“EXCUSE WHAT DIFFICIENCIES YOU WILL FIND:” METHODIST WOMEN AND PUBLIC SPACE IN JOHN WESLEY’S ARMINIAN MAGAZINE

Andrew O. Winckles

Tucked away among the pages of the August 1791 edition of John Wesley’s popular Arminian Magazine was a narrative written by a woman only identified as Mrs. Planche. Mrs. Planche was not a great figure of Methodism; in all likelihood few people knew her name. Yet writing from a relatively remote corner of Scotland, this obscure widow laid her soul bare to the vast Methodist readership of the Magazine, telling of the freedom she found in Methodism: “He came into my soul with such a display of his grace and love, as I never knew before,” she writes, “All my bands were loosed, and my spirit was set perfectly free. I felt an entire deliverance from all the remains of sin in my nature; and my precious Jesus took full possession of my heart” (XIV: 42). Mrs. Planche was one of the thousands of women whose lives were altered by John Wesley’s life and ministry. Until 1830, nearly 57% of Methodism’s membership was female.1 Women also played a vital leadership role in early Methodism, leading devotional groups, Sunday schools, and even preaching. Furthermore, Wesley encouraged members to publish their personal narratives of conversion in his Arminian Magazine. Methodism provided an avenue for personal religious expression that was unavailable to women elsewhere. The question then becomes: how did these women navigate the complex nexus of religious experience, subjectivity, community, and power they found in Methodism? What avenues for expression were available to them and why did the language of Methodism connect so powerfully with their experiences?

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In considering these questions from the perspective of Evangelical religion as liberatory experience for women, I want to suggest that many of the binaries social historians have imposed on Evangelical religion—public/private, internal piety/external action, rich/poor—ultimately break down in the narratives of early Methodist laywomen. While the literature on Methodist women and particularly Methodist women preachers has expanded dramatically over the past ten years, the literature on Methodist laywomen writers remains scarce. Examining the religious experience accounts by women as published by Wesley in the *Arminian Magazine* provides a powerful glimpse of the vitality of the early Methodist movement. Focusing on ordinary laywomen illuminates what Methodism was like at the grassroots level as well as providing a window into the relationship between gender, religion, and subjectivity during the long eighteenth century.

After a period of relative neglect feminist historians have increasingly embraced religion as a vital category for understanding the history of gender. For example, Phyllis Mack’s *Visionary Women* reassesses the role of religion in the formation of gendered identity at the beginning of the long eighteenth century by tracing the rise of women’s public involvement in religion back to the English Civil War and the rise of Quakerism. Here, as in Methodism, women located an open space for religious expression that operated as a fundamentally liberatory force. Quaker women like Margaret Fell were active as prophets and writers whose religious experience provided the impetus for speaking in a largely male religious space. It was not until after the Civil War, as Quakerism became more centralized and bureaucratic, that women’s piety was gradually confined to a single sex space. These Quaker “mothers of Israel” still wielded tremendous authority, but over a shrinking public arena.

Likewise in Methodism the freedom of religious expression women enjoyed under John Wesley was delimited after his death in 1791 as the Methodist leadership became more male, centralized, bureaucratic, and conservative. This would seem to confirm the claims of Callum Brown who suggests that after 1800 evangelical piety became largely feminized and domestic—eventually evolving into the religious woman as angel in the house. This interpretation has the benefit of moving past class as a primary motivator of women’s religious experience but, as Sarah Williams points out, it also reifies a static, generalized binary between public and private religious expression. Furthermore, in the case of Methodism both Vicki Tolar Burton and Jennifer Lloyd have persuasively demonstrated that though male bureaucracies often sought to shut down avenues for women’s religious speech, women often found room for expression outside of the private and domestic sphere.

In examining the conversion narratives of early Methodist women I thus want to further complicate this narrative of the “feminization of religion” for, as Morgan and deVries have recently argued, it is possible that “proponents of the ‘feminisation of religion’ thesis [have] simply taken what was a Victorian cultural construction and naturalised it as a historical reality.” As the experiences of the Methodist women under consideration here clearly show, they were active and vital participants in Methodist culture and were only confined to a private piety when the movement inevitably developed into an institutionalized structure. As such, they viewed their public expression primarily as a means to build community solidarity and encourage similar, mimetic experiences in other community mem-
bers. Thus, the agency and subjectivity they gain as a result are primarily figured as willingness to be God’s agent, to express “freedom” through Christ. In this, these narratives vividly illustrate that these women located their own subjectivity not in the individual autonomous self of the Enlightenment but in a willingness to subject themselves to God and then serve a larger religious community. It is in this space that they find true liberty.

