrating a complex internal subjectivity and narrative pattern that anticipate the novel form. I have written about the conventions of conversion narratives elsewhere and there is an excellent and growing literature on the subject (see especially D. Bruce Hindmarsh, The Evangelical Conversion Narrative), but what really sets Bunyan’s narrative apart is the way it relies on sense perception to represent spiritual experience.

The key point here is that in Grace Abounding Bunyan not only comes to know God or assent to the tenets of faith, but see, hear, and feel God’s presence. He says that before conversion he was not, “sensible of the danger and evil of sin” (emphasis mine), indicating that religious experience is predicated on sense and that a new type of spiritual sense is granted upon conversion. However as Bunyan continues to struggle with God he begins to see his sins set before him:

> Yet I saw my sin most barbarous, and a filthy crime, and could not but conclude, and that with great shame and astonishment, that I had horribly abused the holy Son of God. Wherefore I felt my soul greatly to love and pity him, and my bowels to yearn towards him; for I saw he was still my Friend, and did reward me good for evil; yea, the love and affection that then did burn within to my Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ did work, at this time, such a strong and hot desire of revengement upon myself for the abuse I had done unto him, that, to speak as I then thought, had I a thousand gallons of blood within my veins, I could freely then have split it all at the command and feet of this my Lord and Saviour.

Here we see the evangelical convention of representing an ultimately indescribable spiritual experience as a visual event. Bunyan does not of course mean that he literally saw his sins set before him or that Jesus was his friends, but it is the best language he can come up with to describe the experience.

Even more important for Bunyan is the sense of hearing – in fact Bunyan emphasizes, “faith comes by hearing,” which is one of the reasons he insists on preaching publicly. Likewise Bunyan’s greatest temptation and most transcendent spiritual experience revolve around hearing. Much of his narrative revolves around the words that he constantly hears in his head encouraging him to “sell Christ,” which he is eventually convinced that he does. He then vacillates between despair and hope as he wrestles with whether he has committed the “unforgivable sin” of blaspheming the Holy Spirit. Ultimately it is through hearing words of comfort from God that he is convinced that he has been saved. The passage bears quoting at length:

> Once as I was walking to and fro in a good man’s shop, bemoaning of myself in my sad and doleful state, afflicting myself with self-abhorrence for this wicked and ungodly thought; lamenting, also, this hard hap of mine, for that I should commit so great a sin, greatly fearing I should not be pardoned… suddenly there was, as if there had rushed in at the Window, the Noise of wind upon me, but very pleasant, and as if I had heard a voice speaking, Didst ever refuse to be justified by the Blood of Christ? And, withal my whole life of profession past was, in a moment, opened to me, wherein I was made to see that designedly I had not; so my heart answered groaningly, No. Then fell, with power, Heb. 12.25.
emotion. understanding, but what he is seeking to do here is develop a theory of the affections that makes at least a limited space for proper religious fluids… attend the motions and exercises of the mind, that there cannot be so much as an intense thought, without an effect upon them" (131- that, “All affections whatsoever, have in some respect or degree, an effect on the body…. So subject is the body to the mind, and so much do its heart and can be inclined or disinclined to the things of religion. He then goes on to detail how these spiritual perceptions act on the body, writing Here Edwards delineates between type of perception located in the mind and understanding and a sort of spiritual perception that is located in the experience that relied on the evidence of perception and the Biblical “fruits of the Spirit.”

For Methodist founder John Wesley, the foundation of religious experience lay not with outward moral action but with the experiential quality of justification by faith. Just as his heart was famously “strangely warmed” at Aldersgate in 1738 he believed that people could know and feel that their sins were forgiven. Contrary to later accusations, this experiential knowledge could not be obtained through good or moral works; instead these works were the result of a true and abiding faith in Christ. Likewise Jonathan Edwards, on the other side of the Atlantic, was faced with the problem of how to determine whether an individual's emotional expressions of faith were genuine. Like Wesley he believed that a felt knowledge of justification to God was necessary and presided over some of the most notable outbreaks of religious fervor during the First Great Awakening. In confronting this question both men drew on their religious heritage, but also modern empirical philosophy to develop theories of religious experience that relied on the evidence of perception and the Biblical “fruits of the Spirit.”

Edwards, for instance, in his Religious Affections lays out twelve signs that a religious affection is gracious, or of God. What is most interesting for our purposes is that, clearly influenced by Locke, Edwards ties the affections to a sort of spiritual perception that is linked with heart emotion:

God has endued the soul with two faculties: one is that by which it is capable of perception and speculation, or by which it discerns, and views, and judges of things; which is called the understanding. The other faculty is that by which the soul does not merely perceive and view things, but is some way inclined with respect to the things it views or considers; either is inclined to them, or is disinclined and averse from them; or is the faculty by which the soul does not behold things, as an indifferent unaffected spectator, but either as liking or disliking, pleased or displeased, approving or rejecting. This faculty is called by various names; it is sometimes called the inclination: and, as it has respect to the actions that are determined and governed by it, is called the will: and the mind, with regard to the exercises of this faculty, is often called the heart (96).

