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Accepted Manuscript (AM) Citation: Pedlar, James E. "Methodism," in *The Palgrave Encyclopedia of Romantic-Era Women's Writers*, edited by Natasha Duquette, Pages 1-7. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, forthcoming.

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Methodism¹

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Definition

Women played a very prominent role in the early Methodist movement. All Methodists were encouraged to give an oral account of their spiritual state on a regular basis, and this fostered a culture where spiritual experiences were recorded and shared with others for mutual encouragement. Methodist women were also given pastoral responsibilities for men and women, and were permitted to preach, in some cases. Thus, Methodist women produced a wealth of letters, diaries, journals, and instructional spiritual material, some of which was published in Methodist periodicals and edited memoirs. The spiritual writings of women such as Mary Bosanquet (1739-1815) and Hester Ann Rogers (1756-1794) were among the most widely read Methodist literature of the early nineteenth century. While Methodist women addressed many of the same themes as men, their work is particularly noted for its passionate and dynamic portrayal of holiness, its rich description and close analysis of human affections, and its fascination with the spiritual significance of dreams.

Keywords

spirituality – preaching – autobiography – diaries – journals – dreams

Introduction

Methodism began as a movement of renewal within the Church of England. Anglican priest John Wesley (1703-1791) and his brother Charles Wesley (1707-1788) are regarded as the founders of Methodism, but in the eighteenth century there were Calvinistic and Wesleyan branches of the movement, with figures such as George Whitefield (1714-1770) and Selena Hastings, Countess of Huntingdon (1707-1791) serving as prominent Calvinist Methodist leaders. The two branches existed in a sometimes-tense collaboration which eventually broke down over theological differences regarding predestination. The Wesleyan branch, which had the predominance of women writers, persisted and became the family of denominations that bears the name “Methodism” today. John Wesley resisted the separation of his movement from the Church of England for decades. He believed Methodists were called to build up the Established Church and recognized that the accusations of political and social subversion that Methodists already faced would be exacerbated if Methodists became dissenters. Nevertheless, English Methodists separated from the Church in the mid-1790s, following Wesley’s death. Although Wesley firmly opposed the American Revolution, he gave his blessing to the establishment of a separate

¹ From *The Palgrave Encyclopedia of Romantic-Era Women’s Writing*, ed. Natasha Duquette (New York: Palgrave, forthcoming).

American Methodist denomination in 1784, due to the disarray of Anglicanism in the newly-formed United States (Heitzenrater 2013).

The early Methodist movement empowered women's voices, resulting in a flourishing of oral and written composition by women such as Mary Bosanquet (1739-1815) and Mary Taft [née Barritt] (1772-1851). Methodist spirituality provided the seeds of this literary output by encouraging active participation by all members in small-group spiritual practices and personal evangelism. Methodists were encouraged to testify, confess, encourage, and pray for one another in cottage meetings, where "public" and "private" social roles were readily transgressed. Methodist practices included mixed-gender "class meetings" and smaller, more intensive and gender-specific "band meetings." The class meeting often had a catechetical as well as pastoral agenda, and women were appointed as class-leaders from the early days of the Methodist movement. Though spiritual instruction in class meetings was pursued in informal and conversational ways, female class leaders often had organized lesson plans, some of which have been preserved. Those who showed promise in these activities were encouraged to speak publicly in broader public worship services in preaching-houses and outdoor spaces. While women were initially barred from preaching as such, they frequently engaged in other forms of public speech, including "exhorting," which was a form of extemporaneous spiritual appeal to a gathered congregation, often after the sermon. Beginning with Sarah Crosby (1729-1804) in 1761, a number of women found themselves in situations where their exhorting crossed the line into preaching, and Methodist founder John Wesley (1703-1791) gradually made allowances for such practice on a person-by-person basis, with gathering momentum in the 1770s and 1780s. Wesley always justified such preaching as an "extraordinary" calling, but this was the same grounds he used to support the use of male lay preachers (Chilcote 1991).

The early women preachers found their voices in the context of close networks of spiritual friendship with other women. The first such network centered around Sarah Crosby (1729-1804), Sarah Ryan (1724-1768), and Mary Bosanquet. They initially met in London in the 1750s but later established small, intentional religious communities, first at Bosanquet's property in Leytonstone (1763-68), and then at a farm called Cross Hall in the West Riding of Yorkshire (1768-1781). In these two communities, single women pursued a life of holiness centered around prayer, Bible study, companionship and mutual accountability, while also operating orphanages and schools. They attracted outside participation in their home prayer meetings. The mixture of intense inward piety matched with outward works of charity typifies the Methodist ethos. During their time at Cross Hall the preaching ministry of these women began to expand. Their community was broken up in 1781 when Mary Bosanquet moved to Madeley, Shropshire, and married John Fletcher, Wesley's designated successor. Bosanquet continued her own preaching and teaching ministry alongside her husband, and then for thirty years following his death in 1785. She also continued to support other women leaders in Methodism through personal contact and correspondence. The others from Cross Hall moved to Leeds and established a house for Methodist women leaders whose preaching ministry became regular enough that they were known as "the Female Brethren." Other networks of female preachers would develop, such as the East Anglian group centred around Sarah Mallett (1764-1846) and a northern group that formed around Mary Taft [née Barritt] (1772-1851), and her husband Zechariah Taft, the most vocal supporter of women preachers in the early nineteenth century (Lenton 2011).