In this light I contend that it was precisely through their conversion experiences that these women found the means to challenge dominant assumptions about gender, religion, and public space in the eighteenth century. It is only by striving to comprehend these women’s experiences according to their own cultural and religious contexts we can begin to better understand how the women of early Methodism viewed the relationship between the inner experience of spiritual regeneration and the acts of speaking, writing, and acting in the public sphere. This means that, as Phyllis Mack puts it, we need, “an angle of vision that allows… [us] to share… the struggles of ordinary Methodists and lay preachers, to stand with individual men and women as they worked to shape their own subjectivity.” In locating this “angle of vision” we not only gain a better perspective on the true role and influence of such spiritual texts and religious enthusiasm, but also the cultural and religious contexts that shaped the subjectivities of Methodist women and, by extension, how the faith traditions that so dominated eighteenth century life interacted with the formation of Enlightenment subjectivity.

WOMEN’S RELIGIOUS NARRATIVES IN CONTEXT

Interest in the role of gender during the Evangelical Revival has never been higher. Scholars like Tolar Burton, Lloyd, and Mack have all published comprehensive books on the incredible female preachers and writers of early Methodism, while Pamela Walker and Christine Krueger have traced the continuing public activities of evangelical women in the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, exceedingly little work has been done on early Methodist laywomen. This is due in part to the fact that these women left relatively little written evidence behind. However even the evidence that does remain, like the accounts in the Arminian Magazine, has been largely ignored. In fact, in The Autobiographical Self, Felicity Nussbaum claims that autobiographical narratives by women were outnumbered ten to one and were, “in the main, stories of chaste and upright women who lead and record unremarkable lives, their stories less eventful than those of their male counterparts.” While it is certainly accurate that the majority of the accounts published in the Arminian Magazine were by or about men, in the twenty years since Nussbaum’s study, more accurate figures have emerged. Tolar Burton estimates that, of the 238 biographical accounts in the Arminian Magazine, 79 are about women. Furthermore, 113 of these biographies were published between the inception of the magazine in 1778 and Wesley’s death in 1791, at which time men’s and women’s accounts were almost equally represented. According to Jones, nearly forty percent of all biographical material published under Wesley’s editorship was by or about women, though only fourteen accounts can be directly attributed to women authors. Finally, even after Wesley’s death almost a quarter of the published accounts were about women, though even fewer were authored by them.
Clearly women did have a voice within the pages of the *Arminian Magazine*, though Nussbaum is correct in pointing out that the narratives about women written by men are largely formulaic stories of “chaste and upright women” who lived exemplary lives. Predictably, their roles as wife and mother are often emphasized to the exclusion of any other characteristic. Furthermore, John Wesley’s editorial hand is clearly evident in all of the women’s accounts. Many of the accounts were solicited directly by Wesley, collected over a period of forty years, and then edited for length and content to highlight the aspects of their lives Wesley wanted highlighted. Nevertheless, as is evidenced by the precipitous decline in accounts by and about women after Wesley’s death, he clearly valued the experiences of women and went out of his way to include them in the magazine. Despite his editing, the *Arminian Magazine* narratives written by women about themselves have a quality quite distinct from both the accounts about men and the accounts by men about women. In their own testimonials, women often spend relatively little time on their lives as virtuous wives and mothers and instead focus on their experiences of inner spiritual transformation. It is this intense, often sensory, spiritual experience that both sets these narratives apart from conversion accounts written by and/or about men and prompts these women to speak and act publicly. In doing so, they move women’s religious experience out of the limited domestic sphere traditionally assigned to female piety, into the broader religious community.