Here Edwards delineates between type of perception located in the mind and understanding and a sort of spiritual perception that is located in the heart and can be inclined or disinclined to the things of religion. He then goes on to detail how these spiritual perceptions act on the body, writing that, “All affections whatsoever, have in some respect or degree, an effect on the body…. So subject is the body to the mind, and so much do its fluids… attend the motions and exercises of the mind, that there cannot be so much as an intense thought, without an effect upon them” (131-132). For Edwards these emotions and their bodily effects were still subject to the mind and true religious affections were still dependent upon the understanding, but what he is seeking to do here is develop a theory of the affections that makes at least a limited space for proper religious emotion.
Likewise John Wesley faced accusations of enthusiasm throughout his life and ministry and often had more difficulty distinguishing between true religion and enthusiastic excess. Early Methodism could be a raucous affair with thousands (sometimes tens of thousands) of people turning out in the open air to hear famous preachers like the Wesley brothers and George Whitefield. Extravagant expressions of religious emotion were often the norm at such events with people breaking down into tears, crying out and even suffering catatonic convulsions. In his published *Journal*, Wesley expresses reservations about such experiences but in general judged many to be genuine. Likewise Wesley’s eagerness to accept the genuineness of emotional experience led to controversy in 1763 when two of his preachers, Thomas Maxfield and George Bell, proclaimed themselves spiritually perfect and led a portion of one of Wesley’s London congregations into antinomianism. Wesley was slow to react, wanting to test whether Maxfield and Bell’s experience was genuine, but in the end his failure to act quickly caused a major rift within London Methodism.

However this may be, in general Wesley thought that the true test of every religious emotion was how the convert manifested the fruits of the Spirit in everyday life. Though a person could not be saved through works; love, joy, and peace with one’s neighbor were the true signs of conversion. It was because of this belief that Wesley solicited personal experience accounts from his vast network of correspondents, many of whom were women. These accounts not only represented evidence that his ministry was effective, but that the religious emotions of conversion could be genuine and carry over into everyday life, powerfully molding a sense of religious agency.

But I want to argue even further – suggesting that from Bunyan to Edwards to Wesley each was developing theory of religious experience based on spiritual senses. As Edwards wrote in defining the spiritual senses, “the work of the Spirit of God in regeneration is often in Scripture compared to the giving a new sense, giving eyes to see, and ears to hear, unstopping the ears of the deaf, and opening the eyes of them that were born blind, and turning from darkness unto light” (206). Likewise Wesley, in his *Earnest Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion*, argues that faith cannot be based on natural sense, but spiritual:

> And seeing our ideas are not innate, but must all originally come from our senses, it is certainly necessary that you have senses capable of discerning objects of this kind: not those only which are called natural senses, which in this respect profit nothing, as being altogether incapable of discerning objects of a spiritual kind; but spiritual senses, exercised to discern spiritual good and evil (V:12).

Here Wesley simultaneously draws on Locke and moves further than him, arguing for spiritual perception of spiritual things to mirror natural perception of natural things.

It is this spiritual sense that is granted upon conversion and allows the believer to experience God in a way that is incomprehensible and indescribable to the non-believer. This, for Wesley, is the true definition of faith:

> Faith is that divine evidence whereby the spiritual man discerneth God, and the things of God. It is with regard to the spiritual world, what sense is with regard to the natural. It is the spiritual sensation of every soul that is born of God… [it] is the eye of the new-born soul… It is the ear of the soul, whereby a sinner ’hears the voice of the Son of God, and lives…It is… the palate of the soul; for hereby a believer ”tastes the good word, and the powers of the world to come ;” and hereby he both tastes and sees that God is gracious,”yea,” and merciful to him a sinner.” It is the feeling of the soul, whereby a believer perceives, through the “power of the Highest overshadowing him,” both the existence and the presence of Him in whom ” he lives, moves, and has his being;” and indeed the whole invisible world, the entire system of things eternal. And hereby, in particular, he feels ” the love of God shed abroad in his heart (V:6).

Thus faith is intimately connected to sense and even in the case of spiritual sense Wesley describes it primarily in terms of natural sense and emotion as a means to validating experience. For this reason Methodist conversion narratives and religious experience accounts are full of the language of sensory perception and emotion – though the experience of faith is ultimately ineffable these men, and especially women, use the language of sensibility to describe faith.

Take, as just one representative example, the language of Hester Ann Rogers as she struggles to describe her experience with God:

> While thus lost in communion with my Saviour, he spake those words to my heart, – “All that I have is thine! I am Jesus, in whom dwells all the fulness of the Godhead bodily – I am thine! My Spirit is thine! My Father is thine! They love thee, as I love thee – the whole Deity is thine!
All God is, and all he has, is thine! He even now overshadows thee! He now covers thee with a cloud of his presence" (102).

