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## V

### *Liberty and the Right of Resistance: Women’s Political Writings of the English Civil War Era*

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In the third volume of her *History of England* (1767), Catharine Macaulay (1731–91) reports on the increasing political unrest of the early 1640s: “The impatience of the public at the slow progress of the long-promised reformation,” she observes, “excited a new inundation of petitions” from many different social classes.<sup>1</sup> In seventeenth-century England, public petitions addressed to parliament were not only an accepted way of expressing political dissent, but also a means of drawing the common people into political action. These petitions usually consisted of two or three pages of printed text, and were typically presented to parliament by a large (and sometimes clamorous) group. Women were among the many petitioners of the civil war era. Though they would often present petitions for personal reasons—to secure their estates or to defend their persecuted husbands<sup>2</sup>—some were also motivated to air their political grievances

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<sup>1</sup> Catharine Macaulay, *The History of England From the Accession of James I. To that of the Brunswick Line* (London: J. Nourse, J. Dodsley, and W. Johnson, 1767; Dublin: A. Leathley and J. Exshaw, 1767), 3.197.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, [Anonymous], *To the Supreme Authority of this Common-wealth, The Parliament of England. The humble Petition of Severall of the Wives and Children of such Delinquents, whose Estates are propounded to be sold, as the Petitioners are informed* ([London: n.p., August 1650]).

as a social group. Macaulay praises one such group as “a company of decent, virtuous matrons, acting under the influence of conscience, expressing their fears and hopes on matters in which they were greatly interested.”<sup>3</sup> As her words suggest, these women wrote and supported petitions not only because their personal circumstances had grown intolerable, but because, according to them, their rights and liberties as subjects had been neglected.<sup>4</sup> Some of these women were strongly influenced by the radical ideas of the Leveller movement, a group that has been described as “the first democratic political movement in modern history.”<sup>5</sup> In a number of petitions from 1642 to 1653, Leveller-inspired women defend the spiritual and political interests of subjects, the toleration of non-conformist religion, and—above all—the individual’s freedom of conscience.<sup>6</sup> A handful of women also published pamphlets of a political nature under their own names: among them, Katherine Chidley (act. 1616–53), the mother of Samuel Chidley (a treasurer of the Leveller party), who published three justifications for the toleration of separatist religion in England;<sup>7</sup> and Elizabeth Poole

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<sup>3</sup> Macaulay, *History of England*, 3.198. Macaulay’s interest in such radical women should come as no surprise—she was an outspoken advocate of women’s rights, and one of the first historians to write a history of England from the perspective of radical politics. On Macaulay, see Sarah Hutton, “Virtue, God and Stoicism in the Thought of Elizabeth Carter and Catharine Macaulay,” and Martina Reuter, “Catharine Macaulay and Mary Wollstonecraft on the Will,” in this volume.

<sup>4</sup> There is some debate about whether or not women themselves actually wrote these petitions; see, for example, *Puritanism and Liberty: Being the Army Debates (1647–9) from the Clarke Manuscripts with supplementary documents*, ed. and intro. A. S. P. Woodhouse, with a foreword by A. D. Lindsay (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1951), 367. Given the lack of conclusive evidence on either side, I do not propose to enter into this debate. I examine instead the concepts of liberty, religious toleration, and resistance, as they are presented in relation to women or from a woman’s point of view.

<sup>5</sup> G. E. Aylmer, introduction to *The Levellers in the English Revolution*, ed. G. E. Aylmer (London: Thames and Hudson, 1987), 9. On the history of the Leveller movement, see H. N. Brailsford, *The Levellers and the English Revolution*, ed. Christopher Hill (London: Cresset Press, 1961); Ian Gentles, “London Levellers and the English Revolution: The Chidleys and Their Circle,” *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 29, no. 3 (1978): 281–309; Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas during the English Revolution* (London: Temple Smith, 1972); and David Wootton, “Leveller Democracy and the Puritan Revolution,” in *The Cambridge History of Political Thought 1450–1700*, ed. J. H. Burns, with Mark Goldie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 412–42.

<sup>6</sup> On the wider activities of the women petitioners, see Patricia Higgins, “The Reactions of Women, with Special Reference to Women Petitioners,” in *Politics, Religion, and the English Civil War*, ed. Brian Manning (London: Edward Arnold, 1973), 177–222; and Keith Thomas, “Women and the Civil War Sects,” in *Crisis in Europe 1560–1660*, ed. Trevor Aston (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1965), 317–40; reprinted from *Past and Present* 13 (1958): 42–62.

<sup>7</sup> Katherine Chidley, *The Justification of the Independant Churches of Christ. Being an Answer to Mr. Edwards his Booke, which hee hath written against the Government of Christs Church, and Toleration of Christs Publike Worship; Briefely Declaring That the Congregations of the Saints ought not to have Dependencie in Government upon any other; or direction in worship from any other than Christ their Head and Law-Giver* (London: William Larnier, 1641); Katherine Chidley, *A New-Yeaes-Gift, or A Brief Exhortation to Mr. Thomas Edwards; That he may breake off his old sins, in the olde yeare, and begin the New yeare, with new fruits of Love, first to God, and then to his Brethren* ([London]: n.p., 1645 [i.e. 1644]); and Katherine Chidley, *Good Counsell, to the Petitioners for Presbyterian Government, That They May Declare their Faith before they Build their Church* ([London: n.p., 1645]).

(fl. 1649), a visionary or “prophetess,” who wrote three works of advice to the General Council of the New Model Army concerning the trial and execution of Charles I.<sup>8</sup> Although these civil war women cannot be labelled political theorists in the strictest sense, an examination of their works helps to reveal the extent to which women adopted and shaped key political concepts in the early seventeenth century.

In the twentieth century, some scholars described the women petitioners as natural predecessors to Macaulay and her contemporary, Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-97). One historian of the Leveller movement, H. N. Brailsford, suggests that the female petitioners “may be reckoned in their modest anonymity among the forerunners of Mary Wollstonecraft.”<sup>9</sup> More recently, Katharine Gillespie has suggested that, like later liberal feminists, the early dissenting women make a significant connection between the subject’s right to resist a tyrannical ruler, on the one hand, and a woman’s right to resist a tyrannical husband, on the other.<sup>10</sup> Gillespie asserts that the arguments of the civil war women ought to lead us to rethink our assumptions about early modern feminism and its almost exclusive association with conservative Anglican and royalist politics. In the writings of early women radicals, such as Chidley and Poole, we apparently see the first steps toward extending the norms governing the social contract in the public sphere to those governing the marriage contract in private. Consequently, it is argued, their “texts rightfully deserve to be included in ‘genealogies’ of liberal political theory.”<sup>11</sup>

In this chapter, I examine the key political themes in women’s writings of the civil war era, with particular emphasis on the transition in their arguments from the

