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# Sermons<sup>1</sup>

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## Definition

There were hundreds of women preachers in the Romantic Era, though relatively few of their sermons survive. Preaching by women was at times religiously heterodox and socially transgressive. Only the Society of Friends and the Methodists gave significant opportunities for women's preaching. While Quaker women were given full recognition as preachers, Methodism's adoption of women's preaching was tentative and uneven. A few women outside of those two traditions were able to preach or write sermons, and fewer still were able to publish sermons. Many women's sermons were delivered extemporaneously, though some followed outlines or were revised through numerous iterations. Identifying women's sermons can be a challenge because the sermon is a difficult genre to define, and because women sometimes subverted the restrictions placed on their preaching by describing their activities in other ways. Women's preaching from the Romantic Era remains an understudied topic, although some important research has been done on the women themselves and their activities as preachers.

## Keywords

Quakerism – Methodism – sermons – preaching – spirituality – Christianity

## Introduction

The Quakers and Methodists are the only major Christian traditions from the Romantic Era that gave women significant opportunities for preaching, although Methodists never fully embraced the practice. There were hundreds of women preachers in the Romantic Era, but scholarly assessment of women's sermons presents numerous challenges. Sermons composed by women were very rarely published. Among Methodists, only one was published, posthumously, in the memoirs of the most prominent example, Mary Bosanquet Fletcher (Moore 1817). One reason publication was uncommon was because most women's preaching was extemporaneous, or in the case of the Quakers, purportedly delivered impromptu under divine inspiration. Nevertheless, extemporaneous sermons were "composed" in some sense, since the speakers prepared to a greater or lesser extent, and would often reuse and revise material on multiple occasions. Even impromptu preaching develops along common patterns of speech and thought which have been formed through communal practice, and could thus be called a kind of composition.

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The sermon is also difficult to define as an oral and literary genre. It cannot be distinguished by the place of its delivery, since sermons (particularly those delivered by persons outside of the religious establishment, such as women) might be preached in homes or outdoors. Neither can the sermon be defined by a strict conformity to a literary or rhetorical structure, as a comparison of typical Anglican and Quaker sermons would show. It is common to claim that the exposition of a biblical text is constitutive of the sermon, but the relationship between the text and the content of the sermon might vary widely, as might the hermeneutical methods used to interpret the text. Sermons could address an almost endless variety of topics, including political, moral, or domestic issues. The relationship between written and oral sermons could also vary significantly, even when the published sermon was purportedly based upon an oral sermon. The published sermon was a widely used literary form, and some published sermons were never preached orally. Published sermons were also sometimes labelled “lectures” or “addresses.” These challenges of definition are particularly acute in the case of women preachers, who sometimes subverted censure by claiming they were not actually preaching. They might claim they were fulfilling the established role of an “exhorter” in the Methodist context, for example, or they might avoid standing in the pulpit, or claim that they were not preaching because they did not “take a text.” Some women composed sermons that were delivered by men and others may have chosen to publish sermons under male pseudonyms. Due to these complications, the sermon should be taken in its broadest sense as a literary genre and performative oral act that intentionally aims to teach, propagate, or apply religious faith to a particular community (Gibson 2012).

Sermons have received relatively little attention from scholars, and this is especially true of sermons composed by women in the Romantic Era. It is difficult, therefore, to generalize about women’s sermons from this period, but the material can be discussed according to the religious traditions of the women in question.

## Quaker Women Preachers

Quakers embraced preaching by women from the very beginning, and this persisted even as the Quakers moved in a more conservative and Quietist direction throughout the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, resulting in a less prominent role for preaching Quaker spirituality. This Quietist period of Quaker history (ca. 1690-1820s) is generally under-studied when compared to the seventeenth century and the divisive phase which began with the schism in the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting in 1827. Sandra Holton has written an important book on Quaker women that includes Romantic era (2007), but no study has focused specifically on sermons, and Rebecca Larson’s detailed study of Quaker women preachers focused on an earlier period (1999).

There are fourteen extant published sermons by Quaker women in the Romantic Era. Ten of the fourteen were published in two anonymously edited and transcribed collections of Quaker sermons: *Sermons Preached by Members of the Society of Friends* (1832) and *Addresses Delivered by Messrs. Allen, Bates, Gurney, Tuke, Wheeler, Mrs. Braithwaite, Grubb, Jones, and Other Ministers of the Society of Friends* (1834). These two sources include five sermons by Sarah Lynes Grubb (1773-1842), and one each by Elizabeth Dudley (1779-1849), Elizabeth Fry (1780-1845), Ann Jones (dates unknown), Hannah Braithwaite (dates unknown), and an anonymous woman preacher. The fact that women featured alongside men as representative Quaker preachers in these two collections indicates that women were equally respected as

preachers among the Friends. A further sermon by Ann Jones was published in *The Friend* in 1836. Two 1779 sermons by Catherine Phillips (1727-1794) were published in 1803. Finally, Ann Branson (1808-1891) recounts the substance of an 1833 sermon delivered in her native Ohio in her *Journal* (1892).

