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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.

1 It may thus be sung to any fitting tune written for the same metre,
 2 including, for example, the famous melody associated with John Newton's
 3 (1725–1807) 'Amazing Grace'. In fact, 101 of Steele's 106 hymns in *Poems*
 4 *on Subjects Chiefly Devotional* (1760) are written in common or long metre.
 5 Of the remaining five, she utilises short metre (S.M. or 6.6.8.6), another
 6 standard hymn metre, four times; her only variation is 'A Rural Hymn',
 7 which is written in 6.6.6.6.4.4.4.4:

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

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

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 We may glean a clue from the fact that Steele's private (unpublished)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

42 As o'er the various pages I bend
 43 Approve dislike or drive to mend
 44 Chagrin arose & frowning spread
 45 Her gloomy Pinions o'er my head . . .

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

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 Sprite. . . . (ll. 1–12)²

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

14 The early women's hymns also borrowed the language of the men. For
 15 instance, Steele's 'Desiring Resignation and Thankfulness' starts with the
 16 line 'When I survey life's varied scene' (134), alluding to Watts's famous
 17 'When I survey the wondrous Cross' (189). Harrison also owes a debt to
 18 the pre-eminent male hymn-writers; in her 'Hymn 74', she asserts: 'Jesus
 19 unloose my stamm'ring tongue, / And then I'll raise my voice –' (78).
 20 The idea of the 'stamm'ring tongue' comes from the Wesleys, who used
 21 the phrase numerous times. John Wesley, for instance, employed it in 'I
 22 thirst, Thou wounded Lamb of God': 'Unloose our stammering tongues,
 23 to tell / Thy love immense, unsearchable' (I.266). It would seem that, at
 24 this early stage of the tradition, women hymn-writers, who had few female
 25 models to look to, drew from the most successful examples established by
 26 the pre-eminent (male) hymn-writers with their masculine responses to
 27 religion rather than develop new forms in which to articulate their female
 28 spiritualities.

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

35 Lo! He comes with clouds descending,
 36 Once for favour'd sinners slain;
 37 Thousand thousand saints attending,
 38 Swell the triumph of His train:
 39 Hallelujah!
 40 God appears on earth to reign. (VI.143, ll. 1–6)

41 Westbury used this metre in 13 of her 72 hymns. For instance, her 'Hymn
 42 6', on the 'Sufferings of Christ', is written to this pattern:

43 See upon the tree outstrech'd,
 44 Jesus, shedding purple gore,
 45

1 O why was he thus afflicted?
 2 Why his sacred body tore?
 3 'Twas for sinners
 4 Whose iniquities he bore. (ll. 1–6)³

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

15 As the numbers of women hymn-writers burgeoned in the later nineteenth
 16 century,⁴ they more frequently developed their own metres with success.
 17 This experimentation is exemplified in the hymns of Charlotte Elliott
 18 (1789–1871), the most famous invalid woman hymn-writer of the nineteenth
 19 century. Elliott favoured the verse form of three equal length lines
 20 followed by a shorter fourth line:

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

25
 26 Written in an irregular metre of 7.7.7.3 syllables, Elliott's hymn has broken
 27 away from the most obvious hymnic patterns. As the assertive exclamation
 28 marks signal, she speaks with the authority of an admonishing teacher;
 29 her commanding tone is emphasized by the device of the short final line
 30 and the imperative command to 'Watch and pray!' at the end of each
 31 verse. The command is in quotation marks as they are words spoken by
 32 Christ in the gospels about the need to be vigilant against the powers of
 33 darkness;⁵ thus, the hymn carries the weight of Christ's teachings. As one
 34 of the primary aims of English hymnody has been to impart scriptural
 35 knowledge, the repetition of Christ's three short words at the end of each
 36 verse means that the hymn is effective and memorable.

37 Elliott utilises the same form of the three equal lines followed by a
 38 shorter fourth in her most famous hymn 'Just as I am, without one plea'. This
 39 hymn, described in John Julian's *Dictionary of Hymnology* (first published
 40 1892) as ranking 'with the finest hymns in the English language' (609),
 41 popularized the 8.8.8.6 metre in English hymnody:

42 Just as I am – without one plea,
 43 But that thy blood was shed for me,
 44 And that thou bid'st me come to the –
 45 O Lamb of God, I come! (*Invalid's Hymn Book* 84, ll. 1–4)