Of course, “women’s experience,” not to mention women’s religious experience, has long been a troubled category for feminist analysis. Sonia Kruks argues that women’s experience should primarily be interpreted as embodied and affective. The difference here is between what she terms a “third person,” or discursive explanation of experience and a “first person” perspective that seeks to understand the experience from the inside out at the level of felt emotion. 16 Both perspectives are important, but it is through the exploration of the “first person” that we come to grasp how women’s experiences shaped their subjectivities. As Kruks argues, “What both discursive and Enlightenment accounts of the subject fail to consider are the lived, corporeal aspects of subjectivity. Sentient, affective, and emotional experiences come to be a vital constituent of cognition, judgment, and speech.”17 This is especially true of the religious women under consideration here. Their experience is best understood precisely in the context of the highly affective spirituality that they represent—experiences that shape how they viewed themselves as subjects and the world around them. However, exploring their narratives primarily as embodied experience does not preclude an examination of the broader cultural and religious discourse in which they were embedded; in fact, it provides a useful starting point from which to interpret these larger social patterns.

By working to understand the complicated nature of these religious experiences and how they affected the lives and actions of individual Methodist women a more complete picture emerges of the nature of Methodist thought and social practice—one that allows for a more nuanced interpretation of how the internal religious experiences of these women prompted them to think, act, and write in ways that were innovative and socially transgressive. Most notably, the *Arminian Magazine* accounts break down binaries between public and private, internal experience and external expression, faith and works. For early Methodist women, the division between private and public became artificial following their conver-
The impetus to act, speak, and write within a public space was, for them, a natural extension of their internal spiritual experience and it was this experience that prompted them to locate this public speech within their religious community.

**THE ARMINIAN MAGAZINE: HISTORY AND PURPOSE**

John Wesley founded the *Arminian Magazine* in 1778 in response to growing tensions within the evangelical revival over the question of predestination. Contrary to subsequent historical portrayal, the evangelical revival in England was diverse with, by mid-century, relatively defined factions divided—especially over the doctrine of predestination. The Wesleyan branch of the revival remained Arminian, while those loyal to George Whitefield and the Countess of Huntingdon split to form loose Calvinist connections. Eventually the Wesleys and Whitefield came to an understanding that, though they disagreed about predestination, they would not preach openly against each other. However, by 1778 Whitefield was dead and the predestination controversy resurfaced again on the pages of various religious periodicals. The Calvinists launched the first salvos in *The Spiritual Magazine* and *The Gospel Magazine*, satirizing Wesley and portraying his followers as enthusiasts. In reply, Wesley began publishing the *Arminian Magazine* to counteract this Calvinist message.

Wesley's introductory comments to the first issue reflect this tension by claiming that the Calvinist periodicals “are intended to show...that Christ did not die for all, but for one in ten, for the elect only.” He then lays out in contrast the general plan of his magazine, saying that it will include, “First, a defence of that grand Christian doctrine, ‘God willeth all men to be saved... Secondly, an extract from the Life of some holy man... Thirdly, accounts and letters containing the experience of pious persons, the greatest part of whom are still alive” (JWW 14:280). Thus the purpose of the magazine, for Wesley, was to defend “universal redemption” against predestination not only through polemic and theological argument, but also through the personal experiences of actual Methodist men and women. This real-life experience was proof positive for Wesley that the salvation experience was available to all.

It is in this context that Wesley solicited personal religious experience accounts for the *Arminian Magazine*. Religious accounts had always been important to Wesley as validations of his ministry. He himself kept a personal diary which he published “extracts” of in his *Journal*. These extracts not only served as an apologia for Wesley’s ministry but also, according to Hindmarsh, worked to mimetically produce both spiritual experiences and spiritual experience accounts by lay people, thus creating a kind of “narrative community.” Furthermore, from the earliest days of the movement both Wesley brothers encouraged their lay preachers and members to record their spiritual experiences and send them as letters, some of which were later published in the *Arminian Magazine*. Ultimately, it was so important to Wesley that his preachers and members record these conversion experiences that he even offered to edit their accounts to alleviate their anxieties over writing. The fact that Wesley recognized that his lay members might have legitimate anxiety over their writing abilities also indicates the extent to which the lay membership that corresponded with Wesley and contributed to the *Arminian Magazine* was...
far from culturally elite. This is an especially prevalent subtext of the accounts by women in the magazine, who are both unsure of their abilities as writers and their role within the Methodist public conversation. Elizabeth Scaddan, for example, ends her narrative by apologizing for its “deficiencies:” “I have endeavoured to give the relation desired by you… Excuse what difficiencies you will find in this, and believe me, with the utmost duty and respect, your friend and servant, E. Scaddan.” Nevertheless, these women overcome their reservations because they see themselves as called to speak out and testify to the broader Methodist community about what God has done in their lives.