Here sensual perception (in this case hearing) is combined with a deeply spiritual revelation of union and communion with God that ends with Rogers describing the intensity of the experience in terms of life and death, writing “I believe, indeed, if this had continued as I felt it before, but for one hour, mortality must have been dissolved, and the soul dislodged from its tenement of clay” (102).

This type of language, though often less beautifully expressed, became the stock in trade of the evangelical conversion narrative – shaping the identities and subjectivities of an entire generation of believers. It is at the same time heavily indebted to the Enlightenment and profoundly opposed to it – in other words it is both enlightened and enthusiastic – a complex fusion of the two that effectively works to break down a binary opposition. It is in tracing these trends from Bunyan to Locke to Wesley and his movement that we can begin to see that expressions of religious “enthusiasm” persisted throughout the eighteenth century but they did not persist in a vacuum – they subtly shaped and were shaped by a culture that was still working out what it meant to be a being in the world.

Notes

1. See Antonio R. Damasio, The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1999: “Moreover, the presumed opposition between emotion and reason is no longer accepted without question. For example, work from my laboratory has shown that emotion is integral to the processes of reasoning and decision making, for worse and for better” (40-41).

2. The role of the “religious affections” was a particularly controversial topic in New England at the time. Following the revival at Edward’s Northampton Church in 1734-1735, the religious establishment (especially in Boston) began to increasingly question what they saw as the excesses of religious emotion (or “enthusiasm” that characterized the revival experience. Edward’s wrote his famous Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God in large part to combat the misconceptions of the revival and defend the role of proper religious affections in conversion. His Treatise on the Religious Affections expand this commentary and more clearly delineates how to distinguish genuine from false affections. For more on this see George M. Marsden, Jonathan Edwards: A Life and the Yale University Press edition of Religious Affections edited by John E. Smith.

3. See The Journal of John Wesley where he writes, “The danger was to regard extraordinary circumstances too much, such as outcries, convulsions, visions, trances; as if these were essential to the inward work, so that it could not go on without them. Perhaps the danger is, to regard them too little; to condemn them altogether; to imagine they had nothing of God in them, and were a hindrance to his work. Whereas the truth is 1) God suddenly and strongly convinced many that they were lost sinners; the natural consequence whereof were sudden outcries and strong bodily convulsions; 2) to strengthen and encourage them that believed, and to make His work more apparent, He favored several of them with divine dreams, others with trances and visions; 3) in some of these instances, after a time, nature mixed with grace; 4) Satan likewise mimicked this work of God in order to discredit the whole work; and yet it is not wise to give up this part any more than to give up the whole. At first, it was, doubtless, wholly from God. It is partly so at this day; and He will enable us to discern how far, in every case, the work is pure and where it mixes or degenerates.”

The truth is that this did not help Wesley’s reputation as an enthusiast and rabble rouser. As Hempton writes, “Early Methodists were looked upon as disturbers of the world, the new Levellers, and were thus victims of surviving memories of the English Civil War when antecedent forms of popular religious enthusiasm led, or so it was thought, to the collapse of political, religious, and social stability” (87). Thus it was no surprise that many early Methodist meetings were broken up by riots or press gangs.

4. For more on the Maxfield and Bell controversy see Kenneth Newport, “George Bell: Prophet and Enthusiast,” Methodist History 35.2 (1997), 95-105. This was one of several cases where Charles Wesley’s instincts towards more tradition and stability in the Methodist movement should probably have been followed sooner. He warned John about Maxfield and Bell early on but John was slow to act, preferring to believe their experience genuine.

Works Cited


Early English Sunday Schools and Literacy Instruction at the Turn of the Nineteenth Century, Pt. 1

Posted on April 21, 2011 | 3 comments

This is the first part of a larger project on the early English Sunday School movement and the literacy practices it inculcated through the use of graduated readers and moral literature.

As far back as I can remember words have always been a part of my life. From the time I was an infant, my parents read to me constantly – *The Wizard of Oz*, *The Swiss Family Robinson*, *The Chronicles of Narnia* were only a few of my favorites that absorbed before I could even read. We had a television but this was before cable and satellite (we couldn’t afford it anyway) and my television watching was limited primarily to *Sesame Street*, *Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood*, and *Reading Rainbow* – all programs that were full of stories and words. I didn’t have access to the internet until I was in junior high school and, even then, my usage was strictly limited. By the time I was in kindergarten I could already read and write simple sentences.

When I entered kindergarten, I was exposed to different types of literacy practices. I attended a conservative religious school where my father taught and where modern literacy theories like “whole language” were viewed with suspicion. Instead, I was given a *Victory Drill Book*, a navy blue, hardback volume with gold lettering on the cover. It was filled with list upon list of words – single syllable words, multiple syllable words, rhyming words. Each week, it would be my task to learn all of the words on one page of the *Victory Drill Book* and read them to my teacher, without error and within a prescribed amount of time. I quickly became a master at this, completing the entire book before all but one of my classmates.