Methodist women also participated in broader networks of women writers, including evangelical Anglican writers such as Hannah More (1745-1843) (see [Hannah More](#)). Methodist and Evangelical Anglican women shared much in common: fervent devotion, a desire for the renewal of vital personal faith, and an activism that saw them engage in various efforts at social relief and reform. Given their common commitments, it is not surprising that many critics lumped them in together. Both groups had to face similar charges of intemperate and dangerous enthusiasm, which many associated with social or political agitation. For example, Thomas Bere, curate of Blagdon, waged a campaign against the local Sunday School established by More on the grounds that she was encouraging Methodism. As the controversy found its way into public debate, More was accused of disloyalty to the Church and radical political leanings. More vigorously denied the charges, closed the school, and disavowed any Methodist leanings, as she would do throughout her life (Stott 2000).

The separation of Methodism from the Church of England in the 1790s and subsequent intra-Methodist schisms resulted in the repression of women's voices in some circles, while opening new opportunities in others. Women's preaching was officially censured by the mainstream Wesleyan Methodist Conference in 1803. Some women continued to preach in spite of the restriction, while others would find a place in break-away revivalist Methodist bodies such as the Primitive Methodists (founded 1811) and the Bible Christians (founded 1815), both of which provided greater opportunities for women preachers (Valenze 1985). A typical example was Elizabeth Evans (1776-1848), who had a long preaching ministry in the Midlands among Wesleyan Methodists as well as revivalist Methodist bodies. Evans, the aunt of George Eliot, was in some respects the inspiration for Dinah Morris, the early nineteenth century Methodist woman preacher who is a central character in *Adam Bede* (1859).

Types of Composition

While the practice of women's preaching remained controversial both inside and outside the Methodist movement, other forms of women's writing were highly influential. Because they espoused what John Wesley called "experimental and practical divinity" (Wesley 1983, 74), Methodists collected and published records of spiritual experience in a variety of forms. Testimonies that were shared on a weekly basis in Methodist meetings were sometimes recorded in diaries, journals, and letters. These might include stories of conversion, of deliverance from peril, answers to prayer, visions, dreams, and accounts of "holy dying." In all these genres, the accounts of women featured prominently.

Despite the prominence of female preaching, none of the sermons were published contemporaneously, though one of Mary Bosanquet's sermons was included in her memoirs shortly after she died (edited by Henry Moore 1817). Much of the published material written by women was filtered through male editors, who sometimes redacted the more radical ideas. A notable exception was Mary Taft [née Barritt], the most prominent of the second generation of Methodist women preachers, who published her *Memoirs* in 1827. Methodist periodicals such as the *Arminian Magazine* and the *Primitive Methodist Magazine* frequently featured biographical and autobiographical writings by women, as well as poetry. Some women, such as Bosanquet and Ann Cutler (1759-1794) became household names in Methodism through best-selling biographies that incorporated their unpublished writings. Others were included in popular books

that featured multiple Methodist leaders, such as Zachariah Taft's *Biographical Sketches of Holy Women* (1825).

Early Methodism was sustained by extensive letter-writing networks, in which women corresponded with one another and the male leadership of the movement. Letters were not only a way of encouraging one another and sharing stories of spiritual experience but were also a means for women to exercise leadership and provide pastoral guidance. Women such as Elizabeth Ritchie (1754-1835) and Hannah Ball (1734-1792) were among the most important correspondents with John Wesley in his later years. Letters were not necessarily limited to private communications, as some were later published, and some were written with a public audience in mind, even if nominally addressed to an individual, such as Bosanquet's *A Letter to the Revd. Mr. Wesley on the Death of the Rev. Mr. Fletcher* (1785). Other prominent examples include the "spiritual letters" of Hester Ann Rogers (1756-1794), which were published in 1796 along with extracts from her diary as *The Account of the Experience of Mrs. Hester Ann Rogers*, one of the most widely-read and influential books among early nineteenth-century Methodists.

Given the prominence of hymns in early Methodist spirituality, it is not surprising that Methodist women wrote poetry and hymns, often modeled after the great hymns of Charles Wesley (1707-1788). A noteworthy example was the brilliant Agnes Bulmer (1775-1836). John Wesley published her elegy on the death of Charles Wesley when she was just thirteen. Later, she became an important scholar in the Methodist community and published an extremely long epic poem of approximately fourteen thousand lines, entitled *Messiah's Kingdom: A Poem in Twelve Books* (1833). The poem took nine years to complete and offered a sweeping overview of biblical and Christian history, integrated with fascinating meditations upon aspect of the natural world as figures of spiritual truth (Winckles 2015).

