Paula McDowell

ORAL RELIGIO-POLITICAL ACTIVISM
AND TEXTUAL PRODUCTION

For all my Labours and Travels, this Paper will not contain them.

(Elinor James, Mrs. Jane's [sic] Apology because of Unbelievers, c.1694)

What did print mean to early female polemicists and preachers, and especially to those women whose lack of access to printed texts -- or lack of time to read them -- ensured that they remained rooted in a still fundamentally oral world? 'I wish well to the Readers, whoever they be,' Elinor James declared at the head of one of her earliest broadsides. James's headnote sounds a tone of regret, as if she recognized that to print her ideas was to lose control over how her audience would respond to them. 'I have given so many, that I can give no more,' she lamented, 'and therefore through the earnest desires of some, I have yielded to Publish them, contrary to my Intentions.' Unable to chastise her addressees in person, or to correct their mistaken interpretations, she could only ask God to 'bless this Paper, that the Reader may be the better'. Even with God's help, print could be a strangely distancing mode of communication.

In turning to the newly available tool of print to supplement their ongoing oral efforts to influence public opinion, Elinor James, Anne Docwra, Joan Whitrowe, and Jane Lead were not trying to avoid more public polemical encounters. These women used print not to 'cover' themselves but rather to expand the public oral audience that they already had. These women typically signed their papers and books, and provided readers and hearers with their own personal addresses. They did this to 'authenticate' their works and of course to maximize the sales of their texts. But they also provided their personal addresses so that readers and hearers who disagreed with their opinions could come and debate issues further with them in person. . . . The broadsides, pamphlets, and books written by these polemicists must be read as the products -- and agents -- of oral discussion and debate: voices of specific speech communities which may be inferred by listening between the lines of the texts themselves. They are utterances responding to specific other utterances, and in them, their authors' anticipation of readers' rejoinders can be heard.

[. . .]

. . . In late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century London, the religio-political culture of ordinary women was still fundamentally an oral culture. Furthermore, this chapter will show, this oral polemical culture informed not only the content, but also the format and other aspects of the material production and circulation of these women's printed texts. A consideration of these
authors’ diverse modes of publishing their religious and political ideas, of their intended audiences, and of the ways that these conditions of publication influenced the external format and internal characteristics of their texts will help to reduce the opacity of these women’s writings for the modern reader, and enable us to move on to a consideration of their religious and political worldviews and ideas.

Quaker Anne Docwra (c.1624–1710) had access to a remarkably sophisticated alternative publishing formation: a network and support system designed to spread the Word, and lend the Society of Friends crucial coherence from within. As their name ‘Publishers of Truth’ suggests, early Quakers made extensive use of the power of the printed word to shape public opinion and foment sociopolitical change. Quaker commitment to the use of the press may be inferred from the fact that in the years 1659 and 1660 the Friends published about 10 per cent of the total extant titles published in England, despite comprising less than 1 per cent of the population. According to one historian of Quakerism, between the beginnings of the movement in the early 1650s and the appearance of the first Quaker bibliography in 1708, 440 Quaker writers printed 2,678 different publications. At this time of harsh persecution and strict press licensing, this illegal nonconformist sect produced not less than two and a quarter million books and tracts.

For Quaker women in particular the practical and psychological benefits of access to this publishing support system may be surmised from the fact that seventeenth-century Quaker women produced twice as many extant printed editions as any other female group. Anne Docwra published at least seven tracts between 1682 and 1700, and was an ardent polemicist for religious toleration, the separation of church and state, and women’s rights to prophesy and testify in public. The benefits of the Quaker publishing system may also be surmised from the many jealous observations of Docwra’s chief polemical opponent, apostate Quaker Francis Bugg. Bugg remarked, for instance, that Docwra’s books were printed and sold by Tacy Bowle, the Quakers Bookseller, as a sign both of their approbation, and unity. Tacy Bowle served as primary printer and publisher for the Friends, and her press was the primary channel through which Quaker works were issued. In addition to Anne Docwra’s pamphlets, Tacy Bowle printed books and tracts by more than a dozen women writers. These women, not all of them Quakers, include Elizabeth Bathurst, Sarah Cheevers, Elizabeth Chester, Mary Edwards, Alice Ellis, Katharine Evans, Jane Pearson, Alice Hayes, Elizabeth Jacob, Jane Lead, Mary Mollineaux, Elizabeth Stirridge, Jane Truswell, and the ‘mother of Quakerism’ Margaret Askew Fell Fox.

From its beginnings, then, Quakerism was a religion of the book. As part of her ongoing efforts to educate the public as to who Quakers were and what they believed, Anne Docwra engaged in an ongoing battle-in-print with apostate Quaker Francis Bugg. In addition to their other religio-political writings Docwra and Bugg produced a total of at least one dozen works slandering each other’s beliefs, backgrounds, and personal characters. Their exceedingly public dispute is worth considering in detail for the insights it provides into the character and rhetorical and commercial strategies of early modern popular religio-political print culture.

Remembering that theological discourse was in fact the ‘bestselling’ form of print material in the early modern literary marketplace does much to help decode the ‘otherness’ for twentieth-century readers of debates such as Docwra and Bugg’s. As a Quaker, Docwra did not need to concern herself with printing costs as much as Bugg did; Quaker central organization did this for her. Quaker texts also had a ready-made readership. Quaker Monthly Meetings throughout Great Britain and Ireland were required to take copies of all Quaker books authorized and published by central organization. Bugg, by way of contrast, had to rely on a general audience to purchase his books for their educational and entertainment value. To some extent, the extraordinary mudslinging of his exchange with Docwra can be explained by this simple fact. In the increasingly competitive
literary marketplace in which these authors wrote, even religious books had to entertain as well as edify. Then as now, there were potential 'sales advantages in calculated eccentricity'. The outrageous rudeness of these religious-tracts-cum-jestbooks is to some degree the textual equivalent of 'going naked as a sign'. The taunting jests, breathless rant, and verbal jousting to be found there are a form of rhetorical entrepreneurship. Theological arguments and gossipy, personal squabbling interanimate one another, and satisfy a public need for 'news' as well as intellectual debate. In addition, while from their beginnings the 'Publishers of Truth' were a well-organized 'religion of the book', at the same time the traces of contemporary oral culture are everywhere evident in their writings. The magnificent series of insults bandied back and forth between Docwra and Bugg, and the statement and rebuttal form of their pamphlets, are the textual equivalents of a verbal street fight. Criticism, no matter how outrageous, is responded to by point by point, and name-calling and derogatory remarks are standard (rather like the verbal phenomenon oral theorists refer to as 'flyting').

