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# **The construction of women's Quaker identity. A case study: Margaret Fell**

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## ABSTRACT

The article analyses the writings of Margaret Fell, the co-founder together with her husband George Fox of the Society of the Friends of God, commonly called the Quakers, in order to show that the contribution of dissenting women to the construction of the religious identity of the society was no less important than that of male members. As the corpus is mostly composed of letters, the article shows how the woman writer, in addition to contributing to the society's collective identity, also constructs her multiple individual identity, which is not monolithic but multi-faced, as it varies according to the role of the recipient of her letters and the relationship between addressor and addressee. Margaret Fell's writings can also be considered a form of autobiographical self-representation as she speaks with both a public and a private voice, thus revealing different facets of her personality.

Keywords: Quakerism, identity construction, women's contribution, Margaret Fell's case.

## **1. Introduction**

The study of ego-documents – diaries, journals, autobiographies – is a privileged locus of self-expression, revealing aspects of personal identity; these texts have mainly been used to privilege male identity issues. As Peterson (1993: 81) writes “prior to 1980 major critical studies of autobiography excluded serious consideration of women's texts. [...] The effort to construct a literary past, a tradition of English autobiography that accounts for women's texts as well as men's, originated in the nineteenth century. More recently feminist scholarship has attempted to delineate a tradition of women's

autobiography from the mid-seventeenth century, when non-conformist women began to produce spiritual accounts".<sup>1</sup> A related feminist assumption is that women's autobiography represents a separate and distinct tradition, a genre or subgenre different from autobiographical writing produced by men; however, as stated by Peterson (1993: 84) with reference to Quaker women writers: "Within the autobiographical tradition constructed by *The Friends Library*, variations in form reveal little correlation with gender." It is, however, the case that in their writings Quaker women contributed to the establishment of the Quakers' group identity by elaborating forms of self-representation similar to that of men, as members of the Society of Friends and as women assuming roles typically feminine.

In addition to ego-documents, other genres can help delineate questions about women's forms of self-representation. During the civil war and also after the restoration of Charles II in 1660, religious writings supporting puritan positions were not only produced by men; dissenting women also continued to publish as they had done during the republican interregnum. Staves (2006: 29) writes: "Both during the interregnum and after the Restoration, Quaker women were especially eager to publish pamphlets proclaiming their versions of the gospels, their visions, their advice about the right ordering of the world, and the histories of their preaching and persecution." Gill (2005) underlines the importance of women's writings for the construction of the Quakers' collective religious and political identity. She shows that they also created roles for themselves that emphasised their engagement with the Friends' religious and political agenda by producing texts such as prophetic writing, prison narratives, petitions, and deathbed testimonies, which reveal their involvement in the shaping of this movement.

It is my contention that, in addition to contributing to the society's collective identity, dissenting women also reveal individual identity in their writings. The focus of the present paper is on the construction of the religious identity of a woman, who was a leading and very influential figure among Quaker women, Margaret Fell (1614-1702). She was one of the founders of the Religious Society of Friends, known popularly as the Quakers; she was

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<sup>1</sup> Prior to this period, Katherine Parr, the wife that survived Henry VIII, wrote a dramatic report of her conversion in *The Lamentation of a Sinner* written in 1546, though it was published after the king's death in 1547. In 1545 she had published *Prayers or Meditations*, and as noted by the Pastor Don Matzat (2017: 12), it was "the first book published by a woman in England under her own name and in the English language."

a leading preacher, theologian and activist in favour of the Society. As wife of George Fox (1624-1691), founder of the Society of Friends, she acted as unofficial secretary of the new movement and, being a member of the gentry,<sup>2</sup> she was often called upon to intercede in cases of prosecution or arrest of leaders such as Fox. Margaret Fell was also entrusted with tasks on behalf of the society. For instance, we know from Fox's *Journal* (see *Quaker Spirituality* 1984: 105) that she went to London to petition Charles II and his parliament for freedom of conscience in religious matters in 1660 and 1662. She also contributed to spreading the Quaker ideas and principles. During her imprisonment from 1664 to 1668 she wrote religious pamphlets and epistles to make the basic tenets of the society known and to support its friends. In this period, she also wrote her famous *Women's Speaking Justified*, a scripture-based argument for women's ministry centered on the principle of the spiritual equality of the sexes. In her writings it is possible to trace the elaboration of a religious identity represented at both the collective level, by virtue of her membership in the society, and the individual level, due to her status as a woman.