Finally, my journey towards literacy was deeply informed by my experiences at church. Sunday School, though a far cry from the educational Sunday Schools of the 18th and 19th centuries that are the focus of this essay, was a focal point of my life. Each Sunday I would attend a graded Sunday school class in the morning and “Children’s Church” during the adult service. In these classes the focus was on learning to read and understand Scripture. Bible stories were taught through a combination of memorization, activities, and instruction as we learned the make the Bible the focus of our lives.

As my own experience makes clear, my journey towards literacy and writing was informed by powerful forces both inside and outside the classroom. Moreover, each of these literacy influences continues to inform how I think about reading and writing to this day. While ample scholarly research has been conducted on the development of literacy and composition within school walls, little has focused on what goes on outside them, in what Anne Ruggles Gere terms the “extracurriculum.” This is in part because, as Ruggles Gere points out, “we in composition studies have sought to establish our right to a place in the academy by recounting our past, and this historiography has focused inside classroom walls” (78). Furthermore, histories of composition studies that have considered the extracurriculum have largely viewed it as a stopping point on the way to scholarly engagement with writing instead of as something that, “extends beyond the academy to encompass the multiple contexts in which persons seek to improve their own writing: … includes more diversity in gender, race, and class among writers; and… avoids, as much as possible, a reenactment of professionalization in its narrative” (Ruggles Gere 80). By thus considering the extracurriculum (in this case the Sunday School) in its own terms, we can better gauge how specific sites influenced the literacy and composition practices of a far wider group of people.

In this early Sunday School textbooks are a particularly important resource for understanding the broader implications of the movement. For, while few actual Sunday School exercises by children are extant, many of the most popular textbooks are available in the Eighteenth Century Collections Online (ECCO) database, though little scholarly work has been conducted on them. As Ferguson Carr, Carr, and Schultz argue in their study of nineteenth century American textbooks, this is largely because such texts are considered largely derivative:

Textbooks have a particular status in the history of the book. They are unusual and difficult books in the variety of their parts, the mode of their author, and their publication history. Like cookbooks, children's books, and popular fiction, they often slide beneath bibliographers’ and historians’ radar, mentioned as a totality rather than in their particularity or difference (11).

It is in this particularity and difference, though, that we can begin to unravel what influenced these texts and how the texts were used in early Sunday Schools; and it is in tracing the multiplicity of these texts that we can begin to understand the far reaching effects of Sunday Schools in late eighteenth century Britain and today.
Interestingly enough, each of my literacy influences illustrate the key aims and methods of turn of the nineteenth century Sunday Schools that I will trace in these textbooks. For the eighteenth and nineteenth Sunday School, as for my Sunday School, the goal was scripture literacy and the methods employed to reach that goal were often repetition of lists of words, memorization, illustration, and imitation. What I want to argue is that such methods, far more than larger social or cultural factors, subtly shaped the types of literacy that the early Sunday School produced. These types of literacy in turn informed how an increasingly literate, industrial populace engaged with the larger social questions of the day. Thus, by examining the material texts of early Sunday Schools – textbooks, spellers, catechisms – we can develop a clearer perspective on the often turbulent relationship between reading, writing, religion, and society at the turn of the nineteenth century.

A Brief History of Sunday Schools in England

Until the middle of the nineteenth century free public education did not exist in England. While the aristocracy hired governesses or sent their children to expensive private academies like Eaton and later on to Oxford and Cambridge, there were few viable options for the vast majority of the population. Though local grammar and finishing schools did exist, they were prohibitively expensive and families would send at most one child to such schools. As such, the demand for basic education was high among England's rapidly expanding working class population. Parents realized that learning to read and write was a vital skill, but they simply could not afford it. Thus Sunday schools are a case of a fortunate confluence of religious, social, and economic forces that collided to create a movement that, by 1851, served over two million children (Laqueur xi).

Robert Raikes

Though the Sunday School movement in England evolved slowly over the course of the eighteenth century, with isolated schools appearing across the country, it was Gloucester philanthropist Robert Raikes (1736-1811) who is credited with systematizing and popularizing the movement. Raikes was the editor and publisher of the *Gloucester Journal* and he used his position to promote various causes, including prison reform, poor law reform, and the abolition of the slave trade (Tolar Burton 269). A deeply religious man, Raikes was disturbed by what he saw as the abuse of the Sabbath by unruly poor children. As he wrote in the *Gentleman's Magazine* in 1784:

I was walking into the suburbs of the city, where the lowest of the people (who are principally employed in the pin-manufactury) chiefly reside [when] I was struck with concern at seeing a group of children wretchedly ragged, at play in the street. I asked an inhabitant whether those children belonged to that part of the town, and lamented their misery and idleness. – Ah! Sir, said the woman to whom I was speaking, could you take a view of this part of town on Sunday, you should be shocked indeed; for then the street is filled with multitudes of these wretches who, released on that day from their employment, spend their time in noise and riot and playing at chuck, and cursing and swearing in a manner so horrid, as to convey to any serious mind an idea of hell, rather than any other place (qtd. in Power 35-36).