Francis Bugg's concern with expenses is certainly one unrelenting reminder that religious books are commodities as well as vehicles of ideas. Bugg frequently complained of the expense of engaging in public debate with Docwra, and this is not surprising, for while indebted to contemporary oral culture, theirs was a text-based, as well as text-focused, confrontation. Docwra and Bugg fought against one another's books, responded to each other's printed texts with more printed texts, and referred to printed texts as evidence for their charges. Bugg printed Docwra's letters and concerned himself largely with what Docwra had or had not written. Docwra repeatedly referred to 'my book' and provided her readers with specific page numbers and citations. Nor, as Docwra herself pointed out, was Bugg the only polemical attempt to find her threatening enough to attack her by name in print. As she explained, one of her papers which Bugg had tried to use against her was itself written in response to 'a Book that came out in Print, written against me, printed 1685'. As with Docwra's pamphlets, so Bugg's were published by a woman: 'Mrs. Janeaway, Bookbinder, in London-house Yard, next door to Child's Coffee-House in St. Paul's churchyard.' By 1701, Bugg claimed to have published '17800 Books, Small and Great', and to be 'indebted for Paper, Printing, and Binding, near 100 pounds'. Bugg also provides us with the information that his Jezbel Withastood, and Her Daughter Anne Docwra, Publickly Reprov'd (1699) was printed in a substantial edition of 1,000 copies, while his A Winding-Sheet for Ann Dockwa was printed in an edition of 500. There is a strong sense of the materiality of literary production throughout Bugg's religious writings, for he constantly lamented print's expense. He claimed to have irrefutable evidence against Docwra's claims in his possession, but that to print these materials would be to 'fill another Half Sheet'. This expense was too much to 'bestow... upon this craz'd old piece which is now creeping into the Unity of the Quakers' (Jezbel Withastood (1699), 4).

While Bugg jealously noted Docwra's indebtedness to the Quaker system of textual financing, Docwra argued that Bugg was a Grub Street hack writing in the pay of the established church. Docwra's works represent the Anglican church as a propaganda machine: a state-sponsored publishing system which encouraged malcontents like Bugg to slander dissenters for pay. Bugg was a 'Mercenary Agent, belonging to such of the Clergy, as are uneasy under the Liberty granted to Protestant Dissenters' (Second Part of an Apostate-Conscience Exposed (1700), 3). He turned to religious hackwork due to his 'Scared Conscience', his 'Shatter'd Head', and above all his 'Desperate Fortunes' (Second Part of an Apostate-Conscience Exposed (1700), 7). His pious tracts were in fact nothing but 'Lyes and Deceit', written 'to cheat the Clergy of their Money' (Second Part of an Apostate-Conscience Exposed (1700), 40 (sic; recte 16)). We have seen how, in the Dunciad, Alexander Pope pronounced that 'Law can pronounce judgment only on open Facts' and called for 'good writer[s]' to step in to supply the deficiencies of the government. In her own writings, Anne Docwra also recognized the power of writers to influence public opinion, but she also recognized government-
sponsored print propaganda as a powerful new form of ‘positive censorship’ in her society. She argued that the legal slander of nonconformists was in fact an increasingly central form of state persecution of oppositional voices: ‘If Bugg, and his Abettors of the Clergy, have raised a New Persecution, with Tongue and Pen’ (Second Part of an Apostate-Conscience Exposed (1700), 5). A propagandist such as Bugg might publish ‘Lyes and Deceit’, but once those ‘Lyes and Deceit’ were printed they were powerful weapons. Playing on the meaning of ‘magazine’ as a place where ammunition is stored, she observed, ‘I perceive by [Bugg’s] Writing, that he hath prepared a large Magazine of Forgery against me, if his Clergy will pay for printing it’ (Second Part of an Apostate-Conscience Exposed (1700), 33).

Bugg rallied back against Docwra’s charges that he was in the pay of the established church. He declared, ‘I never Wrot for Money, nor was I ever a Beggar, nor have I wanted a sufficient support to this Day.’ But he contradicted his claim that he ‘never Wrot for Money’ when he then went on to admit to having accepted support for his writing from the church, and sought to justify his financial strategies by comparing them to what appeared to him the well-funded publishing programme of the Quakers. ‘If I have Applyd my self to the Clergy,’ he explained, ‘that thereby, I might be enabled to Defend my Christian Profession, against the Powerful Fund of the Quakers; it is no more than for, Whitehood, and others of the Quakers have done, who at first were not able to Print a Book at their own Charge’ (William Penn, the Pretended Quaker (1700), 15). In An Apostate-Conscience Exposed, And The Miserable Consequences thereof Disclosed, For Information and Caution (1699), Docwra attacked Bugg’s services as a ‘Mercenary Agent’, and attempted to counter his church-subsidized propaganda. In Jezebel Withstand, and Her Daughter Anne Docwra, Publickly Reprovd, For Her Lies and Lightness in Her Book, entitled, An Apostate Conscience &c. (1699) Bugg responded to Docwra’s charges, systematically quoting each one of Docwra’s ‘Lies’ and printing replies. In The Second Part of an Apostate-Conscience Exposed (1700) Docwra responded to Bugg’s response, and provided further evidence for her own case against him. Referring to the Act of Toleration granting freedom of worship to Protestant subjects, she accused her opponent of being ‘uneasie under the Liberty granted to Protestant Dissenters’ (3).