## 2. Religious identity

Identity is primarily the locus of self and subjectivity, but to speak of religious identity is also to refer to social and political aspects. As stated by Werbner (2010: 233), it "is to refer to a particular way of approaching 'difference'. Religious identity is, above all, a discourse of boundaries, relatedness and otherness, on the one hand, and encompassment and inclusiveness, on the other – and of the powerful forces that are perceived to challenge, contest and preserve these distinctions and unities". This is apparent in the outlook of the dissenting groups of seventeenth century England striving to establish their own group identity in conflict with the official religion of state, the Anglican church, or the Puritan outlook prevalent during the Interregnum.

From the socio-psychological perspective identity is the self image, derived from the experience lived both in childhood and in significant social relationships; current theory thus gives a central place to the self, which is posited as composed of multiple aspects rather than a unitary self (see Stryker

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<sup>2</sup> She had married Thomas Fell, a barrister, in 1632, and had become the lady of Swarthmoor Hall in Lancashire, which after the death of Thomas Fell and her marriage to George Fox, became a centre of Quaker activity.

– Serpe 1994: 16). Identity is faceted, as it is constructed interpersonally, in the relationships established with others, in their confirmations and rejections or dis-confirmations (see Vitale 2016).

The discursive construction of identity has also become a central concern across a wide range of disciplines within the humanities and the social sciences (Benwell – Stokoe 2006, 2010), both contemporary and historical. From this perspective, identity is an intersubjective rather than a subjective process, which complements post-modern accounts of identity as plural and fragmented. Benwell and Stokoe (2010) outline the history and development of approaches to discourse and identity and focus on the fact that through discourse analysis it is possible to show how identity is understood as a social phenomenon produced in social interaction. According to them (2010: 83), “identity is located not in the ‘private’ realms of cognition, emotion and experience, but in the public realms of discourse, interaction and other semiotic systems of meaning-making.” Also, historical critical discourse analysis (Reisigl – Wodak 2016) is relevant to the examination of in-group and out-group roles and the asymmetrical positioning of discourse participants and social groups in diachronic reconstruction.

In recent years<sup>3</sup> many studies have focused on language as a relevant analytical tool to investigate identity. From this perspective, language is considered a salient marker of group membership and social identity. In interactional sociolinguistics the analysis of the linguistic choices used in specific speech events is considered meaningful as it may contribute to revealing the relationship between interactants and, in particular, the opposition between in- and out-groups, where the minority group tends to refer to itself as *we*, while using for the out-group the “they code” language (Gumpers 1982: 66). Also at the individual level, a person psychologically identifies him/herself as being a member of the in-group. By comparing his/her own group to out-groups he/she not only makes his/her own identity distinct, but also reinforces his/her own identity consciousness.

### 3. Material and methodology

This contribution will analyse a set of texts, primarily letters, to demonstrate how the religious identity of Margaret Fell is constructed both socially and individually in interaction with the addressees of her writings as no self-

<sup>3</sup> An overview of the most salient social identity research and theories is contained in Hansen – Liu (1997).

consciousness can exist in isolation. As stated by Hall (2004: 83): "It always exists in relationship to 'another' or 'others' who serve to validate its existence."

The approach adopted for the purposes of this paper is the analysis of identity construction in a specific historical and gendered discursive context: the emergence of dissenting female voices in the civil and religious conflicts of seventeenth century England through the analysis of the writings, in particular letters, of a major female actor in the religious arena, Margaret Fell. To delineate her identity, I will focus on the interrelational aspects of her self representation as a religious woman, as revealed in her writings.

Text-based discourse analysis is employed in this analysis, combining quantitative information retrieved by using the Lancaster University Corpus Toolbox (LancsBox 5.0) and qualitative interpretation. The assumption is that the information contained in the writings by Margaret Fell is usually reported from the writer's point of view and tends to construct a self-representation that can vary according to the role assumed by the writer vis-à-vis her addressees.

The present paper is based on the analysis of Margaret Fell's letters<sup>4</sup> and epistles, and that of the pamphlet *Womens' Speaking Justified* downloaded from *The Quaker Writing Home Page*. To show her construction of a female religious identity, the paper identifies expressions which can reveal the type of relationship she establishes with her addressees and a few words, in particular Quaker key words<sup>5</sup> for instance *light/darkness*, whose presence in the corpus is recurrent as they refer to the relevant theme of Quakerism. Also, personal pronouns are analysed, as these seem relevant to revealing the kind of interpersonal relationship Margaret Fell established with both friends and opponents of the society. Quakers, instead of adopting the already-in-use symmetrical semantics expressed by the use of *Ye/You*, adopted a different egalitarian system by continuing to use *Thee/Thou* for singular and *Ye/You* for plural irrespective of power relationships. It is Margaret Fell's use of the first person pronoun to refer to herself that is particularly revealing as to the relationship she establishes with her addressees as she alternates between *I* and *We* according to the role she assumes.

<sup>4</sup> The importance of Margaret Fell's letter exchange in helping shape the community of the friends is underlined by Marjon Ames in her book, *Margaret Fell, Letters, and the making of Quakerism* (Routledge, 2016).