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<sup>8</sup> Elizabeth Poole, *A Vision: Wherein is manifested the disease and cure of the Kingdome. Being The summe of what was delivered to the Generall Council of the Army, Decemb. 29. 1648. Together With a true Copie of what was delivered in writing (the fifth of this present January) to the said Generall Council, of Divine pleasure concerning the King in reference to his being brought to Triall, what they are therein to do, and what not, both concerning his Office and Person* (London: n.p., 1648 [i.e. January 9, 1649]); Elizabeth Poole, *An Alarum of War, Given to the Army, And to their High Court of Justice (so called) revealed by the will of God in a Vision to E. Poole, (sometime a messenger of the Lord to the Generall Council, concerning the Cure of the Land, and the manner thereof.) Foretelling the judgements of God ready to fall upon them for disobeying the word of the Lord, in taking away the life of the King. Also a letter to the Congregation, in fellowship with Mr. Kissin, in vindication of E. advising them to live lesse in the Letter of the scripture, and more in the spirit* (London: n.p., [May 17] 1649); Elizabeth Poole, *An [other] Alarum of War, Given to the Army, And to their High Court of Justice (so called) by the will of God; revealed in Elizabeth Pooll, Sometime a Messenger of the Lord to the Generall Councell, Concerning the Cure of the Land, and the manner thereof* ([London]: n.p., [May 17] 1649).

<sup>9</sup> Brailsford, *The Levellers*, 317.

<sup>10</sup> Katharine Gillespie, *Domesticity and Dissent in the Seventeenth Century: English Women’s Writing and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

<sup>11</sup> Gillespie, *Domesticity and Dissent*, 13.

spiritual liberty of souls to the political liberty of subjects; and then their apparent justifications of the right to resist unjust authority at both the family and state level. But I take a somewhat sceptical attitude toward claims about the significance of these women's writings for the history of liberal feminism (in particular) and liberal political theory (in general). On the one hand, these women certainly deserve recognition for their astute observations about the political status of women in their time; and, with their emphasis upon liberty and the right of resistance, there is some sense in which the civil war women anticipate a strand of thought in later feminist philosophy. But on the other hand, it is difficult to see these early modern women as "feminists" or "liberals" on the standard definitions of those terms.<sup>12</sup> In what follows, I demonstrate that the civil war women do not develop a feminist theory of women's rights, and nor do they develop a thorough-going feminist critique of the marriage/social contract analogue. In fact, on the topic of the duties of wives to husbands, these women seem to have more in common with the conservative Tory polemicist, Mary Astell (1666-1731), rather than her liberal successors, Wollstonecraft and Macaulay. Though it would be nice to see the civil war women as mothers of liberal feminism—as active contributors to the birth of modern enlightenment—this interpretation can be achieved only at the expense of distorting their texts. In addition, though the civil war women do take a stance on the topic of female liberty, I maintain that it is not clear that they espouse a classic liberal conception of liberty. It is not straightforwardly obvious, in other words, that these women ought to be counted among the early proponents of liberalism.

But I hesitate to dismiss the role that these women played in the history of political ideas in England. Even if we do not read their texts according to a "principle of progress" in the history of political thought, I hope to show that their ideas are philosophically interesting in their own right. In particular, we might think that the

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<sup>12</sup> Although it is hard to give a precise and uncontested definition of feminism, I assume that there must be at least two basic components to any feminist theory worthy of the name. First, a feminist doctrine must put forward a descriptive account of women's oppression or disadvantage as a social group: there must be some account of how women are oppressed or disadvantaged compared to men. Second, any feminist theory must have a normative component: there must be some statement to the effect that women's oppression and disadvantage is morally unjustified or impermissible, and ought therefore to be eliminated. I am grateful to Karen Green for pointing out to me that even this bare-bones definition of feminism is open to question. Late medieval women writers, such as Christine de Pizan, do not develop a theory of women's oppression, though they do argue (against their misogynist contemporaries) that women, like men, are capable of cultivating the virtues and achieving the good—a distinctively feminist claim. But I take it that my definition is one that liberal feminists would accept without question or qualification, and have therefore retained it as adequate for my purposes.

writings of these seventeenth-century women shed further light on the non-liberal origins of radical political thought in the early modern period.

### *I. The 1642 Petitioners on Liberty*

The primary political content of women's civil war writings derives from their religious views.<sup>13</sup> In this respect, the dissenting women follow the lead of the Leveller men, John Lilburne and Richard Overton. These men also translate a religious point of view into a political programme: much of the Leveller political outlook is borne of universalism, or the view that all human beings are capable of attaining salvation through their own efforts.<sup>14</sup> Because, according to the Levellers, all Christian subjects have a spiritual duty to attain their salvation, they also share an interest in the government of the church. If the state church is unjust, or requires something that sins against the conscience of the individual, then that individual is entitled to dissent or resist the state church, rather than betray his or her conscience. All souls are free in the sense that they owe their primary allegiance to God alone; their consciences are not, strictly speaking, bound to any civil or earthly authority.<sup>15</sup>

A similar concept of religious liberty can be found in the works of the civil war women associated with the Leveller group. Women first appeal to their liberty of conscience in the early petitions of 1642. The petitioners of February 4, 1642, claim that they account themselves “to have an interest in the common priviledges with [their husbands].”<sup>16</sup> These privileges, it is implied, consist in the “liberty of our conscience and the freedome of the Gospell, and the sincere profession and practice

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<sup>13</sup> The line between religion and politics was typically blurred in the seventeenth century. Hilary Hinds observes that religion and politics were seen as two approaches to the same issue—the question of how God's plans could best be implemented in society; see Hilary Hinds, *God's Englishwomen: Seventeenth-Century Radical Sectarian Writing and Feminist Criticism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), 6–7.

<sup>14</sup> Brailsford, *The Levellers*, 33, 64.

<sup>15</sup> Sharon Arnoult refers to this as the “sovereignty of the soul”; see Sharon L. Arnoult, “The Sovereignties of Body and Soul: Women's Political and Religious Actions in the English Civil War,” in *Women and Sovereignty*, ed. Louise Olga Frandenburg (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1992), 228–49.

<sup>16</sup> Anonymous, *A True Copie of the Petition of the Gentlewomen, and Tradesmens-wives, in and about the City of London. Delivered, To the Honourable, the KNIGHTS, Citizens, and Burgesses, of the house of Commons in Parliament, the 4<sup>th</sup> of February, 1641. Together, With their severall Reasons why their sex ought thus to Petition, as well as the Men; and the manner how both their Petition and Reasons was delivered. Likewise the Answer which the Honourable Assembly sent to them by Mr Pym, as they stood at the House doore* (London: R.O. & G. D. for John Bull, 1641 [1642]), 2–[3].

thereof.”<sup>17</sup> They express a fear “that unlesse the blood-thirsty faction of the Papists and Prelates be hindred in their designes” they shall be exposed to “the thraldome of our soules and consciences in matters concerning GOD, which of all things are most deare unto us.”<sup>18</sup> Freedom of conscience, for them, is the freedom to believe and worship as they see fit, without fear of persecution, external compulsion, or threat. In a long justification of their right to petition, these women spell out the reasons for their defence of freedom of conscience. They say that

It may be thought strange, and unbeseeming our sex to shew our selves by way of Petition to this Honourable Assembly: but the matter being rightly considered, of the right and interest we have in the common and publique cause of the Church, it will, as we conceive (under corection) be found a duty commanded and required.