In opposition to the rising tide of Augustan polemics against religious enthusiasm, Docwra appended to this pamphlet a defence of inspiration, a ‘Treatise concerning Enthusiasm’ by ‘A. D.’ By the eighteenth century, religious enthusiasm was associated with the political upheaval of the Civil War period, and increasingly became ‘the bugbear . . . of polite and scholarly . . . society’. Jonathan Swift’s satire A Tale of a Tub (wr. 1696; pub. 1704), written and published during the same years that Anne Docwra was publishing her works, exposes ‘Enthusiasts and Phanatics among us’ and specifically links religious enthusiasm to women. Section VIII is devoted to ‘the Learned Aelists’ (‘All Pretenders to Inspiration whatsoever’ (95 n.)) and notes that the practices of ‘our Modern Aelists’ are encouraged in ‘Female Priests . . . who are agreed to receive their Inspiration . . . like their Ancestors, the Sykils’ (99). (‘Female Priests’ is glossed ‘Quakers who suffer their Women to preach and pray’ (99 n.).) Docwra, by way of contrast, argued that the motives of those who would represent marginalized and persecuted religious groups as ‘fanatics’ were fundamentally political ones. She worked to ‘shew the Legerdemain that hath been used in this Nation, by some of the Learned, concerning this strange word Enthusiasm, which they have frightened the Ignorant People with, making them believe that there is dangerous matter contained in it’ (Second Part, 39). (Swift for instance specifically links religious enthusiasm with ‘revolutions of government’.) By means of her word choice ‘Legerdemain’, Docwra suggested that the leaders of the Church of England, rather than the dissenters, were the purveyors of deception and ‘black arts’. In the case of enthusiasm, Docwra argued, it was in fact the ‘Learned’ rather than the simple folk who were ‘superstitious’ and ‘irrational’. She pointed out that ‘the strange word Enthusiasm, is from a Greek word, and signifies in English, Inspiration’ (Second Part, 39) and noted that English dictionaries confused ‘Divine Motions with
Poetical Fury'. She concluded her treatise by emphasizing that in all such matters, it was not ordinary folks but 'learned Men [who are most subject to Error]' (Second Part, 46).

Docwra came to believe that the new public forum of print was in fact the safest place to do battle with one's enemies. Oral debates could be misrepresented to those who did not hear them, and manuscript letters could be misquoted or forged. Docwra claimed to have received personal letters from Bugg full of 'Cramour and Threats, if I will not Retract my Book, which I do not intend' (Second Part of an Apostrate-Conscience Exposed (1700), preface, 31). She claimed too that her opponent had 'forged letters, as from me to him, and printed them with my name to them'. Docwra believed that she was no longer 'free to answer F. Bugg, or any of his Cabal, but in Print, least they should put false Constructions of them, or add some Forgery to them' (Second Part, 9, 31). While Docwra increasingly saw print as one of the safest places to conduct an argument, Francis Bugg fundamentally distrusted this new mode of communication. Despite a John Dunton-like obsession with print, Bugg still appears to have felt most comfortable with oral modes of debate. In his Seasonable Caveat Against the Prevalency of Quakerism (1701) Bugg questioned why 'this Ann Docwra, whose Books they [the Quakers] sell, disperse, and spread for the Service of Truth . . . does she not come forth and prove what she says' (75). In William Penn, the Pretended Quaker, Discovered to hold a Correspondence with the Jesuite [sic] at Rome. To which is Added, A Winding-Sheet for Ann Docwra (1700), he went further, actually challenging Docwra to a public trial. He listed the names of four people— including a son—who would witness that he was not as Docwra claimed 'distracted'. He dared Docwra to abandon the 'shelter' of print and dispute religio-political matters with him in person. He suggested that she choose six men to serve on an ad hoc 'jury', along with six men of his own choice. And he added that if this supposedly neutral jury could not decide who made the better argument, he was willing to stand before two more supposedly neutral judges, the Vice-Chancellor and Mayor of Cambridge. In the 1640s, the Brownist pamphleteer and preacher Katherine Chidley carried on a pamphlet war with Thomas Edwards, and challenged her opponent to an oral parley much like this one that Bugg proposed to Docwra. Each opponent was to choose six persons who, in the presence of an impartial moderator, would listen to the details of the oral debate, then decide upon a verbal 'victor'. In stylistic terms, as well as in actuality, oral parleys such as the Chidley—Edwards and Docwra—Bugg debates are at the heart of early modern religio-political print polemic. They are another example of the fundamentally oral underpinnings of late Stuart and early Hanoverian literary life.

Obsessed with print and yet afraid of it, Francis Bugg complained of his polemical opponent that the Friends 'now cry her up, Oh, a brave Woman! and she cries up them, Oh G. Whitehead is a Gentleman Quaker' (Seasonable Caveat, 62–3). Bugg dedicated his career as a polemician-hack to alerting the nation to the powerful new combination of dissent and print, and to pointing out the 'Effects such Books have amongst . . . credulous People' (71).

Other than Francis Bugg, what were some of Anne Docwra's most pressing concerns as a Quaker? Docwra's first publication, A Looking-Glass for the Recorder and Justices of the Peace, And Grand Juries for the Town and County of Cambridge (1682), was written in response to the intensified persecution of dissenters during the Popish Plot and Exclusion Crisis (1678–83). In December 1681, the Privy Council had attempted to enforce the Clarendon Code to the fullest. Local magistrates had been ordered to enforce the Corporation Act of 1661, excluding Quakers and other non-conformists from any share in government or administration, and subjecting them to disabling fines and imprisonment. Docwra's Looking-Glass was written to chastise what she saw as a corrupt local government. Two of her other pamphlets of the 1680s were also responses to intensified persecution: An Epistle of Love and Good Advice to My Old Friends and Fellow-Sufferers in the Late Times. The Old Royalists And their Posterity (1683) and Spiritual Community, vindicated amongst people of different persuasions in some things (1687). These pamphlets, however, are directed not to corrupt magistrates and
governors but to ‘Old Friends and Fellow-Sufferers’, and are aimed primarily at enhancing internal cohesion among the Quaker movement.

In her address to local magistrates in *A Looking-Glass for the Recorder* (1682), Docwra used unwritten collective oral memory, written and printed texts, and a subtext of prophetic threat to condemn the hypocrisy and corruption of local governments. Demonstrating typical Quaker familiarity with English statute law, she pointed to specific laws pertaining to dissent. More generally, she boldly demanded that justices and juries might ‘understand so much of Religion as is declared in the Laws and Statutes of this Land, and that the Oyer of the Law may be observed and allowed in all points, which is no more than the undisputed Right of every Free-Born Subject of this Nation’ (1). Barely disguising her contempt for local magistrates and clergymen, she pointed out that these spiritual and political leaders were paid to uphold the law, not abuse it by fining dissenters and confiscating their property for their own gain. ‘I pray let us have Law for our Money, ye are paid for it before-hand,’ Docwra wrote. ‘It is hard to find in the Histories of former Ages such a Money-Trade made of Religion, as hath been made in England within this two and Forty Years’ (*Looking-Glass*, 2).