<sup>5</sup> Corpus linguistics and the lexical approach to grammar and meaning developed by John Sinclair is useful in better identifying the significance of a text. For a recent appraisal of John Sinclair's importance see Moon 2007. A review of trends in corpus linguistics is contained in Tony McEnery – Andrew Hardie (2012).

Each document has been analysed individually and as part of one of the three subcorpora constituted by three 'private' letters, six epistles and two public documents, since as indicated by Jucker (2000: 161), we need to adopt a more micro-pragmatically motivated perspective that focuses on the intereactional status of the interactants. In this perspective, social status is only one aspect in the establishment of interactional status, and a microanalysis of texts may better illustrate the choices of Margaret Fell.

In the Quaker writings homepage, the provenance of the letters here analysed is indicated as follows.

The first letter is taken from Barclay, A. R., ed. *Letters, &c. Of Early Friends; Illustrative of the History of the Society, etc.* In: Evans, William and Evans, Thomas, eds. *The Friends Library*. Philadelphia: Joseph Rakestraw, 1847. Vol. XI, p. 351.

As to the second letter, first published in 1909 in *The Journal of the Friends Historical Society* (6, 2, pp. 69-81), Joseph Green writes in the Quaker writings homepage:

The following letter is a transcript of the original which I discovered accidentally in a manuscript book having no connection with it, and enclosed in a wrapper endorsed by my late uncle, Henry Robson, who died at my father's house, Stansted, Essex, 1850, aet. fifty-one. It is probably that it was given to my grandfather, Thomas Robson, of Liverpool, by his intimate friend, Thomas Thompson, of the same, whose collection of Quaker MSS. is not at Devonshire House. The letter is a folio one, on one side of the paper only; the right hand margin has portions missing, and has been mended by the late H. Robson.

The third letter is taken from Barclay, A. R., ed. *Letters, &c. Of Early Friends; Illustrative of the History of the Society, etc.* In: Evans, William and Evans, Thomas, eds. *The Friends Library*. Philadelphia: Joseph Rakestraw, 1847. Vol. XI, p. 396.

The letter to the King, was appended to the end of William Shewen, *The True Christian's Faith and Experience, etc.* Philadelphia: M. T. C. Gould, 1830.

The six epistles, preceded by an introduction by Margaret Fell, are taken from an anonymous *The Life of Margaret Fox, Wife of George Fox. Compiled from her own Narrative, and other Sources; With a Selection From Her Epistles, etc.* Philadelphia: Published by the Association of Friends for the Diffusion of Religious and Useful Knowledge, 109 North Tenth Street, 1859.

#### 4. Analysis

The first subcorpus analysed consists of three 'private' letters, though it is useful to remember that, in this period, letters, though addressed to an individual recipient, were only 'semi-private' as they were usually read aloud to a circle of family and friends. As stated by Del Lungo Camiciotti (2014: 24), a typical development of the early modern period is that correspondence began to be used in everyday life by members of virtually all social strata, most of them illiterate, who then relied on the assistance of people who wrote letters for them and read aloud the letters received.

The first letter (1) of this group is written from London in 1660 to give information home about the case of a prosecuted friend and other news; the second one (2) is written in 1684-85 to her daughter and son-in-law to give information home about what was happening in London; the third one (3) is written from Lancaster jail to her son-in-law and wife in 1664.

In all these letters the tone is rather informal and affectionate, particularly so in the opening and last paragraphs of the first one. The identity emerging from these documents seems to be that of a caring mother eager to inform family and friends of what is happening in London and, more than other texts, these letters show the private facet of her personality. Words and phrases showing her affectionate concern for the addressees are underlined.

In letter (1) Margaret Fell mostly uses the first person pronoun to refer to herself and the plural *You* for the addressees, thus establishing a personal affectionate relationship with her addressees, her "dearly beloved lambs and babes". In speaking about George Fox, who had been arrested, she refers to the enemies of the friends as *they/them*.

Letter (2) is more matter-of-fact. Here the reporting of news seems to outbalance establishing a connection with the addressees, though affectionate sentences and phrases are present. There are two versions of this letter in the Quaker site. The first is an exact replication of the original, while the second, here reproduced, is in modernized spelling. Though at the beginning of the letter the relationship with the addressee is expressed by *I/you, My/your* she shifts to *we/our* when she is speaking on behalf of the London community.

In letter (3), written when she was in jail, she tries to comfort her family about her situation by exhorting them to trust in God and his will. Again, it is the affectionate tone of a mother addressing her family that prevails. At the beginning she seems to address her letter to John Rouse, referred to as *thee/thy*, then she shifts to the plural referring to a group of friends "I hope in the Lord you are all together".