This was the impetus for Raikes' founding of a Sunday School in Gloucester in 1780. Other schools quickly sprung up in the area so that by November 1783 Raikes could write in his *Gloucester Journal* that:

In those parishes where this plan has been adopted, we are assured that the behaviour of the children is greatly civilized. The barbarous ignorance in which they had before lived being in some degree dispelled, they begin to give proofs that those persons are mistaken who consider the lower orders of mankind as incapable of improvement, and therefore think an attempt to reclaim them impracticable, or at least not worth the trouble (qtd in Power 35-36).

Thus as their inception Sunday Schools, much like the charity schools that had preceded them, sprung from a desperate need for education among the still coalescing working class. Unlike Scotland, England had no system of free public education and most poor families could not afford to send their children to school; thus Sunday Schools filled a much needed gap in the education of children and illiterate adults. Though expressed by Raikes as a concern for public order among the poorer classes, his Sunday Schools met a real social need and also responded to rapidly changing social conditions in England during the 1780's.
Like Raikes, London philanthropist Jonas Hanway (1712-1786) was also deeply concerned about the living conditions of the working poor and the moral effect these conditions had on individuals and society. Best known for his work with foundlings, Hanway was a tireless advocate for what he saw as the inexcusable treatment of children (Taylor 286). To this end, in 1785 he published *A Sentimental History of Chimney Sweeps in London and Westminster Shewing the Necessity of putting them under regulations to prevent the grossest Inhumanity to the Climbing Boys with a letter to a London Clergyman on Sunday Schools calculated for the preservation of the Children of the Poor* which detailed the deplorable conditions under which young chimney sweepers, or “climbing boys” worked. According to Hanway, boys as young as five were apprenticed by master chimney sweepers who forced them to climb up “chimneys [sic] which are on fire; or to climb chimneys too strait in their dimensions” (xvii). In addition, these boys would often be forced to live in filth and often contracted cancer from the amount of soot they had to breath in. In response, Hanway urges his readers to both support reforms that would change the way such working boys were treated and proposes the establishment of Sunday Schools as a means shaping the boys moral education.

Indeed, in his 1786 *Comprehensive View of Sunday Schools* Hanway goes even further by laying out a justification for Sunday Schools that frames them explicitly in terms of a reformation of manners among the poor. “The better condition the labourer’s children are put in, with regard to moral and religious instruction,” he writes, “the less they will turn their thoughts to pilfering and begging. They will become more industrious, be tighter and cleaner in their garments, and be better nourished” (iii). Thus, for Hanway, Sunday Schools were a means to raising the condition of the poor only as high as their societal station allowed. By inculcating moral and religious principles, middle class philanthropists like Hanway hope to better regulate the poor so that they would quiescently accept their station in life.

Nevertheless, at least until 1800, there was a deep anxiety among the middle and upper classes over the wisdom of teaching the poor to read – nevermind write. The fear among the ruling classes was that if the poor were taught to read they would be more susceptible to dangerous or seditious literature like Tom Paine’s *The Rights of Man*. Especially in the years following the French Revolution when radical pamphlets and tracts abounded, the propriety of teaching the poor to read was profoundly questioned. It thus became the job of Sunday School proponents to convince their wealthy donors that by teaching the poor to read they were actually guarding against radical activity. As Hanway writes in *Comprehensive View*, “The better Christians they are, the better subjects they will make” (xii).

Hannah More (1745-1833) was one of the most visible proponents of this view. A prominent writer, poet, philanthropist, and social reformer More, with the help of her sister Martha and the financial support of William Wilberforce, founded a system of Sunday Schools in the poor Mendip Hills around Bristol in 1789. Both deeply conservative and deeply evangelical, More was fundamentally interested in inculcating religion and social order among the poor. In her account of the Sunday School project in *Mendip Annals*, More recounts how she structured her curriculum to instill these values through reading:
For More reading was a vital skill, but it had to be the right kind of reading. Thus she provided her students with a very circumscribed curriculum and supplemented it with her own Cheap Repository Tracts which were meant to explicitely combat the popular and/or radical broadsheets and pamphlets that typically circulated among the poor. Her tract titled The Sunday School, for instance, includes an explicitely moralistic message about the transforming effect a Sunday School can have on individuals, families, and communities when everyone learns to make the best of their proper social place.

Note, though, that More explicitly opposes teaching writing in Sunday Schools. In this she echoes the concerns of earlier middle class social reformers like Hanway who saw writing as unnecessary to the poorer classes:

As to the connexion between reading and writing, as vulgarly understood, I discover none that concerns those who depend for their bread on their manual labour, and not on the pen. The first is necessary to them for learning their religion, and filling up their vacant hours, and to prevent that vacuity of thought, or mischievous consequence which ignorance often occasions; the last is not necessary or expedient (Hanway, Comprehensive View xiii).