The freedom of women to preach was rooted in the core Quaker belief that the Inward Light of Christ dwelled within all persons, and their characteristic dismissal of religious ritual and ordained ministry. The earliest Quakers had neither pulpits, nor pastors, nor liturgy, and their worship was primarily marked by silence, rather than speech. They believed that all people could receive immediate divine inspiration, which in some cases might compel a person to speak publicly in worship. Hence, there was no restriction on a woman exercising what the Quakers came to call “vocal ministry.” While the Quakers never ordained leaders, they developed practices to sanction preachers, who became known as “Public Friends” or “recorded ministers.” Women were always included among their number (Graves 2012).

In the later nineteenth and twentieth centuries, some strands of Quakerism ventured into heterodox Christian theology. These developments are not foreshadowed in the published Romantic-Era women's sermons, which share much in common with other evangelical Protestant preaching from the time: an emphasis on the need for spiritual regeneration, a call to resist worldliness, the necessity of renouncing all self-righteousness, and trusting in Christ, the need for living faith—not simply a nominal or intellectual profession—and a deep reverence for the Bible. However, Quaker emphases come to the fore in various ways. From a rhetorical perspective, these women's sermons employ all the distinctive metaphor clusters identified by Michael Graves as characteristic of late seventeenth-century Quaker preaching – metaphors of light/darkness, journey/pilgrimage, sound/silence, hunger/thirst, the family, and the seed (2009). Within the sermons, women preachers regularly underscored their claim to speak with the direct inspiration, and even compulsion, of the Spirit. They also strongly emphasized the necessity of a genuine, experiential knowledge of God, which transcended all verbal expression. The sermons from Catherine Phillips and Sarah Grubb exhibit intense concern for the purity of faith among the Friends themselves, and a call for a return to the simplicity and dedication of their forebears. Both were concerned that growing social and economic attainments among the Friends were compromising their spiritual experience, concerns which would become key focal points in the Gurneyite / Wilberite schism among the orthodox Friends in the 1840s (Dandelion, 2007). While the sermons reflect a deep sense of the Quakers' special status as God's peculiar people, this sectarian impulse was tempered by a conviction that salvation was available to all people if they followed the light that was available to them.

## Methodist Women Preachers

Women were encouraged to speak publicly in the small group meetings that formed the backbone of the Methodist movement. Personal testimony and prayer in such gatherings, some of which were mixed gender, gradually developed into opportunities for exhortation, which in some cases evolved into preaching. John Wesley (1703-1791) was initially opposed to women's preaching but beginning in the 1760s he gradually made allowances for it on what he called an “extraordinary” basis. The numbers of these extraordinary women preachers, such as Sarah Crosby (1729-1804), Sarah Ryan (1724-1768), and Mary Bosanquet (1739-1815), grew with increasing momentum into the 1790s, after John Wesley's death.

However, a conservative party in the Wesleyan Methodist Connexion (the primary Methodist church body in England) soon gained a foothold in its governance and discouraged women's preaching. In 1803 the Wesleyan Methodist Conference issued a strongly worded resolution restricting preaching by women. Nevertheless, some women who had already gained prominence and had strong support networks continued to preach in Wesleyan Methodism into the middle of the nineteenth century. Moreover, revivalist breakaway Methodist bodies such as the Primitive Methodists and Bible Christians embraced women's preaching in the early nineteenth century. The women who continued to preach in the Wesleyan Methodist Connexion shared much in common with the spirituality of the revivalist Methodists. Their common belief in immediate communication with God, while not as radical as the Quakers, undermined the authority of any church body to restrict their preaching.

While some significant work has been done on women writers in Methodism, the lack of extant sources has inhibited assessment of the sermons themselves. As noted above, one sermon of Mary Bosanquet Fletcher was published in her memoirs, but recent archival work has suggested that some of her manuscript scriptural and devotional writings should be classified as sermons. A significant selection of these writings was transcribed and published in *The Asbury Journal* in 2006, and another was published in *Wesley and Methodist Studies* in 2010. Bosanquet Fletcher's close compatriot Mary Tooth also preserved some sermon manuscripts which have gone largely unnoticed in her commonplace book (Winckles 2019). Thus, there is a significant body of work that awaits further analysis. Scholars have written substantively about the women preachers, their justification for preaching, and their activities, including reconstructing sermon registries, detailing preachers, dates, places, and texts (Chilcote 1991; Graham 1986; Lloyd 2009). However, at present, most of the scholarly assessment of their writings has focused on their journals, letters, and memoirs, and occasional instructional material.