- (1) Dated: London, 25<sup>th</sup> of Eighth month (tenth month) 1660.

My dearly beloved lambs and babes,--my love is to you all; and my prayer to the Lord is for you all, that in his arm and power you may be kept in the bosom of his love, there to be nursed and cherished up to eternal life. G. F. is now free, blessed be the Lord God,--whose arm and power alone has done it,--after he had appeared before the judge who sent for him up; then he appeared before the Lord Chief Justice of England in his chamber; and the next day he appeared before them all in open court, in the King's bench; and all this after the King had granted out an order to set him free: but they would not set him free, till he had appeared in all these places, to see if any thing would come against him. It was of great service to the Lord. [...] Let me hear of the little ones, how it is with them all (you mention little of them when you write) and my desire is to hear of you all, and of your well-being in the Lord. [...] So no more, but my love in the Lord Jesus is with you; and as soon as the Lord gives me leave, I shall return. The eternal arm of the Almighty be with you.

- (2) To her daughter Rachel Fell and son in law.  
Dated: London, the 7<sup>th</sup> 12<sup>th</sup> month, 1684-5.

Dear Son and Daughter Abraham.

I received your letter and I praise the Lord for your preservation in the truth and in your health as we are here all at this time glory to the lord forever, our business at the Lords is not yet ended but we hope in the Lord to get it ended this next week, here has been a great and Sudden Change, King Charles was taken ill on second day morning and departed this life yesterday about midday, and in the after noon King James the second Late Duke of York was proclaimed, so yet this day the Judges have received Commission to Sit again (as we hear). [...] My dear love and constant prayer is to the Lord for you yet in his powerful Arm and Strength you may be preserved. My dear Love is to Leonard Fell and his wife and to all the Servants and friends, We Can give no account of what will become of Mary Woodburns business till out Motion Comes on. Your Brother and Sister Mead and Sister Susanah have their dear Loves remembered unto you, which is all at present,

From your dear Mother in the Lord

- (3) Margaret Fell to John Rouse (her son in law) and wife.  
Dated: Lancaster jail, 1<sup>st</sup> of 8<sup>th</sup> month (tenth month) 1664.

As I had said often to thee, give up to be crossed; that is the way to please the Lord, and to follow him in his own will and way, whose way is the best. Let nothing enter [sic] thy mind concerning anything about me, for I am very well contented in the work of the Lord. I know your care and tenderness were not wanting to Friends: and so be all satisfied in the will of the Lord. I hope in the Lord you are all together, ere this come to you. Be all satisfied and content with the will of the Lord; and let neither murmuring nor repining enter any of your minds; and let not sorrow fill your hearts, for we have all cause to rejoice in the Lord evermore, and I most of all. [...]

As can be seen in this set of letters, positive words and phrases are used, so that the impression we get is that of a caring motherly figure who wants to reassure her relatives and friends and communicate a positive outlook. In a second sub-corpus, called *Six Epistles by Margaret Fell*, which she published to edify her community, she presents a different facet of her personality, that of the leader and prophetess for her community of friends.

In the *Preface to Margaret Fell Epistles* (4), addressed to the 'friendly reader' and 'written by herself' (as it is written under the title), she explains the basic metaphor of Quakerism, the opposition between 'light' and 'darkness', using the authoritative voice of a prophetess. She presents herself as the intermediary between God and the friends and as inspired by God to write to them. To make her voice authoritative she employs the pronoun *we/us*, apparently speaking on behalf of the society, while addressing her reader as *thou*, a pronoun already in this period mostly used in religious discourse and by the Quakers,<sup>6</sup> though the prevailing pronoun for the addressee in the entire letter corpus is *you* (165 occurrences) since all but one (that to John Rouse) are addressed to the community. (For an overview of the use of the pronouns *You/Thou* from 1300 to 1700, see Dury 2007.) The opposition *we/they* is prominent

<sup>6</sup> As observed by Dury (2015), "During the 16<sup>th</sup> century the use of the singular *thou* had already been reduced to a few marked contexts: a husband addressing his wife (Puritanism), a superior talking to a person of very low rank. And the use as singular of contempt (especially during trials at court)". According to Finkstaedt (1963: 223) the loss of *thou* is due to changes in the society of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. However, the Quakers continued to use the singular pronoun of address regardless of rank or of relationship with the speaker (see Dury 2005: 2).

in the *Letter to the King on Persecution* (7): *we*, the people who has the light, are set in opposition to *they*, those who follow darkness and oppose the friends. In the entire corpus the personal pronouns recur as follows: *We* 109 / *They* 44; *Us* 32 / *Them* 50. Of course, the use of *they/them* is not restricted to enemies of the society, but the predominance of *we/us* seems to indicate that Margaret Fell sees herself as the authorized spokesperson of the society.

