Chapter 1

A Nonconformist Women’s Literary Tradition

The Women Writers of the Steele Circle, 1720–1840

*Other British Voices* presents the lives and writings of four women who comprised the heart of the second generation of what is now known as the Steele circle. This circle of nonconformist (primarily Baptist) women writers originated in the West Country of England in the early 1700s and eventually stretched to Bristol, Southampton, London, and Leicester. The first generation was led by the diarist Anne Cator Steele (1689–1760), wife of William Steele III (1685–1769), Baptist minister at Broughton, Hampshire; she was joined by her talented stepdaughter and poet, Anne Steele (1717–78), who published *Poems on Subjects Chiefly Devotional* in 1760 under the nom de plume “Theodosia,” and another daughter, Mary Steele Wakeford (1724–72), also a gifted poet. The central figure in the second generation was Mary Steele (later Dunscombe) (1753–1813), Anne Cator Steele’s granddaughter and Anne Steele’s niece, author of *Danebury: or The Power of Friendship, A Tale. With Two Odes*, which appeared anonymously in 1779. The younger Steele’s reputation as a poet, though eclipsed by (and later confused with) that of Anne Steele, was sufficient to sustain her own coterie of literary friends, including Mary Scott (later Taylor) (1751–93) of Milborne Port; Somerset, author of the poems *The Female Advocate* (1774) and *Messiah: A Poem* (1788); Jane Attwater (later Blatch) (1753–1843) and her sister, Marianna Attwater (later Head) (1742?–1832), of Bodenham, near Salisbury—the former a prolific diarist and the latter a clever poet;
and Elizabeth Coltman (1761–1838) of Leicester, Mary Steele’s closest literary friend after the death of Mary Scott and who was herself a poet, periodical writer, and author of moral and political tracts between 1799 and 1820. The third generation centered upon the poet Maria Grace Andrews Saffery (1772–1858) and her sister Anne (1774–1865). They moved to Salisbury from London in the early 1790s and, through their marriages, became friends and relations of the Steele and Attwater families. Maria Grace, the second wife of John Saffery (1763–1825), Particular Baptist minister at Salisbury, published *Cheyt Sing* (1790), a narrative poem composed when she was 15; *The Noble Enthusiast* (1792), a Minerva Press novel; and *Poems on Sacred Subjects* (1834).¹

Most of the writings of the Steele circle have remained in manuscript, preserved by their descendants for more than two centuries. Among these manuscripts are their “signature poems,” to use Paula Backscheider’s term, “acts of self-definition” that reveal, through a variety of prose forms, both formal and informal, their “strong individual voices” as women writers (16). Women’s manuscripts of the eighteenth century have occasionally been “(re)discovered in attics, library cupboards, or behind wallpaper” (Grundy 185), a statement that rings true for the Steele circle, since much of the Reeves, Saffery, Whitaker, and Attwater Collections now residing at Oxford were found in an attic (Reeves, *Sheep Bell* 36–41, 92). Informal writings, like those of the Steele circle,

teach us something of how it felt to live as a woman in a culture (so different from our own, yet sharing so much with it) in which the inferiority and subordination of women was utterly taken for granted. They can teach us something important, too, about the impulse to literature—the sources of poems, stories, and so on—something of how to read the work of those who broke into literature from the outside, who in taking up the pen were claiming a privilege which in general was denied to them. (Grundy 185)

Such writings—whether published anonymously, under a nom de plume, or left as a manuscript—became the primary artifacts of a religious and literary culture that, despite its constraints, promoted a competence and independence in its women writers that belies “inferiority” or “subordination.” As nonconformist women, their “impulse to literature” does not seem to have emerged from their desire to claim “a privilege which in general was denied to them.” On the contrary, their writings were valorized within their culture as if they were a popular literary gazette; only in this instance, these women served as