Docwra believed that the ideological notion of a national church of which all British subjects were members was a pernicious myth likely to cause England’s downfall if left unchallenged. At the very least, those who did not choose to participate in Church of England services should be left to the censure of the parish church, rather than be punished by secular authorities. Relying on personal memory as well as on the collective oral memory of her audience, she illustrated the evils of forced conformity, warning that the persecution of dissenters would bring on another civil war:

> Force makes Hypocrites, which is the same Spirit that appeared in many of those that were concerned in the War against King Charles the first, which were the conforming Party mostly; I very well remember that [my emphasis], and the Bishops’ Severity also; they were very Officious in their Offices, to make them Church-men with their Church-Policy, so called, which proved to be the same in issue as effect with that of the Spaniards with the West-Indians.

(*Looking-Glass*, 3–4)

She argued that recent Acts of Parliament were directed primarily against Catholics, not Protestant dissenters. And she pointed out that if the justices of the peace were genuinely concerned that Quakers harboured Catholic affiliations, there was a Test Act in force which made it easy for those in power to determine who was Catholic. She herself, she claimed, had nearly been made subject to the penalties of ‘the 32nd and 29th of Elizabeth’, but was later discharged – presumably the best evidence that she was not a Papist. Employing the ‘I was there’ mode of argument of a residual oral culture even as she referred to printed statute law, she referred to a document that she herself had signed as evidence of her fundamental harmony with the government: ‘I my self, with several others, subscribed to the Declaration contained in the said Act, before Judge Montague, a Record thereof is in the Exchequer, and a Copy of it in the Sheriffs hand, whereby we are discharged of the Penalties of the Statutes of the 32nd and 29th of Elizabeth, aforesaid’ (*Looking-Glass*, 6). Notwithstanding her subscription to this act, she and fellow Quakers had been robbed of their goods, though ‘restored again upon Complaint’ (6). This was illegal, for ‘there is no Law to compel People to Conform, if they can shew a lawful or reasonable excuse’ (7). The Scriptures provided examples of ordinary people like herself who dissented not against the faith but against the corruption of clergymen and princes (5). Finally, Docwra argued, imprisoning the people of England in filthy gaols and confiscating their property was not an effective way to promote Christ’s gospel.

For Docwra, as for so many early religio-political polemicians, the notion of historical inevitability served as a crucial enabling presupposition. The ‘legal Tyranny’ of those in power would
certainly bring on another civil war, for the 'poor People' of England could endure their wretched circumstances no longer. 'Vipers' might flourish now, Docwra warned,

But Storms will come to make them Creep  
Into their Holes, in hopes of Sleep;  
Instead of Rest, with Sorrow Weep  
This is the Portion that will be  
Due to so great Hypocrisy.
Anne Docwra.

(Looking-Glas, 10)

Recalling the 'late Experience' of the Civil War, as well as the continuing instability of recent years, Docwra deployed unwritten oral memories to support her political prophecies for the future: 'There is nothing but Truth and Righteousness will stand in this Land of our Nativity, all things else stand but as a tottering Wall in England, as late Experience hath shown, whether they be Laws against Dissenters, flattering Addresses, Abhorrences, forced Oaths, contriv'd Covenants and Engagements for or against this or that Government' (Looking-Glas, 7). As an appendix to her argument for religious freedom, she affixed an advertisement informing those in power that the warrants they had drawn up against local dissenters were unlawful and unlikely to be profitable: 'Those People that the warrants are out against are mostly poor People, and but few, if any at all (that I can hear of) that can or will provide the Money for to pay such an illegal Debt.' As in the body of her pamphlet, so in the appended advertisement she concluded her appeal with a prophetic curse: 'Disappointment will be the portion of all those that carry on such Designs as this: The Lord God Everlasting hasten the Confirmation of it that men may see where they are, and what they are doing A.D.' (Looking-Glas, 11). If nothing else could authorize her public political critique of the government, the end of the world made it not only possible, but urgent for her to write.

Polemist and preacher Joan Whitrowe published at least eight tracts over a period of twenty years from 1677 to 1697. Most active in the immediate post-revolutionary period, she addressed most of her pamphlets specifically to William and Mary, expressing a sense of disillusionment that these professed saviours of the church had not lived up to her own and the nation's expectations. Whitrowe's relentless threats and advice are distinctive in their tone and in the specificity of their demands for social change. More than any of the other women political writers considered here, Whitrowe was motivated to write by her anger at the indifference of the propertied classes to the ubiquitous suffering of the poor. Concerned with immediate social problems rather than abstract constitutional issues, her pamphlets are rich in social observation, and her critique of property is sustained. Her papers are informed by an intensive, primary concern with what we might call class relationships, and serve as a reminder of the importance of class hostilities to seventeenth-century religious and political upheaval. They should also serve to caution those modern scholars who see sectarian radicals as having 'reduced to silence and inertia' after the Restoration.

Initially united with the Quakers but later separated from them, Joan Whitrowe may have been one casualty of the Quakers' own intensified internal press controls during the later years of the Restoration. Mysterious references to Whitrowe in Francis Bugg's polemics against Anne Docwra suggest that at one point the Society of Friends tried to put an end to Whitrowe's radical (and exceptionally dangerous) writings by withdrawing support for their publication. In denigrating Anne Docwra, Francis Bugg made a vague and chilling allusion to Joan Whitrowe's books being 'stopt'. Anne Docwra's books, Francis Bugg complained, were still 'sold by [the Quakers], and not
stopt, as Joan Whitrow’s'. Bugg implied that Joan Whitrow was 'rebuked as an Incendiary', and suffered pre-publication censorship of her writings not by the government but rather by her own persecuted group. Joan Whitrow’s censorship by her peers, and difficulty in publishing her 'too-radical' writings, presents an interesting case study of one woman political writer’s access to the means of material literary production. It should also serve to caution twentieth-century readers against idealizing the mutual support systems and collaborative publishing programmes of early sectarian groups.

Early Quakers suffered relentless persecution from dominant religious institutions, and it is not surprising that the leaders of the movement sought to minimize divisive criticism from within. After 1672, Quaker central organization acted in the capacity of a modern ‘publisher’, financing production, supplying printers with copy, and overseeing national and international distribution. But the executive bodies of ‘antient men Friends’ which made up Quaker central organization also served as a complex board of review for all Quaker publications. The Morning Meeting read over even the works of their founder George Fox line by line with meticulous care, and decided which passages must be altered or omitted. Like any alternative social formation for which survival is dependent on internal cohesion, the embattled Quaker community of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries was a powerful force for internal censorship. By the 1700s, the Quaker press was ‘characterised by caution and extreme political sensitivity, which had been absent in the 1650s’.