While much of women's writing was published with an implicit teaching agenda, there are also publications by women which were explicitly instructional. For example, Mary Bosanquet's *An Aunt's Advice to a Niece* (1780) is a commentary on the baptismal covenant and catechism from the *Book of Common Prayer*. In this case and some others, the scandal of a woman engaging in explicit theological instruction was muted by the work being nominally addressed to another woman. The most formally theological material was produced by Mary Tatham (1764-1837), who prepared careful explanations of doctrinal matters for those under her charge in Methodist class meetings. These are preserved in her *Memoirs*, edited by Joseph Beaumont for publication shortly after her death (Beaumont, 1838).

Prominent Themes

The writings of Methodist women echoed the central themes of the broader Methodist corpus: an emphasis on the necessity of conversion, an evangelical doctrine of salvation by faith, the necessity of personal assurance through the work of the Holy Spirit, an ardent quest for holiness aimed at the Wesleyan ideal of "Christian perfection," and an emphasis on a practical outworking of faith in works of mercy such as visiting the sick and helping the poor. However, there are some distinctive emphases and themes that can be noted in Methodist women's writings.

Phyllis Mack has suggested that women more readily gave expression to an intensely relational and organic Methodist understanding of holiness. John Wesley controversially encouraged the pursuit of Christian perfection, by which he meant perfect love of God and neighbour. This was not a static attainment but a living, dynamic, and relational experience that could only be sustained by self-emptying resignation and radical dependency upon God. Women seemed to more readily embrace and attest to this experience than men, though the reasons for this affinity are debatable. Certainly, women Methodist writers were willing to describe their relationship with God in intimate and sometimes sensual ways which brought the dynamic sanctification experience to life more vividly than systematic doctrinal exposition (Mack 2008).

Methodist women were also ardent in their expressions of love for one another, a feature which is most prominent in their letters. While Methodist spirituality aimed to foster personal conversion and holiness, this was pursued through the intense social practices of small-group accountability that formed the backbone of the movement. Methodist women's writings highlight the deep spiritual friendships that were formed in Methodist communities of faith, where women sometimes formed attachments to one another that were of far greater significance than their marriages. These powerful friendships empowered women to act in ways that transgressed common gender barriers of the time (Mack 2008).

Methodist women's writings thus had emotional intensity, but contemporary understandings of the emotions do not capture the affective understanding of the will that undergirded Methodist spirituality. Methodism was an expression of the "religion of the heart," a broader stream of Christian spirituality that focused on the right ordering of the affections (Campbell 1991). As such, it was only natural that Methodist women would engage in deep introspection regarding their own desires. This self-examination was undertaken with a view to having such desires corrected and molded in a God-ward direction. While their writings reflected their deep personal experience of faith, these women closely analyzed their spiritual lives in the light of scripture, Methodist teachings, and the experience of others. Their goal was to have their motivating dispositions directed by pure love of God and their neighbor, and so their reflections on their inward state are marked by examination, repentance, and resignation.

Methodists were known for taking dreams and visions seriously, and the tendency to record and interpret dreams was stronger among women Methodists than among men. While dreams seem to have played more of a functional role in male Methodist biography (often serving to help discern a call to preach), women Methodists were more likely to see their dreams as a revelatory gift of God throughout their lives. The dreams could be seen as providing direction, and warning, or reassurance in difficult times. For example, Mary Bosanquet recorded multiple edifying conversations with her deceased husband and other mentors in dreams. Others were more symbolic, and sometimes became the textual basis for a sermon, such as the vision of a transparent tree which Bosanquet interpreted as an image of the Trinity (Taft 1827, 26-27). Women also collected accounts of the dreams of others and circulated them for interpretation, which sometimes came many years later. As was the case with the emotional content of the Methodist materials, the dreams were not taken at face value or interpreted without scrutiny. Nor did women such as Bosanquet see these dreams as direct communications from God to be accepted without question. Part of the reason the dreams were recorded and circulated was so that they could be questioned together in community. Still, the editor of Bosanquet's memoirs

felt it necessary to caution his readers that she may have put too much stock in such impressions. Some of the dream and visionary material bordered on excess, but there was also a reserved quality to Methodist fixation on dreams when compared with other mystical and prophetic writings, such as those of the radical visionary Joanna Southcott (1750-1814).

Summary

The emotive religious enthusiasm of Methodism, especially prominent among women writers, has some points of contact with the literary enthusiasm of prominent Romantic voices such as William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, though it rests upon radically different foundations (Cragwall 2013). However, for the most part, Methodist women's writing is significant for the perspective it provides on popular religious experience and the changing roles of women in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Early Methodism cannot be understood without looking to the voices of these women writers, who played a vital leadership role in the Methodist community and were highly regarded as models of piety. Their writings occupied a place of tremendous influence in popular religious literature.

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More, Hannah
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Memoirs
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Prophecy
Religious Poetry
Rogers, Hester Ann
Sermons
Southcott, Joanna

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