The lack of surviving sources is due in part to Methodism's ambiguous embrace of women's preaching. Wesley's support was significant in certain cases, but by the beginning of the nineteenth century the conservative faction in the Wesleyan Methodist Connexion held key positions overseeing Methodist publications. As Zechariah Taft opined in the preface of his *Biographical Sketches of the Lives and Public Ministry of Various Holy Women* (1827, 1:i), "the great majority of Biographers and Editors of Magazines, are enemies to female preaching." Women's voices were therefore given a less prominent role in the *Methodist Magazine* and confined to gendered roles and types of writing. The memoirs of Mary Bosanquet Fletcher passed through the editorship of Henry Moore, who suppressed some of her more radical views. Even Taft, a strong defender of women preachers, and a the most important source of information about the early Methodist women preachers, did not publish any sermon material. Thus, the best-known example of a Romantic-Era sermon by a Methodist woman is the fictional account (written 1858 but set in 1799) of Dinah Morris preaching on the village green in George Eliot's *Adam Bede* (1859). The idea for the novel began with an anecdote told to Eliot by her aunt, Elizabeth Evans (1776-1848), a Wesleyan Methodist preacher who had visited a woman condemned of child-murder in prison and accompanied her to her death. In George Eliot's novel the sentence is mercifully changed to exile in the colonies (transportation), but Morris still accompanies Hetty through her trial and sentencing in *Adam Bede*. Though Eliot is known for her realism, she never heard her aunt preach.

In America, Methodists were relatively less open to women preachers than their British counterparts. Catherine Brekus has identified nine active women preachers in the American

Methodist Episcopal Church, and two officially recognized women preachers in the African Methodist Episcopal Church, along with several other prominent preachers who lacked ecclesiastical recognition. This number stands in contrast with approximately two hundred Methodist women preachers known in Britain by the 1840s (Brekus 1998, 133). Two notable African-American examples were Jarena Lee (1783-1849) and Zilpah Elaw (1790-?), whose preaching is remarkable not only for the fact that they were women but also because they had to overcome the intense racial prejudice of their time. Both wrote important memoirs that offer insight into their preaching activity, but again, no actual sermons survive.

## Other Women Preachers

In addition to the Methodists and Quakers, there were other isolated examples of women's preaching in the Romantic Era. First, there were women prophets, such as Joanna Southcott (1750-1814), who published extensively, garnering an estimated following of 100,000, though, she did not often engage in public speaking. Second, there were some independent evangelists who remained free of any ecclesiastical oversight, such as the American Harriet Livermore (1778-1868). She preached and published widely, including a defense of women's preaching (Livermore 1824). In England, Ann Carr (1783-1841) became an independent preacher when she, along with Sarah Eland and Martha Williams, left the Primitive Methodists to found the "Female Revivalist Society" in the 1820s. Third, we know of some women who wrote sermons that were preached orally by men. Esther Beuzeville Hewlett Copley (1786-1868) is believed to have written many sermons for her alcoholic husband, a Baptist Minister. Mary Deverell (1774-1797) and R. Roberts (1728-1788), whose first name is unknown, wrote sermons in response to dares from men who promised to preach them if they were worthy. Roberts and Deverell, both Anglicans, belong to a final group of women sermon writers from this era: they both published collections of sermons in their own lifetime. Roberts's *Sermons from a Lady* (1770) and Deverell's *Sermons on the Following Subjects* (1774) stand out, both because they were published explicitly as sermons, and because they conformed to eighteenth-century conventions for published sermons in the Anglican tradition, in contrast to the "inspired speech" of nearly all of the other women preachers discussed above. The Anglican Anna Seward also wrote sermons to be preached in her father's church by clergy who had no idea who wrote them.

## Conclusion

There is a need for further research on women's sermons from the Romantic Era. The scarcity of sources presents a significant challenge, but the available examples should be given due consideration. Further detailed archival work may discover more sermonic material that has gone unnoticed due to subversive or creative labelling of the material. Preaching by a woman was a socially transgressive act for women, and except among the Quakers, these women often faced opposition from within their own religious communities. And yet they persisted, believing they were called by God to do so. The distinctive voice of women preachers should be heard, despite the efforts of many male gate-keepers to suppress their contribution.

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Lee, Jarena  
Methodism  
Prophecy  
Religion  
Seward, Anna  
Southcott, Joanna  
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