This disconnect between reading and writing instruction is perplexing to a modern audience, but it was a fundamental principle to these early middle class social reformers and it became the defining controversy of the Sunday School movement in the nineteenth century. Reading was so necessary for religious instruction that these early reformers were willing to risk providing people with the tools to also read what they considered “dangerous” literature. Writing, however, was more closely associated with thinking and social action and thus for reformers like Raikes, Hanway and Hannah More it had no place in Sunday School.

Up to this point, the history of Sunday Schools in England would seem to accord with E.P. Thompson's famous argument in The Making of the English Working Class that Sunday Schools mainly operated as middle class instruments of social control and indoctrination (375-376). Though no doubt prompted by the best of motives, reformers like Raikes, Hanway, and More did see themselves as defenders of the existing social order. The conditions of the poor could be bettered and they could be taught to be better stewards of their time and money, but they ultimately could not expect to rise above their God-ordained place in society. Nevertheless, recent scholarship has questioned the extent to which the ideas of these prominent Sunday School advocates spread to the Sunday School movement at large. What began as a relatively circumscribed movement among middle class evangelical Anglicans quickly spread across the country and among Methodists, Dissenters, and even political radicals. What is more, control of these local Sunday Schools rarely rested in the hands of wealthy patrons like More. By 1800, 200,000 children attended Sunday Schools, by 1818 – 240,000, by 1833 – 1,400,000, and by 1851 – 2,100,000 (Laqueur xi). Such figures are staggering and they indicate the extent to which Sunday School instruction quickly became far more dependent upon local and denominational circumstances than the opinions of a few influential reformers.

Nowhere is this more apparent than on the question of writing instruction in Sunday Schools. For conservatives like Raikes, Hanway, and More teaching writing was predominately a social and political question and that is how it has been portrayed in the literature since (see Thompson 377). However, as Laqueur has pointed out, this rather limited view of the subject does not take into account the broader scope of the argument in the early nineteenth century (124-125). In reality, many of the fears over writing instruction had faded after 1800 and the opposition to writing was based mainly on religious conviction and denominational politics.

In the case of religious conviction, many people were worried that teaching writing on the Sabbath violated the command to “honor the Sabbath day.” Reading instruction was excused because children could be taught the Bible, but some argued that writing was not strictly necessary. This did not indicate an opposition to writing instruction, in fact many Sunday Schools offered writing courses on weekday evenings, but it did limit the number of people who were able to learn to write (Laqueur 138-139). However in denominations like Methodism, which had the highest number of children in Sunday Schools and where the debate over writing was the most fierce, the issue went much deeper. Here, the debate over writing instruction really came down to issues of control with Methodist leader Jabez Bunting attempting to bring the relatively independent Sunday Schools more closely under his supervision (Laqueur 142). In both cases, however, class regulation was not really at issue and, despite the heat of this controversy, many Sunday Schools continued to offer writing instruction throughout the first decades of the nineteenth century.

In my next post I will explore how the textbooks of the Sunday School movement shaped both literacy and social practice in more depth. Stay tuned...

References

The Arminian Magazine and Lay-Women’s Conversion Narratives

Methodism under its founder John Wesley presented an unusually open space for women in the eighteenth century. Though at the beginning of his ministry Wesley’s attitudes towards women reflected the cultural, social, and ecclesiastical prejudices of his day, this attitude shifted over time as he witnessed the powerful work of the women of Methodism. In fact women came to play a vital leadership role in early Methodism, leading devotional groups, Sunday schools, and even preaching. Furthermore, the influence of women within Methodism was so great that until 1830, nearly 57% of its membership made up of women (Hempton 137). Much good scholarly work has been done in the past twenty years on the extraordinary women of early Methodism and I will not retrace their arguments here. Nevertheless relatively little work has been done on the contributions of religious lay-women like the largely unknown and forgotten female contributors to John Wesley’s Arminian Magazine. What I want to argue here is that by striving to listen to these women in their own terms and according to their own cultural and religious contexts we can begin to better understand how the women of early Methodism viewed the relationship between the inner experience of spiritual regeneration and speaking, writing, and acting in the public sphere.

The Arminian Magazine: History and Purpose

John Wesley founded the Arminian Magazine in 1778 in response to growing tensions within evangelical revival over the question of predestination. The evangelical revival in England was both diffuse and diverse with, by mid-century, this controversy spilled over into the pages of the religious periodical press. The Calvinist evangelicals launched the first salvos in The Spiritual Magazine and The Gospel Magazine, lampooning Wesley, satirizing his writings, and portraying his followers as enthusiasts (Heitzenrater 267). In reply, Wesley began publishing the Arminian Magazine: Consisting of Extracts and Original Treatises on Universal Redemption to counteract this Calvinist message.

