Gender and Authority in British Women Hymn-Writers' Use of Metre, 1760–1900

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Abstract
This article is part of a cluster that draws material from the recent conference Metre Matters: New Approaches to Prosody, 1780–1914. It comprises an introduction by Jason David Hall and six articles presented at the conference, whose aim was to address renewed scholarly interest in versification and form across the long nineteenth century, as well as some of the methodologies underpinning it. The papers included in the cluster look both to the minutiae of Romantic and Victorian metres and to their cultural intertexts. The conference, hosted by the University of Exeter's Centre for Victorian Studies, was held 3–5 July 2008.

The cluster is made up of the following articles:
Jason David Hall, 'Metre, History, Context: Introduction to the Metre Matters Cluster'.
Emma Mason and Rhian Williams, 'Reciprocal Scansion in Wordsworth's "There Was a Boy"'.
Ross Wilson, 'Robert Browning's Compounds'.
Margaret A. Loose, 'The Internationalism of Ernest Jones's Dialectical Prosody'.
Nancy Jiwon Cho, 'Gender and Authority in British Women Hymn-Writers' Use of Metre, 1760–1900'.
Ashley Miller, 'Involuntary Metrics and the Physiology of Memory'.
Summer Star, "For the Inscape's Sake": Sounding the Self in the Metres of Gerard Manley Hopkins'.

The English hymn is unusual as a verse genre to which women made significant contributions from early in its development. Hymnody, especially women's hymn-writing, thus offers an intriguing arena in which to examine the interplay of gender and authority in prosody. This essay will examine the implications of the borrowing of hymn metres by eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century British women hymn-writers (Anne Steele, Susanna Harrison and Eliza Westbury) from the pre-eminent male hymn-writers (such as Isaac Watts and Charles Wesley), and Victorian women's innovation of their own successful hymn metres, as exemplified in the work of Charlotte Elliott.

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The English hymn has been an unpopular genre for critical scrutiny owing to its reputation as 'a second-rate form of poetry' (Cedl xxiii). Amidst a range of accusations against its religiosity, often simple language and perceived limited aims, the hymn has been associated with simple and restrictive metres unable to provide 'a free vehicle for the expression of the poet's imagination' (xxiii). Consequently, it has been neglected as a minor verse genre of little significance to literary history. In fact, however, hymn-writing flourished in Britain as congregational hymn-singing became increasingly popular throughout the nineteenth century, and hundreds of variations of metre were utilised by multitudes of men and women. Indeed, British women made prominent contributions to English hymnody from early on in its development; the influential hymns of Anne Steele (1717-78), the first major woman hymn-writer, were published in 1760, only twelve years after the death of Isaac Watts (1674-1748), the Independent minister and poet commonly considered the progenitor of modern English hymnody. Later, Emma Raymond Pitman's Lady Hymn Writers (1892) celebrated the achievements of 121 female writers of hymns. Several of the women were leaders in the field, who recorded the changing religious climates, identified new liturgical areas to address and cultivated new metres in which to meet these needs. The hymn, then, is an excellent poetical tradition in which to explore the relationship between prosody and gender, particularly in relation to the establishment of authority in verse. The examination of this interplay in the first hundred and forty years of British women's hymn-writing is the concern of this essay.

Pre-Victorian women hymn-writers were cautious in their employment of metre. For instance, Steele normally utilised the two then most usual hymnic metres: 'common metre', a metre of four lines alternating between tetrameters and trimeters (C.M. or 8.6.8.6), and 'long metre', a tetrameter quatrain (L.M. or 8.8.8.8), for her hymns. As demonstrated above, hymn metres are often denoted numerically according to the number of syllables per line per verse. This denotation is important because the numbers signal what melodies the text — which is, after all, intended as sacred song — may be sung to. For, although hymns are often associated with specific tunes, they have generally been written without specific melodies in mind to a range of widely known metres. Thus, a new hymn-text may be sung readily to any number of appropriate tunes known by a singer or congregation. This in-built versatility has been important in the prevalence of the hymn as an accessible mode of worship. Steele's most famous hymn, 'The Excellency of the Scriptures', is written in iambic common metre:

Father of mercies, in thy word
What endless glory shines!
For ever be thy name ador'd
For these celestial lines. (58, ll. 1–4)
It may thus be sung to any fitting tune written for the same metre, including, for example, the famous melody associated with John Newton's (1725–1807) 'Amazing Grace'. In fact, 101 of Steele's 106 hymns in Poems on Subjects Chiefly Devotional (1760) are written in common or long metre. Of the remaining five, she utilises short metre (S.M. or 6.6.8.6), another standard hymn metre, four times; her only variation is 'A Rural Hymn', which is written in 6.6.6.4.4.4.4:

To your creator God,
Your great preserver, raise,
Ye creatures of his hand,
Your highest notes of praise:
Let ev'ry voice
Proclaim his pow'r,
His name adore,
And loud rejoice. (I.42, II. 1–8)

This piece may have been composed with Watts's hymns 'Lord of the World Above' and 'We Give Immortal Praise', written to the same metre, in mind; her text would fit any tunes to which these hymns were sung. She certainly admired Watts; in 'Christ the Christian's Life' she asked 'for the animating fire / That tun'd harmonious Watts's lyre' (II.109). Similarly, Susanna Harrison (1752–84), a labouring-class woman whose Songs in the Night by a Young Woman under Heavy Affliction was published in 1780, also wrote the majority of her hymns in common and long metre.

On one level, these women employed familiar metres in order to make use of the extant reservoir of hymn tunes; however, there was room for divergence from the common musical metres. Watts varied his metres more than Steele, and Charles Wesley (1707–88) experimented with unusual metres as will be evidenced later. Thus, one may question why the earliest women hymn-writers chose not to diverge from the most conventional metres. We may glean a clue from the fact that Steele's private (unpublished) writings – now stored at the Angus Library at Regent's Park College, Oxford – are often less orthodox and more playful. The work that gained entry into print culture was carefully selected and proper – suitable as the pious productions of a woman who aspired to a holy identity. These early women hymn-writers desired their work to be accepted and utilized by Christian society and, to this end, drew heavily from the popular examples of the male pioneers for authority and precedent. Certainly, both Steele and Harrison recorded their anxiety regarding the presumption to publish; for instance, Steele's 'On Reviewing My Verses for Publication' attests to her fears of rejection and ridicule:

As o'er the various pages I bend
Approve dislike or drive to mend
Chagrin arose & frowning spread
Her gloomy Pinions o'er my head . . .
1. What ear can rhymes like these engage?
2. The Press Ah, no suppress the thought
3. By just reflection better taught
4. They write with life who write to please
5. Let Lines so spiritless as these
6. To dark Oblivion be consign'd
7. Be wise and learn a humbler Mind
8. So spake Chagrin imperious Speite . . . (ll. 1–12)

Steele was also involved in a project of literary self-fashioning; she published under the pseudonym 'Theodosia', meaning 'female gift of God', and thereby suggested that her work was divinely sanctioned. This identity protected her work from censure and accusations that she was unwomanly for publishing her work.

The early women's hymns also borrowed the language of the men. For instance, Steele's 'Desiring Resignation and Thankfulness' starts with the line 'When I survey life's varied scene' (134), alluding to Watts's famous 'When I survey the wondrous Cross' (189). Harrison also owes a debt to the pre-eminent male hymn-writers; in her 'Hymn 74', she asserts: 'Jesus unloose my stammering tongue, / And then I'll raise my voice' (78).

The idea of the 'stammering tongue' comes from the Wesleys, who used the phrase numerous times. John Wesley, for instance, employed it in 'I thirst, Thou wounded Lamb of God': 'Unloose our stammering tongues, to tell / Thy love immense, unsearchable' (1.266). It would seem that, at this early stage of the tradition, women hymn-writers, who had few female models to look to, drew from the most successful examples established by the pre-eminent (male) hymn-writers with their masculine responses to religion rather than develop new forms in which to articulate their female spiritualities.

Another example of a specific borrowing may be found in the work of Eliza Westbury (1808–28), a lacemaker from Northamptonshire, whose *Hymns by a Northamptonshire Female* was published in 1828. She used the peculiar – that is, unusual – metre (P.M.) of Charles Wesley's eighteenth-century 'Lo! He comes with clouds descending' (8.7.8.7.4.7) numerous times in her hymnody. Wesley's famous hymn opens with the following verse:

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Lo! He comes with clouds descending,
Once for favour'd sinners slain;
Thousand thousand saints attending,
Swell the triumph of His train:
Hallelujah!