First, because *Christ* has purchased us at as deare a rate as he hath done the Men, and therefore requireth the like obedience for the same mercy as of men.

Secondly, because in the free enjoying of *Christ* in his own Laws, and a flourishing estate of the Church and Common-wealth, consisteth the happinesse of Women as well as Men.

Thirdly, because Women are sharers in the common Calamities that accompany both Church and Common-Wealth, when oppression is exercised over the Church or Kingdome wherein they live; and an unlimited authority has been given to Prelats to exercise authority over the Consciences of Women, as well as Men, witnesse Newgate, Smithfield, and other places of persecution, wherein Women as well as Men have felt the smart of their fury.<sup>19</sup>

According to these women, they have an interest in the government of the church because they have a duty of obedience to Christ, who died for female as well as male sins; their happiness, as well as that of the men, consists in living in a land where Christ’s religion is permitted to flourish; and, conversely, women also partake in the

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., [4].

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 6–[7].

misery that accompanies the oppression of church and state. They end their petition with the words:

On which grounds we are imboldned to present our humble Petition unto this Honourable Assembly, not weighing the reproaches which may and are by many cast upon us, who (not well weighing the premisses) scoff and deride our good intent. We doe it not out of any selfe conceit, or pride of heart, as seeking to equall our selves with Men, either in Authority or wisdome: But according to our places to discharge that duty we owe to God, and the cause of the Church, as farre as lyeth in us.<sup>20</sup>

These women deliberately shun any assertion of their political equality “either in Authority or wisdome” with men. Their point is simply that, like men, they have a duty to fulfil their obligations to God and the church, and therefore an equal interest in freedom from religious oppression. Needless to say, this is a coherent position: having a duty might mean that you owe something to yourself or to others, or that others have the right to expect a particular kind of treatment from you—but it does not amount to you having the same right in return. Likewise, having an equal interest to men does not equate to having the same political rights as men either. (To draw an analogy: a sentient animal might have an interest in feeling pleasure rather than pain, equal to that of an intelligent adult human being, but this does not automatically give the animal the same rights as the human being.) The women petitioners are therefore right to assert that while they have an equal interest in freedom from religious persecution, this does not amount to them calling for equal political standing with men. Here, then, we do not find any clear assertion of “female political equality.”

But what of their view that women possess an equal spiritual liberty to that of men: does this have any liberal feminist implications? For the petitioners, spiritual liberty consists in freedom of the mind or soul: if women are spiritually free, they cannot be forced to believe—or to profess to believe—a religious doctrine that, in good conscience, they cannot support. In the civil sphere, this translates into women having an equal interest in resisting a state of religious “thraldome” or a state in which prelates are given an “unlimited authority” over their consciences. But this does not

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

automatically translate into an equal civil or bodily liberty for women as a social group; and nor does it amount to a call for their freedom from the arbitrary oppression of men as a social group. In so far as recognition of women's spiritual liberty translates into recognition of some civil liberties, the women petition only for freedom from tyranny over their religious beliefs and practices. "Liberty for women" is thus confined to a narrow sphere of choice—religious liberty does not entail a challenge to those civil hierarchical structures in which women always occupy a subordinate position to men.

## *II. Katherine Chidley and the 1649 Petitioners on Liberty*

With these sentiments, then, the early petitioners do not develop a full-blooded "feminist concept of political equality." Do the later women offer anything more? According to Katharine Gillespie, they do: in the late 1640s, claims about the equal spiritual liberty of men and women develop into a "feminist concept of political equality" or "an early theory of women's rights."<sup>21</sup> Gillespie points to the works of Katherine Chidley and the later women petitioners, in particular.

Chidley upholds a slightly more sophisticated concept of religious liberty than that of the early women petitioners. Chidley, a London seamstress or "stocking-seller," was closely associated with the Leveller organisation of women's petitions from 1649 to 1653.<sup>22</sup> Some scholars maintain that Chidley herself is the most likely author of the 1649 women's petitions: there are many stylistic and thematic similarities between Chidley's works and the *Humble Petitions* of April and May.<sup>23</sup> As a member of a persecuted religious sect, Chidley was also a fierce supporter of toleration for independent or separatist congregations. Her first work, the *Justification*, is written against the Presbyterian minister, Thomas Edwards, the author of *Reasons against the Independant Government of Particular Congregations* (1641).<sup>24</sup> In this short tract, Edwards argues in favour of centralised church

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<sup>21</sup> Katharine Gillespie, "A Hammer in Her Hand: The Separation of Church from State and the Early Feminist Writings of Katherine Chidley," *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 17, no. 2 (1998): 213, 223; and Gillespie, *Domesticity and Dissent*, 85, 91.

<sup>22</sup> On one occasion in 1653, Chidley organised a group of 6000 women to sign a petition for the release of the Leveller leader, John Lilburne.

<sup>23</sup> Brailsford, *The Levellers*, 318 n. 8; Gentles, "London Levellers," 292; and Gillespie, "A Hammer in her Hand," 223.

<sup>24</sup> Thomas Edwards, *Reasons against the Independant Government of Particular Congregations: As also against the Toleration of such Churches to be erected in this Kingdome* (London: Richard Cotes for Jo Bellamie and Ralph Smith, 1641).



government. He maintains that a show of goodwill toward non-conforming sects “will make great disturbance in the Church, both to the outward peace, and to the faith and conscience of the people of the Kingdome.”<sup>25</sup> Like Hobbes, Edwards sees the central role of government as the maintenance of civil peace and harmony; and for him, the state control of religion is essential to fulfilling that role. Edwards warns his readers that “Liberty, the power of government, and rule, to be in the people, are mighty pleasing to flesh and blood, especially in meane persons, and such as have beene kept under.”<sup>26</sup> He maintains that the separatists will use such power and liberty to promote their religious outlook as the only truth; they will force their beliefs on the body politic, and thus create dissent and chaos among the masses.

Against Edwards, Chidley calls on parliament to permit separatist congregations to operate independently of the state church. She maintains that “liberty, power, and rule, should be in the whole and not in one man or few”;<sup>27</sup> church government must rest with the entire body of Christian worshippers, and not just one or two officers of the state church. Freedom or liberty is contrasted with tyrannical church government:

The way of the Gospell, as hath beene plainly proved, is not to live without Gods Ordinances, nor to live at liberty (as you say) except you meane the liberty wherein Christ hath set them, and commanded them to stand fast, because he hath made them free, *Gal. 5.1*. By this you may see the Saints are called into liberty; but not a liberty to sinne (as you would insinuate) but to be freed from the yoake of bondage, which is the tyranny, or tyrannical government of the Canon, Lawes, either of *Rome* or *England*.<sup>28</sup>

In Galatians 5:1, Paul urges the Galatians to “maintain their Christian liberty”: “Stand fast ... in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage.” Christian liberty is the freedom to live according to the spirit of Christ, and to believe and worship independently of fear, constraint or coercion. According to Chidley, individuals ought to be permitted the freedom to

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<sup>25</sup> Quoted in Chidley, *Justification*, 21.