WOMEN’S NARRATIVES IN THE ARMINIAN MAGAZINE

Though numerous women had their religious experiences published in the Arminian Magazine, I will focus on four exemplary, non-preaching lay-women: Rachel Bruff, Elizabeth Scaddan, Mrs. Planche, and M. Taylor. All four had their narratives published prior to Wesley’s death, indicating their narratives were a result of direct correspondence with him. Broadly speaking, the religious experience accounts by women that appear in the Arminian Magazine fall into a relatively consistent seven part narrative pattern: 1. Consciousness of sin; 2. Acquaintance with Methodism and search for salvation; 3. Justification; 4. Opposition from within and without; 5. Search for “Christian Perfection”; 6. Achievement of perfection; and 7. Evidence of God’s grace in life and community. Of the four narratives under examination here, three incorporate all seven characteristics, with one (Scaddan’s) including all but the search for and achievement of Christian perfection.

In exhibiting this pattern, these narratives perform the mimetic function John Wesley hoped to instill through his own Journal. They also indicate that these women saw themselves as part of a larger community of readers and writers, all of whom were pursuing the same spiritual goals. As Hindmarsh has pointed out:

Through these communal practices they learned what was commonly expected in religious experience, and what was common became, in literary terms, conventional…. In expectation of conversion, evangelical discourse acted like a map, identifying the sort of terrain one might cross and the sort of destination one might arrive at if one chose to venture out.22

Of course, as Hindmarsh makes clear, just because these narratives were conventional, does not mean they lacked originality or insight. Instead, Methodist women appropriated readily available genres as a means to relating their own experience in a way that would be better understood by the broader Methodist community. It was precisely by using these conventions that women were able to form a unique sense of identity grounded in the broader religious culture.

By appropriating the evangelical conversion narrative genre these women accessed a tradition that extended back at least to John Bunyan’s Grace Abounding—a tradition that people like John Wesley used as a means to transmit their message and form the religious identities of their followers. For, as Somers and Gibson have argued, narrative structures are powerful, illustrating that “stories guide action; that people construct identities (however multiple and changing) by locating themselves or being located within a repertoire of emplotted stories; that
'experience' is constituted through narratives." 23 In the case of women this was true in ways that were different than narratives by men for, though they relied on many of the same narrative conventions, they enacted them differently. For example, though both narratives by men and women focus on the presence of sin pre-conversion, men focus predominately on outward bodily sin like drinking and swearing, while women focus on inward sins of the heart and mind. Furthermore, the narrative pattern they enacted allowed them to form their religious identity in a way that defied easy characterization or cooption—allowing them to resist the developing narrative of private domestic piety.

The first narrative convention that appears in the Arminian Magazine accounts is consciousness of sin and the need for salvation. As with many Methodists, all four of these women were religious as girls and tried to observe all outward signs of piety. Elizabeth Scaddan recalls that from an early age she was taught by an older pious woman to observe her duty to God and neighbor and that “the duties of religion demanded my chief concern. Her endeavours so far succeeded, as to give my mind a religious turn; and before I was ten years old, I felt a concern whenever I thought I had offended God” (AM, 14:183). Nevertheless, these women come to believe that this is not enough and that they are in reality slaves to the “sins” of dancing, card playing, novel reading, and vanity. As M. Taylor recalls, “I was fond of dancing and card-playing . . . . I made no distinction of days: on the Lord’s day I went to Church at ten o’clock, repeated the prayers with as much devotion as others did; but in the afternoon I would dance or play at cards” (AM,14:613). Eventually, this sensibility of sin begins to grow as the women become more uncomfortable with their spiritual state. Rachel Bruff writes, “I was brought under deep distress of soul, being made sensible of my undone estate by nature: and was constrained to implore the aid of the blessed Spirit; knowing that I could do nothing of myself” (AM,10:135). It is in this spiritual state that these women usually became acquainted with the Methodists and their emphasis on justification by faith and the sensible experience of salvation.