In addition, the presence in the corpus of *friends* (141 occurrences) predominates over that of *enemies* (94), so the focus of Fell's attention seems to be more on the society than on their opponents. Her prominent attention to the friends as a community is reinforced by the fact that the first person singular pronoun, which we could expect to be very frequent in letters, is less so than the plural: *I* 45 / *We* 109 occurrences. On the whole, Fell's attitude towards the situation the community is living in is positive; in her letters she is usually optimistic as she intends to bolster the friends' faith and help them overcome present difficulties. To give courage to the friends, she also reports citations from the Bible to reinforce her statements, though sometimes her voice sounds more reassuring than authoritative when she presents herself as a caring mother for her children.

Her positive vision is also enhanced by the use of key words characterising the construction of Quaker identity: in the corpus of letters there are 61 occurrences of *light* vs 9 of *darkness*. The basic Quaker dichotomy *Light/Darkness* is present in all the documents,<sup>7</sup> thus reaffirming the religious collective identity of the friends as chosen people different from the others, those who oppose and persecute them. To strengthen the boundaries between the collective identity of the society of friends, those who follow the light and are humble and obey the will of God, and those opposing them, she repeatedly mentions "the opposition of the power of darkness", identified with priests and professors trying to wage war against those who trust the light. In these documents an important aspect of religious identity emerges: that of a group of people different from and in opposition to the evil forces trying to oppress them. As for her personal identity, in the preface to the *Six Epistles*, she presents herself as authorized by the Lord to write to friends, as an authoritative leader and an inspired prophetess, urging her fellow Christians to follow and obey the light in opposition to the haters of the light, the forces of darkness. In this group of letters, the pronouns used are *we/thou*. She directly addresses her friendly reader by using the singular

<sup>7</sup> George Fox preached the 'inward light' as metaphor of the presence of Christ in the heart. Early Quakers would sit in silence and meditate until they felt Christ's Light shining on them and the Holy Spirit speaking to them.

*thou*, but she refers to herself with the plural *we*, rather than *I*, thus stressing her belonging to the community.

(4) Preface to Margaret Fell Epistles

Friendly Reader:

The following epistles were written at the first appearance of truth among us, when we were young in it: the Light of Christ being our first principle, our minds being turned to it, and it having become our teacher, leader, and guider, we saw perfectly that there was no safety, nor preservation out of sin and transgression, but as we obeyed the Light, and following it in our hearts and consciences, it leading out of sin, transgression, and iniquity: so as we waited in it, and dwelt in it, we came to witness a washing and cleansing, by the blood of Jesus. [...] We were moved of the Lord to write often to Friends, and our testimony was very much to the Light of Christ in the conscience; because we that(sic) that this was the way, and there was no other; for Christ Jesus said, I am the Light; He also said, I am the way, the truth, and the life; and there is none that can come to the Father, but by me. And so we received His Testimony, and could set our seals that it was true. And then we saw the great concern that lay upon this, which is the salvation of poor people's souls. And we knowing as Christ said, they that hated the Light it was their condemnation; and also those that obeyed it, it would bring them to Christ their salvation; this made us very importunate with all people, both Friends and others, to direct them to the Light, and obey it. [...] And so, reader, cleave to the blessed Light and Truth of the living God, that He hath placed in thy heart, and believe in it, and hearken to it, and obey it, and it will lead thee in the path that we have gone, and then thou wilt see, and feel, and understand what we have been through; and thou wilt come to be a witness of the living God and His Truth, which will be peace and comfort to thy soul.

The Lord God Almighty open thy heart, and enlighten the eye of thy understanding, that thou mayest come to have unity with all the saints in the Light.

(5) A General Epistle To Friends, 1655

So read, and with the eternal light examine and search, and try what it is that you thirst after; whether it be righteousness, purity and holiness, for these will the Lord satisfy; and whoever is not thus

seeking, shall never receive satisfaction from the Lord God; but wrath, and terror, and horror, shall fall upon that which is contrary to this. [...] So examine, and try whether you are gathering now or scattering abroad, with the Light which is eternal, which is one in all. Examine and try your own selves, I charge you, as you will answer it before the Lord God; come down and stoop to the yoke of Christ, which is easy, and take His yoke upon you, and His burden, which is light; and beware of starting from under the yoke of obedience, or pulling away the shoulder; for the God required not only sacrifice, but obedience, which is better. [...] So read where you are, for it(sic!) you are in that which is divided, you cannot stand. So in love and tenderness to your souls, I warn and charge you from the Lord, keep in the light, which is one, and in the power, which is one, and in the measure of life made manifest in you, which is one. [...] And this I was moved of the Lord, to write to you, in love and tenderness to the measure of God in you, with which I have unity, which will witness for me forever; and this is in love to your souls. So the Lord God of life and power keep you alive in that, which He hath placed in you, to His everlasting glory: for a sweet savour we are unto God, both in them that are saved, and in them that perish. And beware how you draw back from the everlasting truth, which the Lord God hath tendered to you, which you shall eternally witness to be of God: [...]