Wesley's introductory comments to the first issue reflect this tension by claiming that The Spiritual Magazine and The Gospel Magazine “are intended to show, that God is not loving to every man; that his mercy is not over all his works; and, consequently that Christ did not die for all, but for one in ten, for the elect only” (JWW 14:279). He then lays out in contrast the general plan of his magazine, saying that it will include:

First, a defence of that grand Christian doctrine, ‘God willeth all men to be saved’... Secondly, an extract from the Life of some holy man... Thirdly, accounts and letters containing the experience of pious persons, the greatest part of whom are still alive; and, Fourthly, verses explaining or confirming the capital doctrines we have in view (JWW 14:280).

Thus the purpose of the magazine, for Wesley, was to defend “universal redemption” against predestination not only through polemic and theological argument, but also through the personal experiences of actual Methodist men and women. This real-life experience was proof positive for Wesley that the salvation experience was available to all.

It is in this context that Wesley solicited personal religious experience accounts for the Arminian Magazine. Because of his extensive correspondence and the fact that Wesley corresponded particularly widely with women, the influence of women on the pages of the Magazine prior to Wesley's death is particularly striking. Of the 238 biographical accounts in the Arminian Magazine, 79 are about women (Tolar Burton 200). Interestingly enough, 113 of these accounts were published between the inception of the magazine in 1778 and Wesley's death in 1791 (Jones 275), at which time men's and women's accounts were almost equally represented (Tolar Burton 200). Furthermore, according to Jones, nearly forty percent of all biographical material published under Wesley's editorship was by or about women, though only fourteen accounts can be directly attributed to women authors (Jones 276-277). Finally, even after Wesley's death, Tolar Burton estimates that almost a quarter of the published accounts were about women, though even fewer were authored by them (200).

Even more interesting is the fact that, despite the clear evidence of John Wesley's editorial hand, the Arminian Magazine narratives written by
women about themselves have a quality quite distinct from both the accounts about men and the accounts by men about women. Instead of being stories of chaste and upright women, these women often spend relatively little time on their lives and family and instead focus on their intense experiences of inner spiritual transformation. It is this intense sensible spiritual experience that both sets these narratives apart from conversion accounts written by and/or about men and prompts these women to speak and act publicly. In doing so, they move women’s religious experience out of the limited domestic sphere traditionally assigned to female piety, into the broader religious community.

**Women’s Experience and Public Space in the *Arminian Magazine***


In exhibiting this pattern, these narratives thus perform the mimetic function that John Wesley hoped to instill through his own *Journal* and published narratives. Furthermore, they also indicate that these women saw themselves as part of a larger community of readers and writers, all of whom were pursuing the same spiritual goals. As Hindmarsh has pointed out:

> Through these communal practices they learned what was commonly expected in religious experience, and what was common became, in literary terms, conventional…. In expectation of conversion, evangelical discourse acted like a map, identifying the sort of terrain one might cross and the sort of destination one might arrive at if one chose to venture out, waiting upon God in the means of grace (157).

Of course, as Hindmarsh also makes clear, just because these narratives were conventional, does not mean that they lack originality or insight. Instead, Methodist women appropriated readily available genres as a means to relating their own personal experience in a way that would be better understood by the broader Methodist community. It was precisely by using these conventions that Methodist women were able to form a unique sense of identity grounded in the broader religious culture. Thus, it is in this light that we must interpret the various manifestations of these generic conventions.

The first narrative convention that appears in all the *Arminian Magazine* narratives is consciousness of sin and the need for salvation. As with many Methodist women whose writings have survived, all four of these women were relatively religious girls, who tried to observe all outward signs of piety. Elizabeth Scaddan recalls that from an early age she was taught by an older pious woman to observe her duty to God and neighbor and that “the duties of religion demanded my chief concern. Her endeavours so far succeeded, as to give my mind a religious turn; and before I was ten years old, I felt a concern whenever I thought I had offended God”.

Nevertheless, these women come to believe that this is not enough and that they are in reality slaves to the “sins” of dancing, card playing, novel reading, and vanity. This conviction of sin and the need for salvation intensify after their encounters with the Methodists and they begin to earnestly seek for their salvation. These portions of their narratives are particularly vivid as the women almost literally wrestle with God and the knowledge that they can do nothing for their own salvation except believe. Mrs. Planche, for example, writes of her palpable desire for justification that she fears will never come:

> My state of mind was now distressing. I had many doubts and fears, the burden of sin lay heavy upon my conscience, and I groaned under it…. O how I longed to come to him; but found I was shut up in unbelief, and could not break my chain…. I found a divine attraction upon my heart, and had many visits of God’s love; but I wanted justifying faith, and a clear sense of my interest in Christ, and determined not to rest till I found it.

Like many women who wrote their conversion accounts, Mrs. Planche feels that she knows the way to salvation and even possesses the desire to be saved, but cannot achieve it herself. As such, this portion of the narratives is often filled with stops and starts, with intense spiritual experiences that almost result in a sense of justification, but always fall short.