Though each woman’s first experience with Methodism was different, in general Methodism operated like an electrifying force in these women’s spiritual journeys. Their conviction of sin and the need for salvation intensify after their encounters with the Methodists and they begin to earnestly seek for salvation. M. Taylor first comes in contact with the Methodists in America, where she works as a ladies maid. She hears the famous Dr. Coke preach and upon seeing him she, “was seized with a palpitation of the heart, which seemed to affect my whole body, so that I could not put the needle into my work” (AM,14:616-17). These portions of their narratives are particularly vivid as the women almost literally wrestle with God and the knowledge that they can do nothing for their own salvation except believe. They also tend to use an intense language of embodiment that describes the physical effects spiritual awareness has on their bodies. Mrs. Planche, for example, writes of her palpable desire for justification that she fears will never come:

The burden of sin lay heavy upon my conscience, and I groaned under it. But the same blessed spirit which convinced me of sin, likewise opened to me the way of salvation through a blessed Redeemer . . . . I came to his footstool with tears, and cried, “Save Lord, or I perish!” O how I longed
to come to him; but found I was shut up in unbelief, and could not break
my chain . . . I found a divine attraction upon my heart, and had many
visits of God’s love; but I wanted justifying faith, and a clear sense of my
interest in Christ. (AM,14:418-19)

In both of these cases it is a spiritual power, a “divine attraction,” that operates
upon the physical body, causing “palpitation of the heart.” This contributes to the
strange, almost “in-between” quality that pervades Methodist narratives—especially
those by women. Like many women who wrote their conversion accounts, Mrs.
Planche feels that she knows the way to salvation and even possesses the desire
to be saved, but cannot achieve it herself. As such, this portion of the narratives
is often filled with stops and starts, with intense spiritual experiences that almost
result in a sense of justification, but always fall short.

Though this struggle for justification (knowing God has forgiven one’s
sins) could last months or years, in the short Arminian Magazine narratives this
time frame is compressed and the account of justification directly succeeds spiri-
tual struggle. This is arguably the most important point in the narrative, and their
descriptions of the moment of justification are remarkably similar. In every case,
justification is preceded by some sort of spiritual discipline, like prayer, and the
sense of justification comes without effort in an act of self-surrender. Rachel Bruff
writes that, praying one night, “The very air seemed to breathe sweetness, and my
soul glowed with love divine! As I was looking up to heaven, praising my great
Creator, I felt that my sins were forgiven” (AM, 10:136), while Mrs. Planche says,
“the Lord then spoke peace to my soul. He took away all guilt and condemnation
from my conscience, and shed abroad his love in my heart. I knew my sins were
forgiven, and that I was accepted in the Beloved” (AM,14:419). What distinguishes
these moments from previous religious experiences is that they mystically feel their
sins have been forgiven. There is a sensory quality to these narratives that reflects
John Wesley’s belief that the individual could experientially know he or she was
saved and that God loved them. It is through this embodied sensuality that these
women are able to navigate the complex nexus between experiential perception
and spiritual emotion.

In their characterization of conversion in embodied language, these ac-
counts are truly unique. For these women religious emotions were very real and
fundamentally transforming experiences with the divine. They were sensory en-
counters with something larger than themselves that overwhelmed and redefined
their subjectivity. However, emotion was not simply one of the ways they expressed
religious sensibility; it instead came to define a new mode of perception that
transformed heart and life. In this, early Methodist women attempted to tread the
thin line between Enlightenment rationalism and religious enthusiasm—using the
evidence of the senses to test experience without being overcome by every whim of
the spirit. Thus they came to comprehend religion primarily through these emotions
and then translated internal feeling into outward action.

However, this sense of justification was often frequently opposed from
within and without as the women began to question their own spiritual state and
friends and family members ridiculed them for becoming Methodists. M. Taylor’s
experience was typical; she relates that, “Satan tempted me to doubt of the blessing;
by relations and acquaintance persecuted me; and my evil heart was prone to start
from the living God” (AM,14:619). Elizabeth Scaddan was given an ultimatum from her family who told her she “should no longer remain with them; that they would disown me; and accordingly I had only till the next morning to determine what answer to give them” (AM,14:187). Eventually her family backed down, but it was not atypical for family members to be distressed at their daughters or wives becoming Methodists. This concern reflected both contemporary prejudices against the doctrine of justification by faith and the circulation of false rumors about Methodists accusing them of enthusiasm.