1 The hymn is one of tremendous evangelistic power and has been used to
 2 great effect in Revivalist traditions: the American evangelist Dwight L. Moody
 3 (1837–99) asserted that this hymn 'brought more souls to Christ than any other
 4 ever written' (qtd. in Ryden 329), and the title of Billy Graham's autobiography,
 5 *Just as I Am* (1997), alludes to the impact of this hymn upon his life and
 6 ministry (the hymn has been used as a call for repentance and conversion
 7 in his international crusades). As in 'Christian, seek not yet repose', much
 8 of the power of the hymn resides in the final line. The hymn is about the
 9 soul's affirmative response to Christ's invitation of welcome. The promise
 10 of each verse is the same: 'Just as I Am . . . O Lamb of God I come!'
 11 Everything in between is essentially in parenthesis and secondary:

12
 13 Just as I am – and waiting not
 14 To rid my soul of one dark blot,
 15 To thee, whose blood can cleanse each spot,
 16 O Lamb of God, I come! (*Invalid's Hymn Book* 84, ll. 5–8)

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

32 'Just as I Am' became extremely popular in the second half of the
 33 nineteenth century. It spread on the Continent via French, Italian and
 34 German translations, and several imitations were made in English – strikingly,
 35 mostly by women. Marianne Farningham (pseud. Mary Ann Hearn,
 36 1834–1909) wrote the most similar version:

37
 38 'Just as I am', Thine own to be,
 39 Friend of the young, who lovest me,
 40 To consecrate myself to Thee,
 41 O Jesus Christ, I come.
 42 [.]
 43 'Just as I am', young, strong, and free,
 44 To be the best that I can be
 45 For truth, and righteousness, and Thee,
 Lord of my life, I come. (*Voice of Praise* 345, ll. 1–4, 13–16)

1 The quotation marks around 'Just as I am' consciously reference the older
 2 woman's work. Other hymns written in same metre include Jane Crewdson's
 3 (1809–63) 'O Saviour, I have naught to plead'; Mary Cornelia Bishop
 4 Gates's (1842–95) 'Send Thou, O Lord, to every place'; Cecil Frances
 5 Alexander's (1818–95) 'His are the thousand sparkling rills' and 'Forsaken
 6 once, and thrice denied'; Genevieve Mary Irons's (1855–1928) 'Drawn to
 7 the cross which Thou hast blest'; and Ada Skemp's (1857–1927) 'I love
 8 to think that Jesus saw'. Unlike the pre-Victorian women who aspired to
 9 the hymnody of the male pioneers, these later women obviously
 10 responded to the powerful example of Elliott's female-authored verse.⁶

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

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27
 28 An investigation of the way that metre was employed by British women
 29 hymn-writers during the period 1760 to 1900 demonstrates that metre
 30 could be a tool or device, perhaps sometimes even a weapon, of sexual
 31 politics. In the early stages, when women hymn-writers were few, it
 32 appears that they attempted to give authority to their work by using
 33 metres established by the pre-eminent male hymn-writers. However, as
 34 their numbers grew in the nineteenth century, and as they gained in
 35 confidence in the field, they were able to create their own forms through
 36 which to articulate their particular messages. Hymn metres have been
 37 dismissed as simple and uninteresting, unlikely to offer literary insight; yet,
 38 they can retain subtle histories, such as these relating to the interplay of
 39 gender, power and authority in verse, which can widen our knowledge
 40 of prosody and revise our understanding of literary history.

41
 42 *Short Biography*

43
 44 Nancy Jiwon Cho's research is located in the intersection of literature,
 45 gender and religion. Her Ph.D. in English Studies (thesis title: 'The Ministry

1 of Song: Unmarried British Women's Hymn Writing, 1760–1936') was
 2 awarded by Durham University in 2007. She currently holds a Fellowship
 3 with the Oxford Centre for Christianity and Culture at Regent's Park
 4 College, Oxford, and is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow in English at
 5 Nottingham Trent University, working on the life and prophetic writings
 6 of Dorothy Gott (fl. 1788–1811). She has also taught at Durham Univer-
 7 sity and been a Research Assistant working on the *Canterbury Dictionary*
 8 *of Hymnology* (c.2010) Project. She has published on Anne Steele, and her
 9 forthcoming publications include dictionary entries for the *Canterbury*
 10 *Dictionary of Hymnology* and chapters and articles on Susanna Harrison's
 11 liminal spiritual identity, Catholic women's hymn-writing in Britain,
 12 1801–1900, and the missionary verse of Amy Carmichael. She is also
 13 working on a monograph entitled *The Rise of British Women's Hymn*
 14 *Writing, 1760–1895*.

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17 *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.

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23

² Ste. 3/3/2, Regent's Park College, Oxford.

24

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

26

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

27

⁵ Christ speaks these words in Matthew 26.40–41, Mark 13.32–37 and Luke 21.34–36.

28

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

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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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