<sup>26</sup> Quoted in Chidley, *Justification*, 24; see Edwards, *Reasons against the Independant Government*, 25.

<sup>27</sup> Chidley, *Justification*, 24–5.

search Scripture for themselves, rather than adopt an implicit faith and simply take for granted whatever religion the state dictates.<sup>29</sup> But this spiritual liberty also amounts to a kind of civil liberty: for Chidley, true freedom of worship means being free from the arbitrary tyranny or discretionary power of others. In a significant passage of his *Reasons*, Edwards suggests that the separatists may live in England and enjoy their liberties. They may do so, he says, if they make an outward show of attending state church services: “(they may be tolerated) so long as they keepe communion with the Church, and submit to the Discipline and orders, and be peaceable, and not speake against what is established by common consent nor practise to the scandall and contempt of the Magistrate and Church.”<sup>30</sup> For Chidley, this kind of toleration does not promote true liberty: under this “toleration” the separatists are still liable to pay their dues to the state church, and to face persecution if they are caught in their private conventicles. In her second work against Edwards, *A New-Yeaes-Gift* (1644), Chidley points out that “the thing we plead for, is a peaceable enjoyment of our liberty to worship God, publikely, according to his revealed word ... without feare of the execution of such *unjust Lawes* which former Parliaments have made.”<sup>31</sup> True liberty is impossible so long as the church governors have the power to persecute separatists for their beliefs—even if those governors never exercise that power. True religious freedom does not depend upon the mere good will of governors or their willingness to turn a blind eye to separatist beliefs. According to Chidley, “We pleade for one intire *gouvernement* established upon *sound principles*, unalterable. And not a *government* which may looke with *severall faces*, in *severall times*, upon *severall occasions*, according to *mens fancies*.”<sup>32</sup>

With these sentiments, Chidley articulates what some theorists might call a “republican” or “neo-roman theory” of liberty.<sup>33</sup> This pre-liberal concept of liberty, highly prevalent in the English civil war era, has its origins in the classical ideal of the *civitas libera* or the free state. While liberal theorists, such as Hobbes, identify civil liberty with non-interference, or the absence of threat or coercion, neo-romans

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<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>30</sup> Quoted in Chidley, *Justification*, 73.

<sup>31</sup> Chidley, *A New-Yeaes-Gift*, 16–17.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>33</sup> See Philip Pettit, *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997); and Quentin Skinner, *Liberty Before Liberalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

characterise freedom according to non-domination, or the absence of arbitrary sway.<sup>34</sup> For the liberal theorist, you are unfree if you are threatened or forced to act contrary to your will; but for the neo-roman, you are unfree if your will is simply subject to, or dependent upon, the arbitrary power of another. While the liberal contrasts freedom with interference or coercion, the neo-roman contrasts freedom with a condition of dependence or domination, as exemplified by the condition of slavery. As Philip Pettit says, the latter acknowledge that “Domination can occur without interference, because it requires only that someone have the capacity to interfere arbitrarily in your affairs; no one need actually interfere.”<sup>35</sup> The neo-romans thus highlight a crucial connection between the freedom of individuals and the powers of the state. In their view, an individual is not free if they are subject to the arbitrary sway or jurisdiction of another. For individual liberty to flourish, the powers of the state must be limited or constrained to a certain degree. The individual’s liberty cannot be upheld under an absolute monarch, for example, if that monarch has the power to interfere with the individual’s “life, liberties, and estate” on an arbitrary basis. Chidley appeals to this notion of liberty when she says that true freedom of conscience requires that separatists are permitted to worship openly and publicly, with some degree of security, and without fear of random persecution from the powers that be. For Chidley, it is possible to be unfree without actual interference: that is, when a government governs “according to *mens fancies*,” and not on the basis of sound, unalterable principles. Edwards’ proposed toleration of separatists (or, we might say, his policy of non-interference), on the proviso that they make an outward show of conformity, does not therefore guarantee true liberty.

Similar sentiments are echoed in the *Humble Petition* of May 1649, a petition that may have been the work of Chidley herself. These women assert their equal interest in the protection of civil liberties. The petitioners ask “must we keep at home in our houses, as if we, our lives and liberties all, were not concerned”.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> An act is arbitrary if “it is subject just to the *arbitrium*, the decision or judgement, of the agent; the agent was in a position to choose it or not choose it, at their pleasure” (Pettit, *Republicanism*, 55).

<sup>35</sup> Pettit, *Republicanism*, 23.

<sup>36</sup> Anonymous, *To the Supream Authority of England The Commons Assembled in Parliament. The humble Petition of diverse wel-affected WEOMEN, of the Cities of London and Westminster, the Borrough of Southwark, Hamblets, and places adjacent. Affecters and Approvers of the Petition of Sept. 11. 1648.* ([London: n.p., May 5, 1649]), [1]. This work is hereafter referred to as *Humble Petition II*.

Have we not an equal interest with the men of this Nation, in those liberties and securities contained in the Petition of Right, and other good Lawes of the Land? are any of our lives, limbs, liberties, or goods to be taken from us more then from Men, but by due processe of Law, and conviction of twelve sworn men of the Neighbourhood?

And can you imagine us to be sottish or stupid, as not to perceive, or not to be sencible when daily those strong defences of our Peace and wellfare are broken down, and trod under-foot by force and arbitrary power.<sup>37</sup>

These women claim an equal interest in securing their civil liberties against arbitrary power in the state. Their appeal to the *Petition of Right* (1628) is significant: this document spells out the civil rights and liberties of English subjects under the crown. The *Petition*, first drafted by Sir Edward Coke, insists (among other things) that subjects ought to be granted freedom from arbitrary arrest and imprisonment. For the women petitioners, this statute applies to female as well as male subjects: women's "lives, limbs, liberties, or goods" are also protected by law. No free woman may be taken or imprisoned, or dispossessed of her goods and liberties, but by the lawful judgment of her peers. They will not rest, the women argue, till "We, our husbands, Friends, and Servants, may not be liable to be abused, violated and butchered at mens Wills and pleasures."<sup>38</sup>

Similar arguments are put forward in the earlier *Humble Petition* of April 1649. In this work, the women complain that their governors are simply repeating the tyrannies of former rulers instead of delivering their "promises of freedom and prosperity to the Nation."<sup>39</sup> The foundations of true freedom require that there is no "exercise of arbitrary Power, or continuance of Authoritie Civil or Military, beyond the time limited by Trust or Commission, or the perverting of either to unjust, bloody,

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<sup>37</sup> Anonymous, *Humble Petition II*, [1].