What these concerns indicate is that controversy over religious doctrine in eighteenth century England was more deeply rooted than arguments over the nature of salvation and redemption. The average layperson may not have understood why Wesley’s doctrine of justification by faith caused such uproar within the Church establishment, but he or she surely understood that such doctrines threatened social order in radical ways. Implicit in Wesley’s assertion that God’s grace was a free gift and salvation was available to all was an understanding of doctrine that exploded static categories of rich/poor, male/female, public/private. Furthermore, by emphasizing that the experience of salvation could be experienced outside of Church walls, Methodism offered a fundamental redefinition of self based on personal experience with God and interaction with a new community of faith. This newly formed embodied religious subjectivity served to highlight deep anxieties over religious “enthusiasm” throughout the eighteenth century. As Leigh Hunt wrote in *Attempt to Shew the Folly and Danger of Methodism*, “We may see directly what influence the body has upon this kind of devotion, if we examine the temperament of its professors. The female sex, for instance, are acknowledged to possess the greater bodily sensibility, and it is the women who chiefly indulge in these love-sick visions of heaven.”24 Women’s experience was considered potentially more disruptive than men’s. Due to their supposed reliance on “bodily sensibility” they were considered more susceptible to a dangerous type of religious emotionalism that threatened family and community bonds.

Furthermore, early Methodism was in many quarters considered profoundly countercultural. As Clive Field’s comprehensive survey of early Methodist membership lists suggests, the perceived threat to social structures reflects the fact that a disproportionate number of Methodist members tended to be drawn from the skilled trades, though this could vary by locality.25 In this type of local economic activity families had a vested economic interest in their sons and daughters remaining in the family trade.26 The concern on the part of fathers, mothers, and husbands was that if their daughters or wives were out participating in Methodist meetings they would not be at home helping to raise the family or contributing financially.27 Furthermore, by developing a grassroots system of classes and bands to foster a unique Methodist social community, Wesley created an organization that operated with what Malmgreen describes as a “centrifugal force” which brought individuals together across wide distances and “broke down the narrowness of provincial life.”28 For this reason these bands were seen as profoundly threatening to existing social and religious structures; thus it comes as no surprise that the early years of Methodism were accompanied by intense persecution in the form of riots, press gangs, and family pressure to renounce Methodism.
In becoming Methodists women were in essence declaring their allegiance to a new spiritual family that was in direct opposition to mainstream British culture. Henceforth their primary allegiance was to God and the Methodist community and, as Elizabeth Scaddan's testimony illustrates, they were willing to give up everything to do so. They did so not to make a political or feminist statement, but because they felt they owed allegiance to a higher moral authority. Such self-determination in the face of vigorous opposition from friends and family defined many women's experience with Methodism, especially in the early days of the movement, and it partially explains why they felt compelled to speak out about the true nature of their religious experiences.

For Methodists justification was only the first step on a journey to salvation that ended with Wesley’s doctrine of “Christian perfection,” or sanctification. The achievement of this most esoteric Methodist experience was the ultimate goal of the Christian journey. Wesley defined Christian perfection as the elimination of intentional sin, which he believed to be attainable in this life. However, by sin Wesley does not mean unintentional wrongdoing but a “voluntary transgression of a known law” of God (JWW, 11:396). Thus, throughout his life, he worked to construct a definition of perfection predicated on positive, liberatory action instead of legalistic rules and requirements. In the 1757 Minutes of the Methodist Conferences he defines perfection as “the loving God with all the heart, so that every evil temper is destroyed, and every thought and word and work springs from and is conducted to that end by the pure love of God and our neighbor.” For Wesley perfection, like justification, is something granted by God instantaneously and is ultimately evidenced through outward action that springs from inner spiritual renewal.

Of the women under consideration here, all but Elizabeth Scaddan relate their struggle for and achievement of Christian perfection. Rachel Bruff first hears about Christian perfection from a lay preacher and actively begins to seek for it:

From the time I was convinced of the necessity of this blessing, there was a struggle in my soul. I was sensible the promise was to be received by faith, and the language of my heart was, Lord, help me! . . . This struggle continued for eight days. All this while I groaned in secret; and intreated God to destroy the last remains of sin. (AM,10:191-92)

Much like justification, these women experience Christian perfection only when they surrender themselves to God. Furthermore, they tend to represent this experience in erotic terms—using the language of love and affection to describe the feeling of sanctification. This would seem to suggest that these women view perfection in much the same terms as a human relationship—their relationship with Christ is cemented in Christian perfection through the mystical union of their soul and body with Christ. Unlike similar accounts by men, perfection for these women is an intensely embodied experience. For example, Rachel Bruff describes sanctification thus:

One day I bowed myself at the Redeemer’s feet, and determined not to let him go without the blessing . . . in a moment my burden was gone. My soul was now so enraptured with a sense of his love, that I was constrained to praise his name aloud. From that time he has been constantly with me, and has borne me up above all my sins, temptations, and suffer-
Likewise, M. Taylor writes, “There is now a free and open intercourse betwixt God and my soul…. My soul cries out for love, and hungers and thirsts for more, and to be more united to him who is my all in all” (AM, 14:619). Mrs. Planche similarly uses the language of liberation to describe her experience:

He came into my soul with such a display of his grace and love, as I never knew before. All my bands were loosed, and my spirit was set perfectly free. I felt an entire deliverance from all the remains of sin in my nature; and my precious Jesus took full possession of my heart. (AM, 14:421)

In each case these women represent sanctification as an overwhelming experience of God’s love that destroys sin by entering into them and taking possession of their hearts. Intentional sin is no longer an option because, as Bruff states Christ is “constantly with me.”

Much like the medieval female mystics, Christian perfection represents an erotic union with God that comes to pervade every action. This language of emptying oneself before God and then being filled with his love is far more prevalent in the spiritual narratives of Methodist women than those of Methodist men. Part of the reason may be, as Mack suggests, that “women were more comfortable with the language of dependency or self-emptying than men, and more able to appreciate the relationship between dependency and an intense experience of love or grace.”

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Thus it would appear that women, more than men, saw their sanctifying submission to God as an empowering or agency-granting experience in the sense that their primary allegiance was to God, not men. The experience of sanctification empowered them to speak and act in ways that would have been inconceivable before because they believed they were operating as God’s agent in the world.

Even within the extensive literature by and about the early Methodists, the experience these women describe is unique and provides a vital clue to why these women’s accounts were selected for publication in the *Arminian Magazine*. Despite John Wesley’s firm belief in the possibility of obtaining Christian perfection in this life he never actually claimed to have experienced it himself and in practice believed it to be extremely rare. Wesley examined many of the people who claimed to have experienced perfection in order to ascertain whether the signs of this transformation were genuine. These accounts represent proof positive for Wesley that Christian perfection was achievable. By publishing them he not only attempts to silence his numerous critics on the doctrine, but also provides examples to follow, showing his membership what they must do to reach perfection.

If we follow Wesley’s positive construction of Christian perfection as pure love for God and neighbor, it naturally leads to the final step of the conversion narrative: evidence of God’s grace. Not only are these accounts constructed according to specific community conventions, they also describe how these women see themselves as part of a unified religious community within which they have found a scope for speech and action. As Mrs. Planche writes following her justification, “I did indeed love him with all the powers of my soul, and made a free-will offering of myself to him, to be his forever. O what a heaven did I enjoy in his favour and love; and how did I feel my soul united to his dear people!” (AM, 14:419). This is
an especially bold statement from Mrs. Planche as she lived a full forty miles from the nearest Methodist society. Her experience prompted her to not only be active within her community, but also advocate with Wesley himself for the stationing of a lay preacher at Kelso, Scotland. These communal bonds further empowered women to become involved in visiting the sick and poor, lead classes and bands, correspond with the most powerful people in the Methodist movement, and record their religious experiences for the broader Methodist community. Though many felt inadequate to do so, the outpouring of love they experienced through sanctification provided the undeniable impetus to enter public space.

The fact that all four of these women were ordinary laywomen and not female preachers or well-known writers further emphasizes this point. The four women whose narratives are presented here are quite unique. Their entry into public space on the pages of the Arminian Magazine came not because they felt called to challenge cultural assumptions in the way the women preachers did, but because Wesley asked them to write about their conversion and they felt compelled to by that experience. These were not the voices of the educated or pious elite, but regular Methodist laywomen who wrote in spite of these perceived inadequacies simply because they felt their experience demanded it. Nevertheless, by using the conversion narrative form they participated in an oppositional counterculture that shook the core of British society and established lay women’s voices as vital to the religious conversations that shaped culture.

RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE AND RHETORICAL SPACE

As analysis of these narratives illustrates, these accounts operate in a unique rhetorical space that works to break down binary divisions between private and public. At the same time that they develop a complex internal subjectivity and interiority they also incorporate a collective religious subjectivity. For these women religious conversion was the door through which they extended themselves in love, first to the Methodist community and then to the entire world. In fact, a common Methodist truism was that, post-conversion, the individual is “drawn out in love” for God and neighbor. In locating their narratives within this community space, these women were able to better express their unique individual experience with faith. For them religion was about more than right belief and came to encompass their identities as women and their relationship with the public sphere. Particularly for Methodist women, who relied on the communal nature of the movement to forge relationships of affection that then worked to transform society, conversion dissolved the barriers between self and God and self and world. It thus formed a sense of identity that operated within a liberated religious space.

