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Winter 2011

Review of *Nonconformist Women Writers, 1720-1840, Part I*

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Recommended Citation

Krueger, Christine, "Review of *Nonconformist Women Writers, 1720-1840, Part I*" (2011). *English Faculty Research and Publications*. 240.

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Review of *Nonconformist Women Writers*

Like other Pickering and Chatto series, this one in two four-volume parts--of which this is the first-- will be a welcome addition to library collections because of its excellent scholarly standards and high production quality. But at \$625 per part, its volumes are unlikely to find their way onto the shelves of individual scholars. So while we should all be grateful to Pickering and Chatto for investing in this long overdue effort to bring a substantial body of women's religious writing into print, it is regrettable that these materials have not been made available in a more accessible form, notably, as a digital archive. The volumes produced under Whelan's general editorship are, however, splendid examples of recovery that will enable rich original scholarship. One may hope that their success will lead to further editions--including digital--casting a wider net to include writings by other nonconformists, particularly the prolific Methodist women writers.

Part one of the series features the writings of Anne Steele (1717-78) and her circle. Volumes one and two, edited by Julia B. Griffin, contain works by Steele herself; Volumes three and four, edited by Whelan, collect writings by her niece Mary Steele (1753-1813), Mary Scott (1751-93), Hannah Towgood Wakeford (1725-46), Mary Steele Wakeford (1724-72), Marianna Attwater (c. 1742/9-1832), Jane Attwater (1753-1843), and Elizabeth Coltman (1761-1838). Volume one provides a useful general introduction by Whelan as well as biographical notes on the writers included in all eight volumes and a description of where their works are held: the Steele Collection, Angus Library, Regent's Park College, Oxford. Particularly helpful is Whelan's taxonomy of nonconformity as applied to these writers. Virtually all the authors represented in these volumes were Baptists of some stripe, and Whelan explains both the varieties of Baptist sects and the general culture of nonconformity as it was shaped by Calvinism and its theological challengers, as well as by the legal disabilities imposed on nonconformists. With the aid of Whelan's introduction, we can see how the close-knit communities of nonconformist sects nurtured women's writing, as the "Steele circle" demonstrates. Unlike the trivial subjects taught to many polite young ladies, the nonconformist curriculum was demanding, for the nonconformist emphasis on pious education for women made parents school their daughters in classical and theological literature from Plutarch to Tasso and Milton. (Though Whelan doesn't mention it, John Wesley promoted a similar curriculum among the Methodists.) As a result of this nurturing, the Steele circle were "self-conscious about their social role as writers" (Moira Ferguson, qtd. Whelan) as well as being aware of Bluestocking coteries (xxxviii). Their families and communities certainly encouraged their literary aspirations. Many never married and several came to run schools as well as publishing their poetry and prose. In spite of the profound ideological differences between nonconformists and Bluestockings, then, it is now clear that religious devotion hardly impeded the intellectual development, literary aspirations, or even professional status of bourgeois women.

Anne Steele is a prime example. According to Caleb Evans, her editor and publisher, Steele felt "extreme reluctance" to see her poems in print (qtd. Griffin, vol. 1:1), and they were published under the *nom de plume* "Theodosia." Yet, given the materials in these volumes as well as the scholarship on Steele and other religious women writers, this statement seems a pro forma expression of piety and modesty. As a preeminent hymnist, she wrote hymns to be published and sung. First published in 1760, her hymns were re-issued five times between 1780 and 1967;

many appeared in hymnals of various protestant denominations, and they were also included in her *Poems on Subjects Chiefly Devotional* (1760).

She was indeed a poet as well as a hymnist. In the hymn from *Poems* called "Imploring Divine Influence," an extended invocation to God as her muse, she asks Him to "let thy grace my heart inspire,/And raise each languid, weak desire / ... / With humble fear let love unite,/ And mix devotion with delight" (lines 9-10; 11-12). Elsewhere in the volume her "Poems on Several Occasions" include classical odes, poems in heroic couplets, and meditative works in complex stanza forms. In the ode called "The Invocation," she asks of Urania, the "gentle Muse, who oft has deign'd/With humble Solitude to dwell" (lines 1-2), "Say, wilt thou ne'er return?/And must I ever mourn?/And must I ever tune in vain/The dull unanimated strain?" (lines 9-12). This may not be Wordsworth or Keats, but neither is it pious platitudes; rather, this is the self-consciously literary device of a practiced poet.