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, [1].

<sup>39</sup> Anonymous, *To the Supream authority of this Nation, the Commons assembled in Parliament: The humble Petition of divers wel-affected Women Inhabiting the Cities of London, Westminster, the Borough of Southwark, Hamblets, and Places adjacent; (Affecters and Approvers of the late large Petition) of the Eleventh of September, 1648. In behalf of Lieutenant Col. John Lilburn, Mr. William Walwyn, Mr. Thomas Prince, and Mr. Richard Overton, (Now Prisoners in the Tower of London) And Captain William Bray, Close-prisoner in Windsor-Castle; And Mr. William Sawyer, Prisoner at White-Hall* (London: n.p., [April 24] 1649), 5. This petition was first circulated on April 22, 1649, and published two days later. The work is hereafter referred to as *Humble Petition I*.

or ambitious ends.”<sup>40</sup> Like Chidley, these women articulate a classical concept of civil liberty, as freedom from arbitrary sway and domination. They see this liberty as compatible with the “due process of the law,” despite the law being a form of interference in the lives of subjects.<sup>41</sup> Their call for liberty is not a call for non-interference alone (the liberal ideal), in other words, but rather for an institutionalised guarantee of personal safety and security (the ideal of non-domination).

Another woman writer, Mary Overton (fl. 1647), wife of the Leveller pamphleteer Richard Overton (act. 1640–63), appeals to the same concept of liberty in her petition, *To The Right Honourable, the Knights, Citizens, and Burgesses, the Parliament of England* (1647). Overton asserts that the “liberty of the *people* is the maine end of all Government.”<sup>42</sup> The people are therefore entitled “to expect from this House the just defence, preservation, and fruition of all their Rights, Lawes, and Liberties, in their lives, persons and estates.” Again, all citizens are entitled to protection under the law. This entails that the government protects its citizens “against the malice and fury o[f] those that seek their ruine, by any arbitrary domination.”<sup>43</sup> Yet, because of the government’s inaction, many begin to fear that

You give way to the Lords to carrie on a designe to alter the whole frame of the Legall Government of the Land, and of subjection of us to a tyrannous, lawlesse arbitrary [sic] Power, and vassalage, to the totall overthrow and irrecoverable losse and ruine of all our just Rights, and native Liberties; for what is tyranny, but to admit no Rule of Government, but their wills.<sup>44</sup>

In Overton’s view, the law is not necessarily a curb or constraint on liberty, but a condition under which liberty is made possible.

According to Katharine Gillespie, such women’s writings ought to prompt us to rethink our assumptions about the history of liberal feminism. The prevailing scholarly view is that early modern feminist ideals are primarily derived from

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<sup>40</sup> Anonymous, *Humble Petition I*, 7.

<sup>41</sup> On freedom as non-domination and the law, see Pettit, *Republicanism*, 35-41.

<sup>42</sup> Mary Overton, *To The right Honourable, the Knights, Citizens, and Burgesses, the Parliament of England, assembled at Westminster, The humble Appeale and Petition of Mary Overton, prisoner in Bridewell* ([London: n.p., 1647]), 1.

<sup>43</sup> Overton, *Humble Appeale and Petition*, 3.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

conservative royalist or Tory political origins. It is not until the eighteenth century—or so the common story goes—that we see the liberal conception of the individual in the public domain being extended to women in the domestic sphere. Contrary to this view, Gillespie argues that radical political movements of the seventeenth century make a significant contribution toward early liberal feminist thinking. In particular, she says, we might think that Chidley and the women petitioners translate a “concept of spiritual equality into the earliest notion of female political equality grounded in contract and consent.”<sup>45</sup> Gillespie argues that sectarian women’s voices ought to be assimilated into the history of liberalism.<sup>46</sup>

Nevertheless, we have seen that these women call for liberty or freedom against their oppressors. Chidley and the early petitioners regard this oppression or domination as affecting a particular aspect of their lives—their freedom of conscience; they do not characterise their oppression as one that enters into every aspect of their lives. It is therefore difficult to see this as a straightforward liberal feminist call for women’s equality with men. First, there is no overt recognition that women are oppressed as a social group compared to men. According to Chidley’s arguments, it is simply the case that both male and female separatists suffer the same fear of persecution as a result of their religious membership; both men and women are therefore entitled to call for toleration. Likewise, in Overton’s tract and the 1649 petitions, the authors point out that women, as well as men, suffer the terrible consequences of arbitrary arrest and imprisonment; and so they too have an interest in seeing the “due process of law” respected. Nothing about this challenge to state control necessarily implies a liberal feminist challenge to men’s domination of women in the private sphere. It simply amounts to a claim that women are entitled to call for change, because they too are oppressed by their dependence upon arbitrary power.

In addition, as we have seen, it is not clear that Chidley and the women petitioners uphold the liberal conception of liberty as freedom from interference. On the one hand, these women would certainly agree with the liberal position on freedom from state interference in one’s religious practices. But on the other, in calling for liberty against their oppressors, these women express a desire to live without anxiety and fear of random persecution on the basis of their beliefs. The condition of liberty

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<sup>45</sup> Gillespie, “A Hammer in her Hand,” 214, and Gillespie, *Domesticity and Dissent*, 76.

<sup>46</sup> Gillespie, *Domesticity and Dissent*, 14.

is contrasted, not with interference, but rather the slave-like state or “vassalage” of being subject to the discretionary power of others. In their view, the interference of the law need not entail a loss of liberty, provided that it is extended to separatists and non-separatists alike on a just and non-arbitrary basis. Respect for the “due process of law” makes freedom from domination possible.

### *III. Chidley and Elizabeth Poole on the Right of Resistance*

To establish whether or not these women offer a truly feminist theory of equality, we must determine not only the extent to which they grant both male and female subjects the liberty to challenge authority in the state, but also the extent to which they grant women as a social group the freedom to challenge the tyranny of men as a social group. I now turn to the textual evidence concerning Katherine Chidley and Elizabeth Poole’s theories of resistance to the authority of husbands in the home. Some comments in their writings might be interpreted as challenges to the political theory known as patriarchalism. In his *Patriarcha, or the Natural Power of Kings* (1680), Robert Filmer outlines the fundamental features of his theory of patriarchal monarchism.<sup>47</sup> He argues that no individual is ever born free, but always in subjection to some patriarchal superior or other: children are born in subjection to their parents, women are subordinate to their fathers and then to their husbands, and all subjects are subordinate to the crown. On his view, the authority of the king is explicitly linked to the authority of a father over his family. The king is literally the divinely appointed “father” of his people, and the source of his patriarchal power traces back to the power that God originally bestowed upon Adam, the first father. According to Filmer, royal power and paternal power are not just analogous to one another, but identical. By the end of the century, men such as John Locke and Algernon Sidney had undermined the patriarchal representation of the monarch’s legitimacy, replacing it with one grounded in social contract and consent. In his *Two Treatises of Government* (1689), Locke argues that the political power of the monarchy is in fact grounded in an act of consent on the part of free-born individuals. On this view, citizens are justified in overthrowing a system of government if it does not promote the good of

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<sup>47</sup> On the different kinds of patriarchalism in seventeenth-century England, see Gordon J. Schochet, *The Authoritarian Family and Political Attitudes in 17<sup>th</sup> Century England: Patriarchalism in Political Thought* (New Brunswick and London: Transaction Books, 1988). For the sake of simplicity, I summarise Filmer’s theory here, but his was by no means the only patriarchalist justification of political obedience at the time.

the people. Nevertheless, Locke does not explore the full implications of his challenge to patriarchalism—especially as far as women are concerned. In order to be consistent, as many critics point out, Locke ought to allow women the right to participate in the formation of government, as free and equal beings.<sup>48</sup> Furthermore, as Locke's contemporary Mary Astell pointed out, he also fails to extend the same liberty to women against domestic tyrants that he grants to subjects against tyrannical rulers.