God appears on earth to reign. (VI.143, ll. 1–6)
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Westbury used this metre in 13 of her 72 hymns. For instance, her 'Hymn 6', on the 'Sufferings of Christ', is written to this pattern:

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See upon the tree outstretched,
Jesus, shedding purple gore,
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O why was he thus afflicted?
Why his sacred body tore?
'Twas for sinners
Whose iniquities he bore. (ll. 1–6)

Although, on one level, Westbury’s repeated use of Wesley’s metre may merely indicate that she especially liked the tune associated with it; by using this peculiar metre, and by extension the recognizable tune, she is connecting her work to him, his eminent place in English hymnody and the evangelistic work of the Wesley brothers, especially among the poor. In the case of Westbury, a poor, obscure, provincial and very young woman – she died when she was only twenty years old – it is easy to see that borrowing from a distinguished hymn-writer as Charles Wesley would have re-enforced her work with his theological and hymnological authority.

As the numbers of women hymn-writers burgeoned in the later nineteenth century, they more frequently developed their own metres with success. This experimentation is exemplified in the hymns of Charlotte Elliott (1789–1871), the most famous invalid woman hymn-writer of the nineteenth century. Elliott favoured the verse form of three equal length lines followed by a shorter fourth line:

"Christian! seek not yet repose;"
"Hear thy guardian angel say;
"Thou art in the midst of foes –
"Watch and pray!" (Morning and Evening Hymns 13, ll. 1–4)

Written in an irregular metre of 7.7.7.3 syllables, Elliott’s hymn has broken away from the most obvious hymnic patterns. As the assertive exclamation marks signal, she speaks with the authority of an admonishing teacher; her commanding tone is emphasized by the device of the short final line and the imperative command to ‘Watch and pray!’ at the end of each verse. The command is in quotation marks as they are words spoken by Christ in the gospels about the need to be vigilant against the powers of darkness; thus, the hymn carries the weight of Christ’s teachings. As one of the primary aims of English hymnody has been to impart scriptural knowledge, the repetition of Christ’s three short words at the end of each verse means that the hymn is effective and memorable.

Elliott utilises the same form of the three equal lines followed by a shorter forth in her most famous hymn ‘Just as I am, without one plea’. This hymn, described in John Julian’s Dictionary of Hymnology (first published 1892) as ranking ‘with the finest hymns in the English language’ (609), popularized the 8.8.8.6 metre in English hymnody:

Just as I am – without one plea,
But that thy blood was shed for me,
And that thou bidst me come to the –
O Lamb of God, I come! (Invalids Hymn Book 84, ll. 1–4)
The hymn is one of tremendous evangelistic power and has been used to
great effect in Revivalist traditions: the American evangelist Dwight L. Moody
(1837-99) asserted that this hymn 'brought more souls to Christ than any other
ever written' (qtd. in Ryden 329), and the title of Billy Graham's autobiography,
just as I Am (1997), alludes to the impact of this hymn upon his life and
ministry (the hymn has been used as a call for repentance and conversion
in his international crusades). As in 'Christian, seek not yet repose', much
of the power of the hymn resides in the final line. The hymn is about the
soul's affirmative response to Christ's invitation of welcome. The promise
of each verse is the same: 'Just as I Am ... O Lamb of God I come!'
Everything in between is essentially in parenthesis and secondary:

Just as I am - and waiting not
To rid my soul of one dark blot,
To thee, whose blood can cleanse each spot,
O Lamb of God, I come! (Inward's Hymn Book 84, ll. 5-8)

It is the short final line - with its stresses on the most significant words,
'Lamb', 'God' and 'come' – that is most potent. The opening 'O' is a cry
of longing and need for the beloved now within sight. The phrase 'Lamb
of God' performs as a metonym for the sacrifice and redemptive work of
Christ on the cross. In the scriptures it is John the Baptist who points to
Jesus and announces, 'Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the
sin of the world' (Holy Bible, John 1.29); thus, the phrase is a signifier for
the centrality of the crucifixion in Christian atonement. The final words
of the line, 'I come', are an assertion of acceptance and commitment from
the grateful soul to Christ. As Erik Routley has stated, "Just as I am",
claiming no rights, but knowing that you want me – knowing that
because of what you have done – I come' (183). Elliott alludes to all these
meanings and feelings in the shorter final line with its uncomplicated yet
powerful monosyllabic words. It is the climax of the hymn building up to
a crescendo at the end of each verse.

'Just as I Am' became extremely popular in the second half of the
nineteenth century. It spread on the Continent via French, Italian and
German translations, and several imitations were made in English – strikingly,
mostly by women. Marianne Farningham (pseud. Mary Ann Hearn,
1834-1909) wrote the most similar version:

Just as I am', Thine own to be,
Friend of the young, whoLovest me,
To consecrate myself to Thee,
O Jesus Christ, I come.