Likewise, these narratives subtly interrogate the theory of feminized piety which argues that women were disproportionately represented in evangelicalism because its forms of worship were uniquely suited to a private, domestic space. In the Arminian Magazine we see women of every social class simply ignoring these arbitrary barriers—speaking out because they feel called. This breakdown between public expression and private domestic piety is particularly well illustrated by the way the Arminian Magazine narratives complicate prevailing gendered ideologies. Not only do these women inscribe themselves in terms of a gendered subjectivity
founded upon spiritual experience, they also carefully avoid portraying themselves solely as a wives, mothers, or daughters. Though they make passing references to their families, this is not the focus of their narratives. In fact, Mrs. Planche is the only one who even mentions being married and having children. Instead they focus an intense inner spirituality that comes to pervade every aspect of their lives.

Predictably, it is this type of subjective interiority that is absent from accounts by women written by men. In these cases, Nussbaum is right to point out that the narratives are formulaic stories of chaste and upright women who performed their proper womanly roles. This contrast is illustrated in Mrs. Planche’s account, which was completed and sent to Wesley after her death by W. Hunter, the preacher appointed to her circuit. While the section of the narrative written by Planche is focused on her struggle for justification and sanctification, the brief section appended by Hunter explicitly portrays her as a paragon of private womanly devotion. He writes, “She seemed to be all light and devotion . . . . She possessed a simplicity not found in many . . . . To this was joined such sweetness of temper and manners, as made her agreeable wherever she was” (AM, 14:422). In using words like “light and devotion,” “simplicity,” “sweetness of temper and manners,” Hunter illustrates an overarching anxiety about women’s public religious expression and an attempt to domesticate alternative spiritualities.

Finally, any attempt to understand these types of religious texts in terms of modern theoretical constructs like “agency,” “freedom,” or “individual autonomy” can lead to fundamental misinterpretations of these women’s lives and stories. The language of freedom pervades these narratives, but it is not the freedom of the Lockean individual subject that we associate with this period. Instead it is the language of freedom of bondage to sin. As Mrs. Planche declares upon her sanctification, “All my bands were loosed, and my spirit was set perfectly free” (AM, 14:421). This type of freedom and agency thus belongs to an entirely different kind of subjectivity—a subjectivity constructed around the freedom to be an agent of a larger, interdependent religious community. It is this freedom that women found in Methodism and it is this freedom that allowed them write, speak, and act in spite of their perceived “difficiencies.”

At its core eighteenth-century women’s religious experience eludes easy definition then and now. It is emotional and rational, embodied and spiritual, deeply interior and radically engaged with the world. For these lay women, religious emotions were very real and fundamentally transforming experiences with the divine. They were often sensory encounters with something that they felt larger than themselves that overwhelmed and redefined their subjectivity. Their accounts of these experiences were simultaneously enlightened and enthusiastic—a complex fusion that effectively works to break down binary oppositions between self and other, public and private, reason and experience. Thus early Methodist women found a sense of subjectivity not in individual autonomy but in liberated community. It was not that women did not find subjectivity through religious experience, but that the subjectivity they did find was multiple, various, emotional, and predicated on the willingness to be God’s agent in the world. In this sense these women stand apart in
that their experience allows them to construct a new holistic identity within which traditional religious notions of gender itself can be renegotiated.

NOTES

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2. Ibid., 145. For an example of some of the work that has been done on the exceptional women of early Methodism see Paul Wesley Chilcote, *John Wesley and the Women Preachers of Early Methodism* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow, 1991). See also Leslie F. Church’s still foundational work in *The Early Methodist People* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1949).


17. Ibid., 147.


27. According to Field, during “the Norwich riot of 1752 one of the complaints against James Wheatley [a Methodist preacher] was that ‘Many journeymen who had worked hard till noon, going home, found their wives gone out to the dear hearers, and their children neglected and no dinner for them, and that by such avocations many mouths had come upon the parish.’” Field, “Social Composition,” 157.

