Scattering and Gathering in Katharine Evans and Sarah Cheevers: Conclusions

The argument of this book has been that early women writers’ key role in British public culture helps us understand it as internally divided and inconsistent, uneven in terms of participation, riven with political conflicts and gender tensions, shaped by interested communities that defined themselves in opposition to dominant trends in religious and governmental policies and practices. In addition, as the introduction argued, and as Bradstreet’s case illustrates most fully, this public culture is also externally extended, affecting and affected by communities of literary production and political critique that deliberately overrun England’s borders. It is in this context of the expanded geography of public life, and the problems of cultural or religious inclusiveness this expansion entails, that A Short Relation (1662) by Katherine Evans and Sarah Cheevers is instructive. What follows is an analysis of their pamphlet as the basis for a focused discussion of some of the broader conclusions of this book on women’s key role in publics that are decidedly non-national in nature. Evans and Cheevers offer a traveling model of counterpublic activity that casts female figures as the proper bearers of Quaker conversion at home and abroad. The assimilative dynamic of that model, however, illustrates both the power and potential cost of transnational counterpublic address.

While Philips composed heroic couplets in Ireland, Evans and Cheevers recorded their imprisonment in Malta from 1659 to 1662, where they had been detained by the Italian Inquisition while on a journey to proselytize in Alexandria and Sicilia. Their narratives were compiled and published by fellow Quaker Daniel Baker, who combines his framing commentary with the women’s letters, hymns, prophecies, and multiple accounts of their physical sufferings and verbal debates with Catholic authorities. Like the other writers in this book, A Short Relation helps unite and represent an ideologically specific group—in this case the Quakers—at a time of religio-political
crisis, envisioning the two women at the center of an expansive counterpublic of traveling and publishing “Friends.” However, the “collectivist style” and “communitarian focus” of Quaker narratives means that this pamphlet foregrounds not a single woman but a pair (Gil 69, 123). It also does so at the changed context of sectarian persecution at the Restoration.

As chapter 3 argues, the Restoration saw a reinvention of monarchy as a form of public representativeness, but it was also a time of continuing, indeed intensified, counterpublic activity and it was followed by a period in which women’s writing reached a new statistical peak. Scholars such as Tim Harris, N.H. Keeble, and Richard Greaves have charted the anti-monarchal critique and topical debate that animated nonconformist and republican circles and impelled their ongoing production of scribal news, petitions, and published books and pamphlets after 1660. In fact, the government’s attempt to control if not eradicate sectarianism backfired, for the effect of anti-sectarian legislation and persecution was not conformity but the creation of what Richard Greaves has called a “radical underground” of discussion and publication (4). This underground relied on female writers, printers, and hawkers. Though female sectarians in particular suffered from both the external oppression of anti-association laws and the internal surveillance of their own anxious brethren, Paula McDowell has shown the continuing vigor of their political interventions until at least the early eighteenth century. Indeed, rather than shutting down opportunities for women’s public commentary, as scholars such as Hobby have argued (Virtue 85), the Restoration saw women’s role catalyzing oppositional groups of readers and writers intensify, as they became representatives of a sectarian “underground” that was powerful even—or especially—in persecution and captivity.

This underground was not homogeneous but comprised a number of distinct communities, pitched in debate not only with the dominant group of Anglican Royalists but also with each other. It comprised, that is, a number of counterpublics, of which the Quakers form a particularly visible example. As Kate Peters has argued, from their inception in 1652 Quakers deployed the press to coordinate a national organization, and this deployment only intensified with the Restoration. Quakers reacted to the anti-sectarian laws by establishing centralized records of Quaker sufferings and using meetings to collect and disseminate Quaker literature (Adrian Davies 112). In fact, altogether Quakers published at least 2,939 books in the last forty years of the century, their publications peaking between 1658 and 1662, during the lead-up to and fall-out from the return of monarchy