Volume two reprints Steele's posthumous *Miscellaneous Pieces in Verse and Prose* (1780), and *Verses for Children* (1788) as well as publishing for the first time her secular poetry, prose, and correspondence. The *Miscellaneous Pieces* include the humorous tetrameter couplets of "On Being Desired to Send some Verses to the *Gentleman's Magazine*," a periodical--Griffin writes--that she read avidly but published in only anonymously, if at all. Evidently addressed to a friend or editor named Polly, the poem concludes, "Had my soft lines the pleasing art/ To charm the ear or touch the heart,/ Such lines might I consign with pleasure/ Next *month* to Master Urban's treasure;/ But since this art I cannot gain,/ Dear Polly, you persuade in vain." Her children's poems can be likewise lighthearted and playful as well as offering serious reflection on religious themes. Her prose works, both previously published and first published here, are for the most part predictably pious meditations. Still, they reveal the complex and intense emotional and imaginative life of a private woman living a quiet life in the provinces. Her correspondence, finally, helps us to see nonconformist communities as literary circles, especially to see how women writers in these groups reinforced one another's authorial identities.

Volume three, edited by Whelan, presents the poetry, prose, and correspondence of Mary Steele (1753-1813), most of it appearing for the first time. Unlike the writings of her aunt Anne, Mary Steele's literary productions were almost entirely lost to history. The five poems she published in her lifetime were unattributed. Further, Whelan writes, she was not credited for her major poem, *Danebury, or the Power of Friendship, a Tale* (1779), published by "a young lady," until Marjorie Reeve's *Pursuing the Muses* appeared in 1997. Whelan brings to light 139 unpublished poems, prose works--including a brief autobiography--and 137 letters, all of which were preserved by her descendants and deposited with the Steele Collection in 1992. Many of these unpublished poems are addressed to friends and family. There are also fine examples of loco-descriptive poems as well as narrative verse. Both genres converge in the heroic couplets of *Danebury*, for according to legend--says the advertisement-- Danebury Hill in Hampshire was the site of a battle between the Danes and West Saxons. In 250 lines, Steele tells the story of Elfrida and Emma, whose friendship restores Elfrida after she is injured in battle while trying to protect her father. Steele's own father, significantly, is the addressee of her autobiography. Narrating her spiritual development, she credits him for teaching her about religion and for intellectual conversation. This entirely confirms my own research on nonconformist communities. Furthermore, Steele's particular interest in local historical subjects such as the

battle of Danebury Hill is further evidence that women's "domestic scholarship" may have played a yet unrecognized role in the literary and philosophical organizations, antiquarian societies, and book collecting groups in which nonconformists were active.

Volume four presents the work of six writers: Mary Scott, Hannah Towgood Wakeford, Mary Steele Wakeford, Marianna Attwater, Jane Attwater and Elizabeth Coltman. Whelan's introductions to each writer helpfully trace out the connections of family and friendship among them. Besides their poetry, Whelan includes correspondence of Scott and periodical prose by Coltman. Collectively, these works shed fresh light on the literary lives of nonconformist women. While Scott's *The Female Advocate* (1774) may be familiar to eighteenth-century scholars, this "poem occasioned by reading Mr. Duncombe's *Feminiad*," as its subtitle indicates, is an interesting early example of a woman writer creating a canon of her female peers, such as Joanne Wilkes has recently traced in nineteenth-century women writers. Coltman's two attributed prose works were published in the *Monthly Magazine*--an account of a visit to the Lake District and an obituary of her mother--and Whelan speculates that she may have anonymously published several poems in that periodical. Though Mary Wakeford, Marianna Attwater, and Jane Attwater never published their poems, they display a remarkably wide variety of verse forms and themes--from religious and philosophical poems in heroic couplets and blank verse to nature poems and riddles. Sometimes inserted in diaries or letters, these poems are evidence of a robust manuscript culture. As much as the published poems, they manifest the centrality of imaginative literature in the lives of nonconformist women.

Finally, Timothy Whelan should be commended for undertaking so ambitious a task as these volumes represent. Especially significant is his decision to include correspondence and diary entries, as well as poetry and published prose. Scholars of eighteenth- and nineteenth literature, as well as cultural historians and historians of women and religion will find here an extraordinary new source of materials, carefully edited, thoroughly annotated, and elegantly presented.

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