Many years prior to Locke and Astell, Chidley challenges the notion that married women are always required to obey their husbands. This challenge is a natural extension of her view that the people are entitled to “separate” themselves from those magistrates who do not practise true worship. As we have seen, Chidley opposes the view that the only legitimate religion is one sanctioned by the king or parliament. Against this, she maintains that all that confers true authority on a preacher is that they have been trained in the school of Christ. This training simply consists in being obedient to Christ and keeping God's commandments.<sup>49</sup> As Chidley repeatedly insists, the primary role of the magistrate is to give praise to those who do well, and to punish evil doers.<sup>50</sup> If the separatists show a due obedience to God, then the magistrate has no right to arrest or imprison them for their beliefs. On the flip side, if the magistrate does not practise true obedience to God, or compels his subjects to practise an anti-Christian religion, then those subjects have a religious duty to “separate” themselves from their ruler. For the Christian, it is their duty “to put it [God's true worship] into practise, not onely in a Land where they have Toleration, but also where they are forbidden to preach.”<sup>51</sup> Christians will therefore sometimes be compelled to defy the laws of the land, and to separate from the state religion, in order to do what is right and to engage in the proper worship of God. Magistrates, on this view, have a power over the “bodies, estates, and lives” of their subjects, but they cannot be “Lords over their consciences.”<sup>52</sup> If they could dictate the religious beliefs of their subjects, then they would be usurping the authority of Christ.<sup>53</sup> In all other

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<sup>48</sup> See, for example, Melissa A. Butler, “Early Liberal Roots of Feminism: John Locke and the Attack on Patriarchy,” *The American Political Science Review* 72, no. 1 (1978): 135–50.

<sup>49</sup> Chidley, *Justification*, 7.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, sig. \*2r.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>53</sup> “I pray you where must Christ reigne then? Must he sit at the Magistrates footstoole? and take what power the Magistrate will give him? ... Here you thrust Christ into a narrow corner” (*Ibid.*, 29).



civil matters, our bodies and lives are those of the sovereign in whose land we dwell; but in the case of spiritual worship, our bodies and souls belong to God alone.<sup>54</sup>

Chidley's justification of separatism is entailed by her notion of liberty. Her theory about the subject's right to separate from the state church is based upon her assertions about every subject's freedom to live according to the spirit of Christ, and to believe and worship without fear of oppression. In her *Justification*, Chidley points out that many people refuse to conform to the state religion because its government is perceived to be "vaine and Popish."<sup>55</sup> Such non-conformity is justified—and ought to be tolerated—because all Christians have a religious duty to follow the true worship. Against this view, Thomas Edwards claims that the toleration of separatists "will breed divisions, and Schismes, disturbing the peace and quiet of Churches, and Townes"; and it will also "breed divisions in families betweene husband and wife, brother, and brother."<sup>56</sup> If we grant the right to resist the government in religious matters, then this will ultimately undermine patriarchal authority in other spheres. If subjects can dissent from the views of their rulers, then wives might dissent from their husbands, servants from their masters, children from their parents, and so on.

By contrast, Chidley is unperturbed by the prospect that toleration will disrupt the patriarchal authority of fathers over their families and of husbands over their wives:

*Next you say O! how this will take away that power & authority which God hath given to Husbands, Fathers, and Masters, over wives, children, and servants.*

To which I answer, O! that you would consider the text in I Cor. 7. which plainely declares that the wife may be a beleever, & the husband an unbeleever, but if you have considered this text, I pray you tell me, what authority this unbeleiving husband hath over the conscience of his beleiving wife; It is true he hath authority over her in bodily and civill respects, but not to be a Lord over her conscience; and the like may be said of fathers and masters, and it is the very same authority which the Sovereigne hath over all his subjects, & therefore it must needs reach to

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>56</sup> Quoted in Chidley, *Justification*, 25.

families: for it is granted that the King hath power (according to the Law) over the bodies, goods and lives of all his subjects; yet it is Christ the King of Kings that reigneth over their consciences: and thus you may see it taketh away no authority which God hath given to them.<sup>57</sup>

If subjects have a duty to pursue the true worship of God, then wives are permitted to defy the religious beliefs of their husbands whenever those beliefs contravene true worship. But does this amount to an argument for a woman's right to resist unjust authority in the home? This interpretation is not borne out by Chidley's text. Chidley explicitly states that the husband still has authority over the wife "in bodily and civill respects." A woman's right to "separate" from her husband is limited to the sphere of religious worship alone. On Chidley's view, it is acceptable for wives to adhere to a different religion from that of their husbands, but it does not follow that wives might consider themselves to be free from their spousal obligations. Chidley's argument in this key passage is not in favour of divorce—it amounts to an argument for female spiritual freedom or "Christian liberty" alone. This position is consistent with women practising an outward conformity to their husband's beliefs, while at the same time privately adhering to their own; it is not about challenging the "arbitrary authority" of the husband in the home. We might think that to be truly consistent, Chidley ought to have extended her challenge to patriarchalism in the state to patriarchalism in the home; but she stops short of doing so—as do so many other republicans of the time. Chidley does not, strictly speaking, extend the notion of civil liberty to women in the private domestic sphere: she does not therefore develop a full-fledged theory of female political equality.

The Baptist prophet Elizabeth Poole takes a similar position on marriage to that of Katherine Chidley. A member of a Baptist separatist congregation, Poole was known in political circles as "a woman of great wisdom and gravity."<sup>58</sup> On December 29, 1648, and then again on January 4, 1649, Poole visited Whitehall in order to offer advice to the General Council of the New Model Army about the trial of Charles I. At the time, the army was reluctant to negotiate, and few members of parliament were inclined to protect the king. In her advice to the council, which was

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<sup>57</sup> Chidley, *Justification*, 26.