From one who desires the good of all souls.

(6) An Epistle To Convinced Friends, in 1656

Dear Friends, brethren and sisters in the eternal light, by which we are gathered, which is or teacher and leader: which light cometh from our Lord Jesus Christ, the Captain of our salvation, in whom is life, and this life is the light of men; who has laid down His life for sheep, and who gives unto His sheep eternal life; and this life is in His Son: *your righteousness is of me,* saith the Lord; and this is the heritage of the saints: this you are made partakers of, who walk in the light, and dwell in the light, you shall have the light of life, and come to know the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom He hath sent, who is come a light into the world: he that believes in Him, shall not walk in darkness, shall not perish, but have everlasting life. [...] Now, dear brethren, of this bear witness, and of the truth and faithfulness of the Lord God, you may set to your seals, all who abide in the light, and depart from iniquity, who name this name, which is better than other

names: to which every knee shall bow, and every tongue confess. And now that ye are made partakers of a living, pure, eternal, immortal principle, which came from the living God, by which you may enter into the holiest, by the blood of Jesus, by this new and living way, which He hath consecrated for us through the veil (that is to say), His flesh; [...] Beware of betraying the just and the innocent in you (I warn and charge you, as you will answer it to the Lord) with a form and profession of the truth without the life, and so betray your own souls; but to the pure eternal principle of the Lord God turn, and keep your minds unto this, which is given unto you, for the redeeming and ransoming of your souls from (sic!) the captivity and bondage of sin and corruption; [...] And therefore I say again, fear the Lord God, that so the pure wisdom ye may come to learn; for dreadful and terrible is the Lord God; and the day of the vengeance of our God is come, in which He renders to every one according to his deeds; [...]

From your dear sister in the unchangeable love of Christ, who desires the good of all your souls.

(7) An Epistle To Friends, 1657.

Dear Brethren and Sisters, who are gathered in the light of Christ Jesus, the fountain of all light, and life, from whence light comes, from whence life comes, from whence power comes; which redeems out of nations, kindreds, people and tongues, to be kings and priests unto God, to reign with Him upon the earth. This is the possession of the saints who dwell in the light, that leads them into the life and fountain from whence it comes; here is the unity of the spirit, and bond of peace, which never can be broken. [...] And beware that you join not with God's enemies, either in yourselves or others; but join with God's pure witness and testimony, and there will be your peace. And here you will know Him, who is the life, and the resurrection; he that believe in Him, though he were dead, yet shall he live; and there is no other name under heaven, whereby any shall be saved, than by that name, which is better than every name; [...]

From a true friend of the Seed of God in all nations.

(8) An Epistle To Friends, 1659.

The eternal God keep you, who brought again our Lord Jesus Christ from the dead, through the blood of the everlasting covenant; and by

His blood wash you, and cleanse you from all sin, and all that would separate from God; that you may have fellowship one with another in the eternal light and life, and there I leave you; and to the Word of His eternal power I commit you, and commend you to His eternal Arm, which is able to save your souls, and keep you up to Himself.

(9) An Epistle To Friends In Ireland, in 1661.

My dear love in the Lord God Almighty is upon you all, which never changest (sic!), but endures forevermore; [...] the servants are not greater than their Lord; and blessed and happy are all they that learn this lesson in the power of God, not only to believe on Him, but also to suffer for His sake; for they who suffer for Him, shall also reign over their enemies with Him; and in His power will they subdue and conquer at the last, for the Lamb and His followers shall have the victory. [...] And so, my dearly beloved, be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might, and be faithful, and bold, and true to your Maker, and he will be a husband unto you, and set your feet upon the rock most sure, [...]

The God of love, whose mercies fail not, preserve and keep you all, and nurse you up in His own bosom, to His own praise and glory, that you may be a people saved by the Lord.

From your dear friend and sister,

The six epistles are dated from 1655 to 1661. They are public because they are addressed to the Friends, with whom Margaret Fell interacts by using the plural *You*. In these documents she mostly refers to herself with the collective *We* thus establishing an intimate bond with her addressees, stressing the common belonging to a chosen group, but she also uses the individual *I*, particularly in threatening sentences expressing the individual voice of the authoritative leader. So, at the same time, she presents herself with a reassuring voice and with that of the prophetess moved by divine inspiration, exhorting and at times even threatening her friends, as can be seen in letter (5). Margaret Fell's exhortations to her friends are rather pressing as she urges them by often using directives.