[..................]

'Just as I am', young, strong, and free,
To be the best that I can be
For truth, and righteousness, and Thee,
Lord of my life, I come. (Voice of Praise 345, ll. 1-4. 13-16)
The quotation marks around 'Just as I am' consciously reference the older woman's work. Other hymns written in same metre include Jane Crewdson's (1809–63) 'O Saviour, I have naught to plead'; Mary Cornelia Bishop Gates's (1842–95) 'Send Thou, O Lord, to every place'; Cecil Frances Alexander's (1818–95) 'His are the thousand sparkling rills' and 'Forsaken once, and thrice denied'; Genevieve Mary Irons's (1855–1928) 'Drawn to the cross which Thou hast blest'; and Ada Skemp's (1857–1927) 'I love to think that Jesus saw'. Unlike the pre-Victorian women who aspired to the hymnody of the male pioneers, these later women obviously responded to the powerful example of Elliott's female-authored verse.6

Two Latin versions were also written by male admirers of the original: the Reverend R. Bingham's 1871 'Ut ego sum! Nec olia ratione utens' and Hamilton M. Macgill's 1876 'Tibi, qualis sum, O Christe!'.7 This Latinisation is interesting because, owing to deficiencies in female education, Latin hymnody was very much the domain of men. As such, the Latin versions may be read as attempts by male admirers to claim this potent hymn as their own. Indeed, there was some male jealousy at the success of this female-authored hymn; Elliott's brother, the clergyman Henry Venn Elliott (1792–1865), said of 'Just as I Am': 'In the course of a long ministry, I hope I have been permitted to see some fruit by my labours; but I feel more has been done by a single hymn of my sister's' (qtd. in Julian 610). This statement demonstrates that the influence of this female-authored hymn, which, with its effective form and emotionally charged content, could stir the hearts of multitudes who sought after God, could be greater than a lifetime's ministry of (male) priesthood.

An investigation of the way that metre was employed by British women hymn-writers during the period 1760 to 1900 demonstrates that metre could be a tool or device, perhaps sometimes even a weapon, of sexual politics. In the early stages, when women hymn-writers were few, it appears that they attempted to give authority to their work by using metres established by the pre-eminent male hymn-writers. However, as their numbers grew in the nineteenth century, and as they gained in confidence in the field, they were able to create their own forms through which to articulate their particular messages. Hymn metres have been dismissed as simple and uninteresting, unlikely to offer literary insight; yet, they can retain subtle histories, such as these relating to the interplay of gender, power and authority in verse, which can widen our knowledge of prosody and revise our understanding of literary history.

Short Biography

Nancy Jiwon Cho's research is located in the intersection of literature, gender and religion. Her Ph.D. in English Studies (thesis title: 'The Ministry...
of Song: Unmarried British Women’s Hymn Writing, 1760–1936’) was awarded by Durham University in 2007. She currently holds a Fellowship with the Oxford Centre for Christianity and Culture at Regent’s Park College, Oxford, and is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow in English at Nottingham Trent University, working on the life and prophetic writings of Dorothy Gott (fl. 1788–1811). She has also taught at Durham University and been a Research Assistant working on the Canterbury Dictionary of Hymnology (c.2010) Project. She has published on Anne Steele, and her forthcoming publications include dictionary entries for the Canterbury Dictionary of Hymnology and chapters and articles on Susanna Harrison’s liminal spiritual identity, Catholic women’s hymn-writing in Britain, 1801–1900, and the missionary verse of Amy Carmichael. She is also working on a monograph entitled The Rise of British Women’s Hymn Writing, 1760–1895.

Notes

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1 Her hymns are influential because 62 were published in John Ash and Caleb Evans’s A Collection of Hymns Adapted to Public Worship (1769), the first Baptist hymn book, and fifty-four in John Rippon’s A Selection of Hymns from the Best Authors Intended to Be an Appendix to Dr Watts’s Psalms and Hymns (1787), which became a best-seller in Britain and America.

2 See. 3/3/2, Regent’s Park College, Oxford.

3 This text does not have page numbers after the preface.

4 Daniel Sedgwick’s Comprehensive Index of Names of Original Authors and Translators of Psalms and Hymns (1863) records 232 women’s names.


6 As with Farningham, several of the women drew from Elliott’s language as well as the form of her hymn.

7 It has not been possible to locate these hymns, but they are documented in Julian’s Dictionary of Hymnology entry on ‘Just as I Am’.

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