Minutes of the meetings of Quaker central organization reveal that Joan Whitrow’s writings were censored by the Friends on at least one occasion. On 23 July 1677, meeting minutes record Quaker leaders’ concern that Whitrow had not yet submitted a book that she was writing to the Morning Meeting for approval. Rebecca Travers, a prominent Quaker at whose house meetings were held, was nominated by the group to speak to Whitrow about submitting her manuscript 'book' for pre-publication review:

Rebecca Travers is desired to speake or write to Joan Whitrow that shee submit the book (conteyning A Relation of what her daughter spoke at the time of her death) to friends as others doe that send books that friends may Leave out what they see not of service to the Truth, which friends are dissatisfied with.

(MMM (Morning Meeting Minutes), vol. i (1673–92))

One week later, meeting minutes record that Whitrow did submit this particular book to Quaker leaders as requested. The appropriate reviewers, however, found certain passages to be unacceptable: 'the book brought by Joan Whitrow [to] be left to J. Claypoole and Rebecca Travers to consider and Tis desired by this meeting that what is chiefly to her owne praise be left out' (MMM, vol. i (1673–92), 30 July 1677). The manuscript ‘book’ in question was The Work of God in a dying Maid, being a short account of the dealings of the Lord with one Susanna Whitrow about the age of fifteen years and daughter of Robert Whitrow inhabiting in Covent-garden in the county of Middlesex, together with her experimental confessions to the power and work of the Lord God both in his judgments and mercy to her soul. The first of her books that the Quakers censored, then, was Joan Whitrow’s too-personal account of the death of her daughter Susanna.

By 1689, Joan Whitrow wrote, 'I walk alone as a Woman forsaken.' A marginal figure even within the Quaker movement, Whitrow's far more radical writings after the Revolution of 1688 may have been considered too dangerous to publish. Whitrow's post-revolutionary polemics are extremely aggressive. She had specific suggestions for social change and argued at length for a more just distribution of available resources. By 1692, she signed herself ‘one that is of no Sect or gathered People’, suggesting that by this time she no longer saw herself as part of the Quaker community or any other. And by 1694, her outspoken criticism of the disparities of wealth and poverty in her
society was addressed to dissenters as well as to members of the Church of England. If Whitrowe’s writings were ‘stopt’ by the Quakers, she was effectively silenced. After a flurry of activity, her publications ceased abruptly in 1697. For many female polemics, the Quaker press was the only practical avenue to print. How many women (and men) must have been silenced by the movement’s understandable concern with uniformity and caution?26

Whitrowe’s printed books and papers were but a small part of her public activism. Both before and after her separation from the Quakers, she travelled enormous distances on foot, praying, preaching, and displaying her abused body as a sign of God’s wrath. Just before the Great Plague, the Lord commanded her to go to Bristol. Accordingly, she undertook one of her first major journeys. With ‘a Sack-Cloth on my Body, and Ashes on my Head’, she travelled to Bristol to deliver her call to repentance, then returned home to London.

where I came to my Husband and Family in ten Days time, or the tenth Day of my parting from them, leaving a young Child of a Year old that suck’d at my Breast, and found all things well, my self also, so well as if I had not gon one Mile, although a weak Woman of Body, and not able to go two Miles without Pain, yet in the strength of the LORD I went almost two hundred Miles a Foot.

(Humble Address, 9)

Shortly thereafter, the plague began, and she was once again ‘commanded to go out of my own House Sack-cloth and Ashes, and proclaim the terrible Day of the LORD’ (Humble Address, 10). Herself gravely ill, she prayed to God to remove her own burden. But the Lord explained:

It is the burden of the iniquities of the Nation I have laid upon thee, and thou must bear my Indignation, for thou art their Sign of the Repentance and Humiliation I require of them: then I knew what the Prophet Habakkuk meant when his Lips quivered, his Belly trembled, and rottenness had entered his Bones.

(10)

Whitrowe saw her physical body as ‘a sign to the Multitude’ (12), and the illnesses to which it was liable as marks of God’s wrath. Sustained fasting, sackcloth and ashes, and the discomforts of long-distance foot travel were in themselves modes of religio-political activism. They were part of a signifying system of the body, aimed at encouraging all who saw her to ‘humble themselves in the dust’. When the Lord commanded Whitrowe ‘to wear Sackcloth three years’, she did, ‘till after the death of King Charles’ (12). And when he told her to ‘depart from the Multitude . . . to give up Name and Fame, and whatsoever was dear to me in this Life’, she did that too — to the point where she eventually came to see herself as ‘one that is of no Sect or gathered People whatsoever’ (To King William and Queen Mary, 16).

Upon the death of Queen Mary in 1694, God commanded Whitrowe to travel to the City of London from Putney. (‘I knew not for what, for I had been there a little before, therefore had no Business of my own.’) Once she had arrived in the City, the Lord commanded her to call the people of London to fasting. Caught up in a crowd somewhere between Cheapside and Cornhill, Whitrowe ‘opened [her] Mouth to them, and said, The Lord calls for fasting, and you go to fasting’. She moved with the crowd through the streets, ‘declaring the Word of the Lord throughout Cornhill, and part of the next Street’. Once she had delivered her public testimony to her own (and the Lord’s) satisfaction, she ‘left them, and Returned that Day to Putney’ (‘To the King’, 109–10).

On another occasion, Whitrowe received a similar call to oral activism immediately after dropping off a book manuscript at the printer’s.
as I was going from the Printers, conversing with the Lord, and contemplating of his
Glorious Power, being fill'd with Harmonious Praises in Melodious Sounds; yet as it
were in deep Conflict of Spirit; and this going on till I came about the middle of Paternoster-Row, where I stood still and beheld; and, as I looked with Admiration, these
Words, in great Power, spoke aloud in my Ears, This is London, the City of Abomination, this is the Abominable City: And these words were Repeated over and over, till I came
about the middle of Cheapside.

('To the King', 187–8)

She continued walking through this central commercial area of London until she came to Bishopsgate, where, filled with a sense of despair for the 'Abominable City', she fell on her knees and prostrated herself before the Lord — as well as, no doubt, before many onlookers in this busy part of
working London.