Though this struggle for justification could often last months or even years, in the relatively short *Arminian Magazine* narratives this time frame is compressed and the account of justification often directly succeeds spiritual struggle. This is arguably the most important point in the narrative for these women, and their descriptions of the moment of justification are remarkably similar. In every case, justification is preceded by some sort of religious activity – prayer, scripture reading, religious services – and the sense of justification comes to these women without the effort or striving that characterizes their earlier attempts. Mrs. Planche writes, “the Lord then spoke peace to my soul. He took away all guilt and condemnation from my conscience, and shed abroad his love in my heart. I knew my sins were forgiven, and that I was accepted in the Beloved”. Thus, what distinguishes these moments from their previous religious experiences is that they mysteriously feel their sins have been forgiven – that they have been justified to God. There is a sensible, experiential quality to these narratives that reflects John Wesley’s belief that the individual could experientially know that he or she was saved and that God loved them.

However, this sense of justification is often frequently questioned and opposed from within and without as the women begin to question their own spiritual state and friends and family members ridicule them for becoming Methodists. Elizabeth Scaddan was given an ultimatum from her own family who told her she “should no longer remain with them; that they would disown me [for associating with the Methodists]; and accordingly I
had only till the next morning to determine what answer to give them”. In the end her family backed down, but it was not atypical for family members to be distressed at their daughters or wives becoming Methodists. This concern reflected not only contemporary prejudices against the doctrine of justification by faith, but also the prevalence of false rumors that were widely spread about the Methodists accusing them of Popery and even sponsoring orgies at their “love feasts,” or communal gatherings.

For Methodists, however, justification was only the first step on a journey to salvation that ended with Wesley's doctrine of “Christian perfection,” otherwise known as sanctification. The achievement of this most esoteric of Methodist doctrines was the ultimate goal of the Christian journey and Wesley believed it could be obtained instantaneously, before the moment of death. Wesley defined Christian perfection or sanctification as the elimination of all intentional sin, which he believed to be attainable in this life. However, by sin Wesley does not mean any unintentional wrongdoing but a “voluntary transgression of a known law” of God.

Of the women under consideration here, all but Elizabeth Scaddan relate their struggle for and ultimate achievement of Christian perfection. Much like justification, these three women experience Christian perfection only when they give themselves over to God. Furthermore, they tend to represent this experience in almost erotic terms – using the figurative language of love and affection to describe the feeling. Mrs. Planche combines this erotic language with the language of liberation to describe her experience:

He came into my soul with such a display of his grace and love, as I never knew before. All my bands were loosened, and my spirit was set perfectly free. I felt an entire deliverance from all the remains of sin in my nature; and my precious Jesus took full possession of my heart.

Thus in each case these women represent sanctification as an overwhelming experience of God’s love that destroys sin and then works outward into the community.

If we follow Wesley's positive construction of Christian perfection as pure love for God and neighbor, it naturally leads to the final step of the religious experience narrative: evidence of God’s grace in life and community. For not only are these women's accounts constructed according to specific community conventions, they also describe how these women see themselves as part of a unified religious community within which they have found a scope for speech and action. As Mrs. Planche writes following her justification, "I did indeed love him with all the powers of my soul, and made a free-will offering of myself to him, to be his for ever. O what a heaven did I enjoy in his favour and love; and how did I feel my soul united to his dear people!" (emphasis added). This is an especially bold statement from Mrs. Planche as she lived a full forty miles from the nearest Methodist society. Her experience prompted her to not only be active within her community, but also advocate with Wesley himself for the stationing of a lay preacher at Kelso, in Scotland. These communal bonds further empowered women to become involved in visiting the sick and poor, lead classes and bands, correspond with the most powerful people in the Methodist movement, and even record their religious experiences for the broader Methodist community. Though many felt inadequate to do so, the outpouring of love they experienced through sanctification provided the undeniable impetus to enter public space.

The fact that all four of these women were ordinary laywomen and not female preachers, teachers, or well-known writers further emphasizes this point. Despite the massive amount of scholarship on the Methodist movement as a whole, there is still relatively little research on lay piety in general and lay female piety in particular. What has been done has primarily focused on the exceptional Methodist women, like the preachers, who felt called to radically challenge eighteenth century cultural norms by speaking to men. The four women whose narratives are presented here, however, are quite different. Their entry into public space on the pages of the Arminian Magazine came not so much because they felt called to challenge cultural assumptions in the way the women preachers did, but because Wesley asked them to write about their conversion and they felt compelled to by that experience. These, then, were not the voices of the educated or pious elite, but regular Methodist laywomen who wrote in spite of these perceived inadequacies simply because they felt their experience demanded it.

**Notes**


**References and Further Reading**


*Planche, Mrs.* "An Account of Mrs. Planche. [Written by herself sometime before her death.]" *Arminian Magazine* August 1791: 416-423.


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