


2007

## Gill's "Women in the Seventeenth-Century Quaker Community: A Literary Study of Political Identities, 1650-1700" - Book Review

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### Recommended Citation

Hagglund, Betty (2007) "Gill's "Women in the Seventeenth-Century Quaker Community: A Literary Study of Political Identities, 1650-1700" - Book Review," *Quaker Studies*: Vol. 11: Iss. 1, Article 9.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/quakerstudies/vol11/iss1/9>

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GILL, Catie, *Women in the Seventeenth-Century Quaker Community: A Literary Study of Political Identities, 1650–1700* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), pp. xii + 243. ISBN 0-7546-3985-1, Hardback, £47.50.

This is a book which genuinely moves our understanding of Quaker writings in general and Quaker women's writings in particular a step further.

While considerable work has been done over the last two decades on Quaker women's writing, this has tended to focus on individual writers and single-authored texts. Much of the importance of Gill's work lies in the way in which she uses multiply authored printed texts to explore relationships between the individual and the community. Multiple-authorship is an understudied phenomenon in the field of seventeenth-century non-conformist writing and yet accounts for a substantial number of early Friends' printed texts, including sufferings narratives, accounts of trials, collective petitions, deathbed testimonies and epistles sent between women's meetings.

Gill suggests that 'in terms of their form, collectively authored texts produce an impression of community, since they implicitly unite Friends around an issue, or series of concerns, within a single work' (p. 7). Such texts therefore draw lines of alliance and connection between individual Friends and offer a way to explore women's relationship to the wider Quaker body. Arguing that English Quaker women writers were simultaneously shaped by their religious context and active in the process of creating that context, Gill contends that women's contributions to both the Quaker movement and its published writing were significant. The book demonstrates ways in which women were able to exploit the terms in which Quaker identity was constructed to create roles for themselves, in public and in print, that emphasised their engagement with Friends' religious and political agenda. As Gill argues, women 'had an integral role to play in the construction of collective understandings of what it meant to be a Friend. Women were not marginal figures in the development of Quakerism; they had a defining influence through their presence in the literature of the period' (p. 2).

Nevertheless, for women, a sense of what it meant to write as both a woman and a Quaker was fluid. Gill convincingly demonstrates that throughout the first fifty years of the Quaker movement, contrasting and contradictory beliefs about the group's goals and identity were present. The pamphlets published in the 1650s show Quakers constantly developing and revising their ideas, reacting to both external and internal pressures; the texts of the 1680s reveal very different concepts of identity and appropriate behaviour for both men and women from those found in the earlier tracts.

In a similar way, from the beginning the Quaker movement created positive roles for women but was simultaneously shaped and influenced by traditional arguments about women's weakness. Gill argues that, 'when the various different aspects of Quaker identity are considered as a whole...the Religious Society of Friends produced varied, and sometimes contradictory roles for women. Quaker identity was multifarious, not uniform: fluid, not static' (p. 7). Within a

consideration of the emergence of Quaker values and beliefs, gender issues form an important part.

The first four chapters of the book deal with contemporary perceptions of Quakerism in the 1650s. Looking at women as prisoners, petitioners and prophets, Gill analyses women's roles, their representation in works by men and their single authored and collectively written texts. There is some very useful analysis of specific Quaker genres and their construction, drawing partly on early Friends' own reflections on the process of writing.

The fifth chapter of the book looks at the ways in which the experience and writings of women changed as Quakerism moved from radical activism to a less outward approach. By the 1680s, prophetic writings had declined and were no longer the dominant genre they had been in the 1650s. Sufferings narratives and accounts of imprisonment, too, almost halved in number as persecution decreased. Instead of these, the dominant genre in the 1680s became the deathbed memorial, a multi-authored text commemorating a Friend who had died, which attempted both to remember the life and to record the death of a Quaker subject. In early Quakerism, Friends' writings had been addressed both to the wider world and to Quakers themselves. Publishing had served both as a way to develop a public understanding of the new movement and as a forum in which Friends could develop and test their ideas. Post-Restoration, the intended audience for Friends' writings was increasingly limited to other Friends. Alongside this shift, we can trace a change in Friends' perceptions of acceptable roles for women. As Gill shows, the dominant context for Quaker women by the end of the seventeenth century had become the home and their identities at this time were largely constructed in relation to their roles within the family—mother, daughter, wife. When read alongside other texts of the period, particularly epistles and statements produced by the women's meetings, the deathbed testimonials offer a way in which to begin to understand the collective attitudes of post-Restoration Friends and the ways in which changes within Quakerism's relationship with the wider world were reflected in changes in Quaker women's roles. The separation of women's tasks from men's tasks is reflected both in the ways in which women are represented in the memorials, and in the ways in which they represent themselves when contributing to testimonies for their husbands or children. Gill's detailed exploration of the tensions between the assertive 'I' of authorship and the idealised domestic woman portrayed in the memorials and her analysis of the ways in which the Quaker community used images of family life in its construction of its self-image provide new insights and open up areas for further exploration.

The book goes on to examine the ways in which organisational mechanisms for internal censorship developed from 1673 onwards and the ways in which the post-Restoration Quaker movement seems to have succeeded in using censorship to create a sense of community unity and uniformity, while at the same time moving away from collaborative writing to a more personalised and individualised subjectivity which was, nonetheless, still firmly sited within the community.

An extensive cross-referenced bibliography is provided which lists men and women's involvement as contributors as well as authors to Quaker pamphlets,

itself a valuable resource for further research. The scholarship is rigorous, the writing is elegant and this is a book that will be both enjoyed and appreciated by historians, literary critics and scholars of seventeenth-century radicalism.

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