<sup>58</sup> Anonymous, *The Manner of the Deposition of Charles Stewart* ([London]: n.p., 1649), 6; quoted in Gillespie, *Domesticity and Dissent*, 139.

later published as *A Vision: Wherein is manifested the disease and cure of the Kingdome* (1649), Poole claims to be interpreting a vision from God by the “gift of faith.” In this vision, the kingdom is represented as a “woman, crooked, sick, weak & imperfect in body,”<sup>59</sup> and the army is appointed as her physician. According to Gillespie, Poole uses this metaphor to advise the council that “the sick body politic must exercise its right to break contract with the monarch ... ‘she’ should divorce him as fast as a sectarian wife would an unregenerate husband.”<sup>60</sup> Poole boldly advises the army to take away Charles’ kingly powers, but she warns against his execution.

Poole begins by drawing a literal connection between kings, fathers, and husbands. Her argument draws on patriarchal logic, or the identification of kings with husbands, and subjects with wives. She advises the army that “the King is your Father and husband, which you were and are to obey in the Lord, & no other way.”<sup>61</sup> It is true, she says, that

when he forgot his Subordination to divine Faith hood and headship, thinking he had begotten you a generation to his own pleasure, and taking you a wife for his own lusts, thereby is the yoake taken from your neck (I meane the neck of the spirit and Law, which is the bond of your union, that the holy life in it might not be prophaned; it being free and cannot be bound: *For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus, hath freed us from the law of sinne and of death ...*<sup>62</sup>

When the husband/king forgets his religious duty to his wife/subject, then the subordinate parties are entitled to consider themselves “freed from the bonds of their union,” according to “the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus.” But although they might consider their spiritual covenant to be dissolved, subordinates are still required to honour their superiors: “although he would not be your Father and husband, Subordinate, but absolute, yet know that you are for the Lords sake to honour his person. For he is the Father and husband of your bodies, as unto men, and therefore your right cannot be without him, as unto men.”<sup>63</sup> Their earthly or civil contract, in

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<sup>59</sup> Poole, *A Vision*, 1.

<sup>60</sup> Gillespie, *Domesticity and Dissent*, 116.

<sup>61</sup> Poole, *A Vision*, 6.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

other words, is not dissolved. Although the husband/king may have refused to be subordinate to God, “You never heard that a wife might put away her husband, as he is the head of her body.”<sup>64</sup> Although the husband/king has no authority over his wife/subject’s conscience, by law he still possesses authority over her bodily self. The wife/subject must therefore endure her husband/king’s tyranny in the flesh—to be insensible to her earthly “interests, lives, liberties, freedoms,”<sup>65</sup> while being assured that she is “free in the spirit of the Lord.”

To support this point, Poole appeals to the story of Abigail in I Samuel. This story demonstrates that although the husband/king may be unjust or irreligious, his ultimate punishment will come from God alone. Abigail, “a woman of good understanding, and of a beautiful countenance” is married to Nabal, a “churlish and evil man” [I Samuel 25:3]. When David comes to kill Nabal, Abigail pleads on her husband’s behalf, and convinces David not to take Nabal’s life with his own hands. A few days later, “the Lord smote Nabal” and he died [I Samuel 25:38]. By analogy, according to Poole, the army should not kill the king:<sup>66</sup>

For as the Lord revenged his owne cause on him [Abigail’s husband], he shall doe on yours [the king] ... Stretch not forth the hand against him: For know this, the Conquest was not without divine displeasure, whereby Kings came to reigne, though through lust they tyranized: which God excuseth not, but judgeth; and his judgements are fallen heavy, as you see, upon *Charles* your Lord.<sup>67</sup>

A wife/subject may act in self-defence by holding the hands of her husband/king, but she must not proceed to take his life.<sup>68</sup> In the end, therefore, Poole advises the army to bring Charles to trial so “that he may be convicted in his conscience, but touch not his person.”<sup>69</sup> The army, in other words, represents the wife/subject who may “hold the hands” of her husband/king, but must wait for God to inflict the ultimate punishment

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<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>66</sup> Poole says “feare not to act the part of *Abigail*, seeing *Nabal* had refused it (by Appropriating his goods to himselfe) in relieving *David* and his men in their distresse; it was to her praise, it shall be to yours, feare it not: Onely consider, that as she lifted not her hand against her husband to take his life, no more doe yee against yours.” *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 6 [7].

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

(in this case, death). Poole does not support the Leveller position on “sovereignty for the people”; the wife/subject is not entitled to usurp her husband/king’s authority for herself.

According to Gillespie, “Poole’s call for a trial ... bespeaks a contractual interest in a limited rather than an absolutist monarchy, one that preserves the King’s life while also managing to infuse his ‘wife’ with new powers.”<sup>70</sup> Poole implicitly challenges the traditional view that wives must always obey their husbands. Instead, wives have the right “to appropriate a measure of ‘sovereign’ self-rule for themselves,”<sup>71</sup> and they are “entitled to invoke the right of exit” or “the right to withdraw” from the marriage contract.<sup>72</sup> In this sense, according to Gillespie, Poole presents a radical challenge to patriarchalism: she “raises new questions about the parameters of patriarchal authority, both at state level as well as within the home.”<sup>73</sup> Poole implies that it is “the wife’s right to consent that forms the original grant of a contract theory,”<sup>74</sup> and she may very well “withdraw consent in the face of tyranny.”<sup>75</sup> Once the husband/king has violated the trust of the wife/subject, the latter is relieved of her obligation to obey—the wife/subject has grounds, in other words, for divorce.

But it is not clear that Poole thinks that it is permissible for the wife/subject to divorce her husband/king. The textual evidence does not unequivocally support this interpretation. According to most patriarchalists, although the consent of both parties may be necessary to initiate the marital union, once the vows have been taken, a woman is unable to dissolve the contract. When a woman marries, as Mary Astell astutely observes in 1700, she “Elects a Monarch for Life” and gives him “an Authority she cannot recall however he misapply it.”<sup>76</sup> Although marriage is a “Contract,” the husband has a “sacred and inalienable” authority over the wife.<sup>77</sup> According to Filmer, God alone invested this authority in the first patriarch, Adam, and his successors—the wife does not have the power to give or take away such authority by her consent or dissent. Poole’s advice to the council is entirely consistent with this patriarchal outlook: a wife must endure her husband’s physical abuse, Poole

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<sup>70</sup> Gillespie, *Domesticity and Dissent*, 142.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 143.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 147, 149.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 149.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 150.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

<sup>76</sup> Mary Astell, *Reflections upon Marriage*, in *Political Writings*, ed. Patricia Springborg (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 48.