In epistle (6) the prevailing voice is that of the caring leader addressing her addressees as "Dear Friends, brethren and sisters" and "dearly beloved brethren" to reinforce the bond that unites them against those opposing and persecuting them, but she assumes also a prophetic voice to stir them up and threaten them at the same time. The two key words of Quakerism *light/*



*darkness* are present also in this letter to emphasise the religious identity of the society of friends based on this opposition.

The tone of epistle (7) is very similar to that of the preceding one. Margaret Fell presents herself alternatively as the caring sister reassuring the friends of their status as the chosen, exhorting them to give testimony of their faith, and sometimes as the prophetess using an authoritative voice to avoid darkness. At the beginning there is the usual allocution reinforcing the bond among the friends and their consciousness of being a chosen community.

In letter (8) the reassuring tone dominates. In epistle (9), the affectionate and caring voice is most prevalent. The readers are addressed as "My Dearly Beloved" and the letter tends to reinforce the recipients' faith in the living God. The writer presents herself using the pronoun *I* rather than *we*, thus establishing a personal bond, rather than a collective one, with her addressees. The tone is rather positive and encouraging. She is more a dear sister to them than an inspired prophetess.

A third facet of Margaret Fell's personality is revealed in two public texts: the letter addressed to the King to ask for liberty of conscience and the treatise *Women's Speaking Justified, Proved, and Allowed of by the Scriptures, All such as speak by the Spirit and Power of the Lord Jesus*.

While in letter (10) she declares that the Friends of God is a peaceful community loyal to the King, in the treatise she presents herself as a theologian, inspired by Jesus to speak in favour of the religious role of women; the spiritual equality of men and women is in fact a tenet of Quakerism. In this argumentative text, she proves that there is nothing in the Scriptures to justify the actions of those who oppose women's preaching; on the contrary, there is proof of the privileged status accorded to women by Jesus.

In *Margaret Fell's Letter to the King on Persecution, 1660*, (10) she assumes the role of spokesperson for the Society of the Friends of God; she is the charismatic leader speaking for her community as she always uses the pronoun *we* in opposition to those who are against them. Here the request to be granted liberty of conscience is clearly affirmed not by pleading for it but by arguing that those who oppose them do not know them, and she boldly asks for the right to "enjoy our civil rights and liberties of subjects, as freeborn Englishmen". In this letter the opposition *we, us / they, them* prevails, and it underlines that the Friends were cruelly persecuted by enemies of the Society. But the opponents of the Society of Friends are also directly addressed as *You* in a passage where she stresses that they are unjustly persecuted.



## (10) Letter to the King on Persecution

We have been a suffering people, under every power and change, and under every profession of religion that hath been, and borne the outward power in the nation these twelve years, since we were a people, and being that, through the old enemy which hath continually appeared against us, not only in the profane people of the nation, but also in the highest profession of sorts and sects of religion, we have suffered under, and been persecuted by them all: some even persecuted and imprisoned till death; others their bodies bruised till death, stigmatized, bored through the tongue, gagged in the mouth, stocked, and whipped through towns and cities; our goods spoiled, our bodies two or three years imprisoned; with much more that might be said, which is well known to the actors thereof. [...] And now because the several of you, who are most concerned in this government, are not acquainted with our principles and practices, neither have known our innocency and sufferings, and the old enemy, by whom we have suffered, at this time being ready to incense and instigate, and infuse secretly into the minds of them who are strangers to us, against whom we have not transgressed, neither do we desire to give any just occasion of offence. [...]

The enemies, “them who are strangers to us” are identified with “priests, teachers, and professors” thus claiming for the Friends a religious identity based on the separation between “us” who follow the light and spirit and “them” “who are contrary to people’s consciences”, defined as “deceivers of the people, and betrayers of their souls” because they do not have the spirit of God in them. The tone of her proclamation is formal and authoritative.

We do therefore declare, to take off all jealousies, fears, and suspicions of our truth and fidelity to the king, and these present governors, that our intentions and endeavours are and shall be good, true, honest, and peaceable towards them, and that we do love, own, and honour the king and these present governors, so far as they do rule for God and his truth, and do not impose any thing upon people’s consciences, but let the gospel have its free passage through the consciences of men, which we do not know that they have, by any law, as yet imposed. [...] we do therefore inform the governors of this nation, high and low, that we are a people that desire the good of all people, and their peace, and desire that all may be saved, and come to the knowledge of the truth, the way, and the life, which is Christ Jesus, [...]

In the treatise *Women Speaking Justified* (11), right at the beginning, Margaret Fell declares her opinion on the role of women in religion to be contrary to that of many.

(11) Women Speaking Justified

Whereas it hath been an Objection in the Minds of many, and several times hath been objected by the Clergy, or Ministers and others, against Women's speaking in the Church; and so consequently may be taken, that they are condemned for meddling in the things of God: [...]