Whitrowe's writing and publishing, then, should be understood as an extension of an ongoing
mode of religio-political activism which was oral and 'bodily'. As Phyllis Mack has pointed out, 'the
acts of writing and public prophecy were actually more similar than one might suppose; writing
involved public confrontation as well, since works were hawked by their authors on street corners or
in front of taverns, or handed to magistrates like a modern summons'. 29 Whitrowe, too, was willing
to endure a long journey on foot and a long wait for a fleeting opportunity to hand over her papers
to the King. One of her pamphlets is signed 'Putney April the 11th, 1696. This I delivered into the
King's Own Hands, the 11th Instant. Jane Whitrow' — as if even the touch of a king she disapproved
of gave a powerful talismanic quality to other copies of the paper.30

Like all of the polemicists discussed here, Whitrowe appears to have found print a challenging
and sometimes awkward mode of communication. Whitrowe's printed texts paint a portrait of a
zealous activist plagued not only by material hardships and loneliness, but also by the mental and
material struggles of authorship. Whitrowe wrote of her depression and frustration when work was
not going fast enough, and of her desire to start new projects before current ones were in press.
Most poignantly, she expressed a sense of despair that she could not address all the injustices of her
society at once. By 1694 she thought that she 'could write a Volume of Sights, Visions and Revela-
tions which she hath had above for these thirty Years'. But it was not that easy. 'Had it stood with my
will,' she explained,

I had never been concern'd more with this Generation, after having delivered the three
first books to the King and Queen, but having delivered the last of the three, Titled to
Queen Mary... a strong powerful Voice Said, Arise and thresh. Oh Daughter of Zion......
Then after this I wrote another Printed-book to the King and Queen, and four Papers
in writing at several times, which I delivered into their own hands; and then after I had
delivered those Writings, I wrote another Book, which I had almost finished, but this
coming so forceable upon me, I laid that by, and this hath been longer in hand than I
expected when I began it, for indeed all things looking so dark and dismal, I rather
expected some dreadful Judgment would break forth before this Book would be
finished.11

Lying in her bed feeling low in spirits, Whitrowe threw her book manuscript out of her hand, 'as
Moses threw the Tables of Stone'. But 'a powerful voice' charged her with neglecting her duty, and
told her to 'Write down thy Poverty, which I immediately did'. And 'now', Whitrowe concluded of her
latest publication, 'I have given you an Account why it was not committed to the Press before now'
(Widow Whitrowe's [sic] Humble Thanksgiving (1694), 35–7).
In this instance, Whitrowe related how she experienced a particularly dreadful form of writing-induced melancholy and ‘writer’s block’ – a strong sense of impending ‘judgment’ preventing her from putting quill to paper. On another occasion, Whitrowe was prevented not from completing a manuscript, but rather from taking it to a printer. Despite her strong dislike of William III’s personal behaviour and political policies, Whitrowe claimed to have held back one of her manuscripts out of concern lest she add to the King’s grief upon the death of his wife. She had originally, she claimed, written a paper to the Queen, ‘telling her therein, that the Sword of the Lord was drawn and Furibished, two-Edged, yes three Edged, and only wants Commission’. But in this same paper, she had also prophesied Queen Mary’s death – a prediction whose fulfilment put her on guard against printing the paper: ‘And so [I] went on, declaring to [the Queen] the very thing that came to pass to my unspeakable Grief, which Paper I had Printed at this time, but for fear of renewing the King’s Sorrrows’ (‘To the King, and Both Houses of Parliament’, Prefatory Epistle to Faithful Warnings (1657), 188).

Despite her apparent concern for William’s feelings upon the death of his wife, Whitrowe was in fact deeply disturbed by William and Mary, and addressed the majority of her pamphlets explicitly to them. As for so many late Stuart women writers, the Revolution of 1688 was for her a momentous occasion: a series of events of enduring spiritual and political importance. The bloodless coup was irrefutable evidence of divine intervention in state affairs: the strength of ‘the Lord’s own Arm which he made bare in the sight of all’ (Humble Address of the Widow Whitrowe to King William (1689), 4). The new King and Queen were irredeemably indebted to God for their earthly crown, yet they gravely endangered their already precarious positions as heads of state by flouting God’s will. Whitrowe spent the better part of her career as a polemicist and preacher urging William and Mary to fulfil their promises as professed champions of the Protestant faith, and advising the ‘Church and People of England’ to ‘put into practice what you have promised the Lord’ (Humble Address, 14).

Among many other requirements, William III was to ‘visit the Widow and Fatherless in their Afflictions’, give up his hunting, and stop playing with his dogs in church.

I saw thee upon East Sheen Common, where thou wast taking thy pleasure in Hunting: I was much grieved to see the King spending his precious time in such a vain Exercise, in such a day as this, when the Nation lies bleeding. . . . Oh King! is this a day for Pleasure . . . ? I beseech thee consider the end of the Lord, in bringing thee into the Nation, was it to do thy own Will, or the Will of Him that sent thee? . . . thou, O King, art a witness, that it was not thy Sword, nor thy Might that brought thee hither, but the Lord’s own Arm which he made bare in the sight of all. And now I beseech thee consider how highly thou art ingaged to the Lord for all his Goodness; and what thou wilt return to the King of Eternal Glory.

(Humble Address, 4–5)

Queen Mary was to abandon her vain and worldly pursuits, while the people of England were to reflect:

What did you send for King William out of his own Country, and turn out King James? You said it was to set up the Christian Religion, and to Establish it: why is it not done? . . . put into practice what you have promised the Lord; but if you will not, then it will appear to all the World, that you did not all this to set up the Christian Religion, but to set up your selves. 32

Whitrowe repeatedly warned the King to bow down before the Lord, for ‘without Him you can do nothing’. 33 Many religious polemicists of the post-revolutionary period appear to have taken
special pleasure in reminding William III that little power he had in comparison to his predecessors, and in pointing out that even that little was given to him by the Lord (and so could be taken away again). Whitrowe urged William and Mary to remember that they were God’s ‘Vice-Gerents here on Earth’, and pray that they would ‘pray unanimously together in Heart and Soul to humble themselves in the dust before Thee the Almighty one’. (Whitrowe’s radically levelling image of the King and Queen humble themselves in the dust was a personal favourite. She repeatedly warned William and Mary to ‘come down from your Thrones, and humble yourselves in the dust by Fasting and Praying, and deep Humiliation, crying mightily to see the Father’ (Whitrowe’s Hymble Thanksgiving, 5). She also exercised considerable aggression by means of the ostensibly dandified art of biblical quotation. In the beatitude to her Hymble Thanksgiving (1694) she highlighted Jeremiah 13: 18: ‘Say unto the king and to the queen humble your selves, sit down.’