<sup>77</sup> Astell, *Reflections*, 17.

says, because by law he possesses authority over her bodily self. His punishment—and her reward—will come from God alone. The spiritual equality of men and women, on this view, does not translate easily into a right to resist unjust authority. The only “divorce” a woman can obtain from an unregenerate spouse is a spiritual one—she need not adhere to her husband’s religious beliefs, but she cannot physically withdraw from their union.<sup>78</sup>

This interpretation of Poole’s text is confirmed in her later works. Needless to say, Poole’s prophetic advice was ignored. Shortly after the beheading of Charles I on January 30, 1649, Poole published *An Alarum of War, Given to the Army*, foretelling “the judgements of God ready to fall upon them for disobeying the word of the Lord, in taking away the life of the King” (title-page). At about the same time, another work titled *Alarum of War* also appeared, now known as *Another Alarum of War*. The text includes material that does not appear in the first *Alarum*. Here Poole reminds the Army that

I told you, that the King was your Father and Husband, which you were to obey in the Lord, and none otherwaies; for when he forgot his subordination to Divine fatherhood and headship, thereby was the Yoak of the spirit, and Law, taken off from your necks, for though ye were bound in the bodie, yet are ye free in the spirit to the Lord, but were to suffer his [the King’s] terrour to your flesh for the Lords sake; according to another sentence in that paper, *True liberty is not bound to any thing, nor from any thing.*<sup>79</sup>

In this passage, Poole expands on her original statement by providing a definition of what it means to be “free in the spirit to the Lord.” Her concept of liberty is similar to Chidley’s notion of “Christian liberty.” She tells the army that “you are men that have professed your selves hot pursuers after libertie,”<sup>80</sup> but true liberty consists in being

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<sup>78</sup> For an alternative interpretation of Poole’s text, see Brian Patton, “Revolution , Regicide, and Divorce: Elizabeth Poole’s Advice to the Army,” in *Place and Displacement in the Renaissance*, ed. Alvin Vos (Binghamton, NY: Medieval & Renaissance Texts & Studies, 1995), 133–45. Patton points to a tension in Poole’s *Vision*. According to his analysis, Poole figuratively represents the army *both* as the ruling husband/king and the subordinate wife/subject. On my own reading, Poole avoids explicitly characterising the army as the husband/king of the people; this metaphor is reserved for the disgraced king alone.

<sup>79</sup> Poole, *Another Alarum of War*, 7.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

free in a spiritual sense, and regarding all earthly interests as subordinate to the divine will. She says

It is true indeed, a just woman must deliver up her Husband to the just claim of the Law, though she might not accuse him to the Law, nor yet rejoice over him to see his fall, for all that passe by and behold her, will say that was a Strumpet, and not a faithful Wife, that rejoyceth at the fall of her Husband; and contrariwise the faithfull Wife mourneth in secret for him: (it is true shee cannot) neither ought she to condemne the just Law that cut him off, but is herein as the Prophet who saith to the people, if ye will not heare, my soule shall mourne in secret for you: You may also remember that as I told you in the Paper presented to your Councill, that you might not lift your hand against your husband to take his life; but suffer his terrour to your flesh, for the Lords sake: so I also said in the same Paper, if he usurpe authoritie over, her she may appeal to the Fatherhood which is the spirit of justice, and as in you, now therefore was I to exhort you (as I also did) to be perfectly dead, in the will of the Lord, to all your lives, liberties, interests, freedoms, or whatsoever you might call yours.<sup>81</sup>

The husband/king's fault is that he "forgot to whom he was subordinate [i.e. God], by prophaning the trust committed to him."<sup>82</sup> In this case, "the spirit of justice" is manifest in the wife but, again, it does not follow that she may take her own revenge.

#### *IV. Conclusion*

Katherine Chidley and Elizabeth Poole may be, as Brailsford observes, "pioneers of women's emancipation" in some sense.<sup>83</sup> But in their critiques of the marriage/social contract analogue, they do not anticipate the liberal feminist ideals of Wollstonecraft and her successors. Instead we might think that the views of Chidley and Poole have more in common with the conservative outlook of Mary Astell. At first glance, the radical civil war women and the Tory pamphleteer are rather strange political

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 7–8.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>83</sup> Brailsford, *The Levellers*, 38.

bedfellows. Astell stands opposed to everything the Leveller movement fought for: she vehemently rejects the toleration of non-conforming sects, she defends traditional social hierarchies, and she certainly does not support the sovereignty of the people.<sup>84</sup> Yet, in terms of the limitations of their challenge to patriarchal authority in the home, Astell, Chidley, and Poole occupy similar positions. They each support a wife's spiritual freedom within marriage, while at the same time advocating wifely obedience in a bodily and civil respect. In her *Reflections upon Marriage* (1706), Astell draws an analogy between slavery in the state and slavery in the family:

If *all Men are born free*, how is it that all Women are born slaves? as they must be if the being subjected to the *inconstant, uncertain, unknown, arbitrary Will* of Men, be the *perfect Condition of Slavery*? and if the Essence of Freedom consists, as our Masters say it does, in having a *standing Rule to live by*? And why is Slavery so much condemn'd and strove against in one Case, and so highly applauded and held so necessary and so sacred in another?<sup>85</sup>

Astell does not employ this analogy to argue in favour of extending the contractarian ethic to the private sphere. She uses the analogy to highlight the inconsistency of liberal Whigs, such as Locke, who distinguish between a man's freedom (in the public sphere) and a woman's subjection (in private) on purely arbitrary grounds. She "heartily wishes," she says, "that our Masters wou'd pay their Civil and Ecclesiastical Governors the same Submission, which they themselves exact from their Domestic Subjects."<sup>86</sup> Astell's feminism is restricted by her conservative political outlook, in the same way that Chidley and Poole's views on marriage are limited by their uncritical acceptance of patriarchy in the home.

I would like to end the paper, however, with a positive suggestion about the contributions of civil war women to the history of political philosophy. I do not agree with Gillespie's claim that their work should lead us to reassess the history of liberal feminism: first, it is not obvious that these women are feminists, and second, it is not clear that they are liberals. But I do agree that their writings prompt some kind of

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<sup>84</sup> On Astell's political thought, see Michal Michelson, "'Our Religion and Liberties': Mary Astell's Christian Political Polemics," in this volume.

<sup>85</sup> Astell, *Reflections*, 17–19.



reassessment of the history of women as political thinkers in the seventeenth century. These women were active in developing and promulgating a particular concept of civil liberty in their time: they do not espouse a liberal conception of liberty as freedom from interference, but rather as freedom from arbitrary domination. Even though they might not have thought to call for women's liberty against the arbitrary tyranny of men in the private sphere, they do extend this concept of liberty to women as political subjects more generally. They see women, in other words, as part of the political realm, and as sharers in the fortunes of the commonwealth. In this sense, these women tell us something about the part that women played in a crucial period of political and ideological upheaval: not as silent and invisible bystanders, but as vocal and active participants, who saw themselves as legitimate commentators on topical issues. There is also a further historiographical point to make: that is, that a careful examination of women's civil war writings might partly challenge the common perception that the history of ideas made a smooth progression from a dying conservative outlook to a modern or "enlightened" worldview. Although the civil war women were radicals of their time, they are much more conservative than we might expect. In this sense, we might see their political ideas—together with those of their male contemporaries—as offering us a somewhat more complex picture of the history of political thought in this period.

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<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