She proceeds to prove that, contrary to official position of the Church, there are in the Scripture many places where the special status attributed by Jesus to women is apparent, not only in the New Testament, where it is reported that women were the first to 'preach' the tidings of The Resurrection, but also in the Old Testament where it is shown that some women, not just men, had the spirit of God:

God hath put no such difference between the Male and Female, as Men would make. It is evident that God made no difference, but gave his good Spirit, as it pleased him, both to Man and Woman, as Deborah, Huldah, and Sarah.

In a further addition to the treatise, in answer to the objection concerning *Women keeping silent in the church* (1 Corinthians: 14.34), the tone is more polemical as she directly addresses her opponents, who are identified as "blind priests".

Now let us see if any of you, blind Priests, can speak after this manner, and see if it be not a better Sermon that any of you can make, who are against Women's Speaking

On the contrary:

Thus much may prove, that the Church of Christ is represented as a Woman; and those that speak against this Woman's speaking, speak against the Church of Christ, and the Seed of the Woman, which Seed is Christ; that is to say, Those that speak against the Power of the Lord, and the Spirit of the Lord speaking in a Woman, simply by reason of her Sex, or because she is a Woman, not regarding the Seed, and Spirit, and Power that speaks in her; such speak against Christ and his Church, and are of the Seed of the Serpent, wherein lodgeth Enmity.

In this treatise, the tone is mainly that of a sober exposition of ideas supported by Bible citations, though occasionally a polemical vision that juxtaposes her opinion with that of her enemies emerges:

Mark this, you that despise and oppose the Message of the Lord God that he sends by Women; What had become of the Redemption of the whole Body of Mankind, if they had not cause to believe the Message that the Lord Jesus sent by these Women, of and concerning his Resurrection? And if these Women had not thus, out of their Tenderness, and Bowels of Love, who had received Mercy, and Grace, and Forgiveness of Sins, and Vertue, and Healing from him; which many Men also had received the like, if their Hearts had not been so united and knit unto him in Love, that they could not depart as the Men did; but sat watching, and waiting, and weeping about the Sepulchre until the time of his Resurrection, and so were ready to carry his Message, as is manifested, else how should his Disciples have known, who were not there?

In this treatise, her arguments are frequently based on the fundamental dichotomy of Quakerism, *Light vs Darkness*, and the related oppositions *free vs bond* and *spirit vs flesh*. For example, *The General Epistle to Friends* (dated 1655) begins as follows: "Friends, whom the Lord God hath called unto the light which is eternal, which the Lord God has sent, to bring His seed out of bondage, and out of the house of darkness". Right at the beginning of the *Letter to the King*, she quotes the scriptural expression "He that is born of the flesh persecuteth him that is born of the spirit."

## 5. Concluding remarks

This analysis of Margaret Fell's letters and epistles shows that her identity as a religious woman is constructed in interaction with both friends and enemies; it is based on inclusiveness as she often refers to herself as a member of the community, and on difference as she opposes the enemies of the Society of Friends. In her epistolary exchanges her identity is presented as composed of at least two aspects as she seems to impersonate two different roles according to the functions and the recipients of her letters: the supporting figure and the charismatic leader. But there is also a third facet: that of the public speaker on behalf of the Quaker identity,

and in particular of the female Quaker identity, as revealed in her letters and in her theological treatise in favour of women. As just mentioned, the religious identity displayed in Fell's letters is composed of at least two facets: a private one, a caring and reassuring family voice, and a more public one, that of the spokesperson of the community. While the first is based on a familial metaphor – she is the sister, even a motherly figure at times – and is thus predominantly supportive and encouraging, the second is the charismatic voice of a leader and prophetess stressing the opposition between the friends of God, who trust the 'light', and their opponents, who represent 'darkness'.

We can conclude by saying that, in Margaret Fell's writings, it is possible to trace the elaboration of a religious identity represented at the collective level, by virtue of her membership in the Society, but also at the individual level, due to her status as a woman. Her personal identity as religious woman as well as that of her community of friends is based on a vision of separateness from other people, be they religious or not, and on the perception of being besieged by enemies, who are identified with establishment persons, who, according to Margaret Fell, do not know the true nature of the Friends and so represent a menace for them. Because of this, much of her message consists in helping her community to identify their enemies and to reassure the Friends that it is they who have the spirit of God and represent Light in opposition to the forces of Darkness.

At the collective level her identity construction is similar to that of Quaker men, but at the individual level she shows marked female features. In addition, she is particularly eager to prove the importance of the female world for their religious community, not only because she is a woman that can exercise all those functions previously attributed to men, but also because the Scripture itself recognises this role of religious women.

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