Religious conviction afforded women such as Whitrowe an outlet for aggression in the form of a desire for millennium ‘revenge’. As in Anne Drury’s polemic, so in Joan Whitrowe’s pamphlets there is a powerful subtext of prophetic threat. These women’s writings contain powerful subversive ‘visions’ characteristic of millennial writings. In these futuristic fictions, existing social hierarchies are dissolved, and widows and children have enough to eat. (And, of course, rulers like William and Mary are ‘humiliated in the dust!’) Like these millennium visions, the curse-poem was another important subgenre in women’s religio-political polemic. Whitrowe prophesied that neither force nor the rule of law could prevent the eventual inevitable destruction of the ‘great ones’. ‘There’s neither Strength nor Policy shall stand, | Against what acco’s a bringing on this Land. | The Youth shall have, the Age shall weep sore, | Ye people’s glad tidings for the Meek and Poor’ (Whitrowe’s Hymble Thanksgiving, 4). In another pamphlet Whitrowe expressed her gratitude for King William’s safe return from the battle at La Hogue, but recorded her disgust at the wood wasted in bonfires to celebrate his victory:

How many poor distressed Families both in the City and Country would be glad and rejoyns to have that Fireing to warm and refresh them and theirs in cold and bitter Weather, that was spent in waste when the king came home to gratifie the humour of an anglysh Crew, who one day cries Housea, Housea, and the next day with a louder voice, Graghe, Graghe.

(To King William and Queen Mary (1692), 6)

Whitrowe’s critique of the conspicuous consumption and waste of state rituals is in fact more subversive than it might initially appear. While directed ostensibly not at William III but at those ‘Judges, Justices, and Officers of all sorts, that do not fulfill the Will of God’ (5), her complaint was graphically illustrated with a powerful image of mob violence. In 1692, the image of a crowd chanting ‘Graghe, Graghe’ would immediately bring to mind the execution of Charles I and the recent forced abdication of James II. In implicitly reminding William III of England’s willingness to ‘crusade’ his predecessors, Whitrowe effectively hinted that this professed servitude of the church was no more secure than they.

Whitrowe’s critique of conspicuous consumption was characteristic of her increasing radicality not with any particular faith but rather with the working poor. ‘many hundreds in City and Count-ry, that sit in their Houses with hungry Bellies, both of Wea-ers and others, that knows not which way to shift for Bread for their Children’ (Whitrowe’s Hymble Thanksgiving, 21). Whitrowe was intensely aware of what the aristocracy and gentry did and did not do with their money; almost without exception, her writings contrast the substance-level existence of the labouring poor with the privileged lives of the propertied classes. She criticized the upper ranks’ excessive attention to things of the flesh, especially fine food and apparel, and she consistently
referred to élites rather than to working people as ‘the drunkards, the feasters, the swearers, gamesters, whomemongers, the proud’. She attacked colonialism and rapacious overseas trade, the amassing of excess wealth and estates, and especially disregard for the poor. Above all, she argued that the endless accumulation of capital in the hands of a few must be curbed:

The next to your Habit is your Houses, which are deck’d with all manner of Curiosity, Richness and Delicacy, as your sinful Persons are: Your great spacious Lordly Houses, furnished with all manner of costly, rich and sumptuous Furniture, which would be too tedious, and fill up much Paper to insist upon; but your voluptuous Feeding, and excessive Feasting one another, in so much that you run out great Estates, both of your own and other Men’s; but in your own Families, that is, among your Servants, many of you are very pinching and sparing, and to the Poor little or nothing, but what you are compell’d to in your Parish Duties; and your poor Neighbours, many hundreds in City and County, sit in their Houses with hungry Bellies, both of Weavers and others, that knows not which way to shift for Bread for their Children; some eating Bread sparingly, and drink Water, Others getting Garden stuff, as Cabbage, and such like for their Children to feed on; whilst you feed, Dives like, lying at your Ease, stretching your selves upon your rich Satin Beds and Couches, wallowing in all your sinful Pleasures, not knowing what to Eat, Drink, or put on for Richness and Dainties; and others of you Hoards up Treasure as Sand, and are never satisfied, compelling Sea and Land to get Riches, adding House to House, and Land to Land, and all for Portions for our Children, say they; and thus the Fathers eat sovre Grapes, and the Childrens Teeth are set an edge.

*(Widow Whitarow’s Humble Thanksgiving, 21–2)*

It was the immediate duty of the substantially propertied of all faiths to make ‘plentiful Provision, not only for them of your own Judgment, but for all sorts, that the Widow, Fatherless, and Strangers may have no want’ *(Widow Whitarow’s Humble Thanksgiving, 23)*. Such stop-gap solutions to desperate poverty, however, were only the first step on the agenda for social change. Petty charity ‘compell’d . . . [by] Parish Duties’ was a sop to the poor rather than a commitment to social justice. For the problem of inequality was inherent in the mode of production and distribution itself:

But you Covetous, Earthly minded Professors of all sorts, your niggardly pinching the Poor, your giving five, ten, twenty or forty Shillings, nay five, ten, twenty Pounds; (though who is so liberal) will not excuse you that have Hundreds, and Thousands, and many Thousands lying by a year will not excuse you . . . when His Majesty calls you to an account what you have done with his Treasure . . . will you say, we hoarded it up by us; or will you say, we gave it our Children for their Portions, to live in Pride and Luxury.

*(Widow Whitarow’s Humble Thanksgiving, 23)*

Not only the landowners and capitalists but also the ‘Teachers and Rulers of this Generation’ were hypocritical and covetous, concerned only ‘for their Self-Interest in one kind or other; some for yearly maintenance, others for Name and Faine, or to be highly esteemed for their Gifts and Parts’ *(Widow Whitarow’s Humble Thanksgiving, 12)*. The ‘Professors of Religion’ in fact ‘outstrip the Prophane’, striving for ‘Honours and Preferments into great Places’ *(Humble Address, 6)*. Given insights into the relation of religion, politics, and property in this period such as these, it is perhaps not surprising that by 1689 Whitrowe declared: ‘I walk alone as a Woman forsaken; I have fellow-
skip with them that lived in Caven, and in Dene, and desolate places of the Earth, of whom the World was not worthy" (Madden, 13. For by that time, her sweeping social critique was directed at members of the Church of England and dissenters alike.

[...]

Notes

1 Elinor James, Mrs. James's Epiphonem of the Church of England, In An Answer to a Pamphlet Entituled, A New Set of the Church of England's Loyalty (1687), 1, and Mrs. James Prayer for the Queen and Parliament, and Kingdom too (1710). After each broadside is cited once, all further references are cited parenthetically in the text.

2 Joan Whitrow was an exception to this rule. While she did typically sign her works, her later pamphlets were too outspoken to show either her own address or a publisher's name or address in imprints.

3 Thorny O'Slade, "Defying the Powers and Tempter of the Spirit": A Review of Quaker Control over their Publications 1672-1699, Journal of Ecclesiastical History, 33 (1982), 74. The word "extant" here is important. After 1672, the Quakers had a very thorough policy for collecting their own works, thus proportionately more of their publications survive.


7 According to her own account, Drucers was "the eldest daughter of William Waldergreave, of Beest, in the County of Suffolk" (An Apology-Conscience Exposed (1699), 64). In about 1647, she married James Docwra of Fulborne near Cambridge, and in about 1664 she became a Quaker. Her husband died in 1672, and after about 1681 she dwelt in Cambridge. For further biographical information on Docwras, possibly of mixed value, see her works, as well as the many biographical claims made by Francis Bugg in his Justed Whittred, and Her Daughter Anne Docwras, Publicly Repeal'd, For Her Law and Lightness in Her Book, entitled, An Apology-Conscience, etc. (1699) and A Reasonable Compend against the Predominency of Quakerism (1703), 57.

8 Francis Bugg, William Penn, the Precedent Quaker, Discovered to be a Consequence with the Jesuits [sic], To which is Added, A Writing-Book for an oak Daucus (1700), 3.

9 This kind of virtuous personal-public debate is an undervalued though central aspect of seventeenth-century popular religious controversy. For a study of nonconformist literary culture which touches on some aspects of these debates see N. H. Keeble's The Literary Culture of Nonconformity in Late Seventeenth-Century England (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1987).

10 On Quaker central organization see McDowell, "Taste Soyle".


12 At almost the same time that Docwra and Bugg were attacking one another in print, Delarivier Manley was publishing her group's political allegories, satisfying a similar public desire for entertainment, news, and stimulating intellectual debate.
Anne Docwra, The Second Part of an Apostate-Conscience Exposed: Being an Answer to a Scurrilous Pamphlet... Written and Published, by F. Bugg, intituled, Jezebel withhood, and her Daughter Ann Docwra reproued for her Lies and Lightness, in her Book, stiled, An Apostate-Conscience Exposed, Etc. (1700), 29.

Advertisement for Francis Bugg, News from New Rome, occasioned by the Quakers challenging of Francis Bugg, whereby their errors are farther exposed (1701), 13, 17, 15, 16.


See Craig W. Horle, The Quakers and the English Legal System 1660–1688 (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988). Docwra cites Michael Dalton’s The Country Justice, Conteyning The Practise of the Justices of the Peace out of their Sessions (London, 1618), a standard lawbook consulted by the Quakers throughout the seventeenth century. She also claims that her father bid her read ‘the great Statute Book’, saying that ‘it was as proper for a Woman as a Man to understand the Laws’ (An Apostate-Conscience Exposed (1699), 24–5).

She refers to more which apparently have not survived. Her tombstone refers to ‘several pious Books’, probably her pamphlets (BL Add. MS 5841, ‘Epitaph of Joan Whitrowe’).

Even Elaine Hobby writes that ‘After the Restoration, as persecution of radicals increased under the workings of the Clarendon Code, sectaries were gradually reduced to silence and inertia’. Elaine Hobby, Virtues of Necessity: English Women’s Writing 1649–1688 (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1989).

O’Malley, ‘“Defying the Powers and Tempering the Spirit”’, 85.

The work also records the recent death of her 6-year-old son Jason.

Joan Whitrowe, The Humble Address of the Widow Whitrowe to King William: With a Faithful Warning to the Inhabitants of England, To Haste and Prepare by True Repentance, and Deep Humiliation, to meet the Lord, Before His Indignation burns like Fire, and breaks forth into a mighty Flame, so that none can quench it (1689), 13.

Joan Whitrowe, To King William and Queen Mary, Grace and Peace. The Widow Whitrowe’s Humble Thanksgiving... for the King’s safe Return to England (1692), 7.

It is not yet known how Whitrowe got her works into print after she left the Quakers. Only three of her works show printers’ or publishers’ names in imprints. The imprint of The Widow Whitrowe’s Humble Thanksgiving, which was apparently licensed, reads: ‘Printed by D. Edwards in Nevel’s Alley in Fetter-Lane, for J. B. 1694.’ Two other works, Faithful Warnings and ‘To the King and Both Houses of Parliament’, show Elizabeth Whitlock’s name in imprints. Faithful Warnings shows: ‘Printed, and are to be Sold by E. Whitlock, in Stationers-Court near Stationers-Hall. 1697.’

O’Malley, ‘“Defying the Powers and Tempering the Spirit”’, 84.

The ‘young Child of a Year old’ was probably Whitrowe’s daughter Susanna, who died in 1677 at the age of 15.

Joan Whitrowe, To the King, and Both Houses of Parliament, Prefatory Epistle to Faithful Warnings, Expostulations and Exhortations, To The several Professors of Christianity in England, as well as Those of the Highest as the Lowest Quality (1697), 109.


Joan Whitrowe, To the King, And Both Houses of Parliament (1696).
32 *To Queen Mary: The Humble Salutation and Faithful Greeting of the Widow Whiterow, With a Warning to the Rulers of the Earth* (1690) and *The Humble Address of the Widow Whiterow to King William* (1689), 13–14.
33 Joan Whitrowe, *To the King, and Both Houses of Parliament* (1696).
34 Joan Whitrowe, *To King William and Queen Mary* (1692), 7 and *Widow Whiterow's Humble Thanksgiving* (1694), 4.