

# LILIAS SKENE: QUAKER POET AND SOCIAL ACTIVIST IN SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY ABERDEEN

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## ABSTRACT

This article looks at one aspect of the life and work of Liliaskene through historical and theological lenses. It will discuss how Skene's status as a Quaker provided her with a relative position of power in comparison to many other women in seventeenth century Scotland, and how she utilised this power to challenge traditional societal models. First, the historical setting will be established before considering how Skene's acts of rebellion disrupted the customs of polite society, and how her poetry subverted traditional gender norms. Through close study of several poems containing violent and war-like imagery, Skene's rhetorical skill and Biblical knowledge will be demonstrated. Her literary legacy has seen few studies and this article seeks to illuminate a long-forgotten poet with a unique position, outlook, and agenda in the history of Scottish women's writing.

## INTRODUCTION

Liliaskene (1626–1697) was a preacher, a prophet and a poet. She was also a member of one of the most controversial religious societies of the seventeenth century: the Religious Society of Friends, also known as Quakers (DesBrisay, 2004a). Examining her unique position as a Quaker and a poet allows a modern reader to reconsider established notions of power and gender in the seventeenth century. This article considers to what extent Skene's poetic output challenged the societally accepted divisions of gender in early modern Aberdeen through her most politically engaged works, written during a period of the prolonged incarceration of her fellow Quakers, which included members of her family. Through her poetry, her ministry and her radical actions, she upset the established balance of seventeenth century gender roles by challenging her male orthodox superiors within the Church of Scotland, or Scottish Kirk. She committed to this then radical movement at the expense of her personal safety. Examining her poetic legacy provides insights into the complex and fierce relationship between the Quakers and their physical and spiritual antagonists.

Today the Quaker movement, also called the Religious Society of Friends, is known for its commitment to fostering "equality and peace" worldwide (Quakers in Britain, 2019). However, it was considered controversial in the seventeenth century. The movement originated during the time of the English Civil War (1642–1651), when George Fox began preaching in towns and rural areas of Leicestershire. Fox succeeded in drawing supporters, and by 1660 there were sixty thousand members of the Religious Society of Friends worldwide (Mack, 1989, p.1). The early Quakers believed that every individual had the potential for 'salvation' if they turned to the 'Inner Light,' meaning Christ's redeeming power, but that each person was also vulnerable to the inescapable presence of sin. This battle of 'good' against 'evil' was known as the 'War of the Lamb', and its theological implementation led to unprecedented Quaker militancy which shocked seventeenth century society. The Quakers used this militancy to fight their antagonists both spiritual, in the form of abstract 'sin' in the Lamb's War, and

physical, meaning Kirk and council elders who penalised the small group of Aberdonian Quakers for what they saw as transgressions.

Skene was a leading figure of the early Quaker movement in Aberdeen, industrious in both her religious and social activism. As well as being an important figure in early Quakerism, she occupies a unique position in the literary history of Scottish women's writing. Firstly, her body of poetry represents a rare, early written text by a non-aristocratic female writer (Giles, 2004, p. 113). Secondly, as a Quaker, she had a relative degree of support within her collective which provided her with a platform from which to write and preach with more freedom at a time when women were actively discouraged from taking on a public role. Despite this relative freedom, Skene's leadership was only truly accepted by her community while she was pronouncing God's ministry, rather than when expressing her own private views. Although writing religious poetry provided early modern Scottish women "the opportunity to record creatively their personal spiritual journeys" (Giles, 2004, p. 117), Skene's poetry more often acts as a rhetorical and political tool.

## APPROACH

Skene's role as a Friend (another name for a Quaker) dominates her work, therefore, my investigation takes an interdisciplinary approach. Historically, I consider Skene's position as a woman in the late seventeenth century, while theologically, I take into account her status as a devoted Quaker. Utilising one of the few studies of Skene's work, carried out by Gordon DesBrisay in *Woman and the Feminine in Medieval and Early Modern Scottish Writing* (2004b), I examine Skene's poetic works, written during the 1670s when she was politically engaged in campaigning for the release of her close family members from prison. DesBrisay argues that aspects of Skene's work utilises masculine Biblical personae, particularly male prophets from the Bible such as Abraham, as a rhetorical device (a persuasive verbal or written technique which influences an audience) to command authority when addressing antagonists. As well as DesBrisay's thesis, I will use Phyllis Mack's *Visionary Women*

(1989), an exciting study of women's religious radicalism in the seventeenth century. Both DesBrisay and Mack's work explore the complex nuances and consequences of women's religious writing during this period. Utilising their texts as a foundation, I will consider how Skene's work from the 1670s relates to complex acts of the early Quaker subversion of gender roles, both within herself as a devout individual and within her Quaker collective. As one of the Quaker's most controversial principles asserted that men and women are equal, they countered contemporary notions of gendered power. They believed that women should be allowed not only to speak openly in church and elsewhere, but to actively preach the word of God. This was very controversial and completely contrasted the Scottish Presbyterian Kirk's contemporary doctrines, taken from I Corinthians:

Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but they are commanded to be under obedience, as also saith the law. And if they will learn any thing, let them ask their husbands at home: for it is a shame for women to speak in the church (The Bible, I Corinthians. 14:34–35).

### ACTS OF REBELLION

Skene rebelled against the social customs of the day indirectly, through her poetry, and directly, through her deliberately disruptive behaviour. The written word in the form of pamphlets and literature was considered by many Quakers to be an important weapon in the Lamb's War (Healey, 2018, p. 17). As well as writing challenging poetic works, Skene was known for disrupting Presbyterian ministers' sermons and imploring the gathered parishioners to denounce the orthodoxy's teachings. Equally radical in the seventeenth-century, when addressing both fellow Quakers and non-Quakers, they refused all forms of honourific (e.g. 'master', 'my lord', 'my lady') (Bauman, 1983, p. 45) and did not accept or use greetings of "civil courtesy" such as 'good day' and 'farewell' (Higginson, 1653). These seemingly small acts of discourtesy completely contrasted the expected social customs, making the Quakers radical to seventeenth century society.

Despite her knowledge of the dangerous punishments the Quaker community faced in light of their transgressions, Skene continued to propagate her messages and warnings to the masses through her poetry. The Quakers' discordant behaviour established their unpopularity among society and for this they were verbally and physically taunted in the streets and public places. They were called "a damnable sect" (Burnet, 1952, p. 18) by Presbyterian ministers, and thousands were imprisoned for their actions (Bacon, 1986, p. 12). In *Visionary Women* (1989), Mack details many horrific cases of Quaker punishments, such as naked public whipping and hot iron torture.

Skene's most active period of writing and preaching was in the 1670s, when the Aberdeenshire Quaker community faced their cruellest treatment. Every adult male Quaker was imprisoned in the Aberdeen Tolbooth jail in squalid conditions (Coffey, 2004). Skene became the surrogate leader of the community and her poetic works from this time include prophetic warnings, apocalyptic declarations, and promises of divine retribution utilising what might be considered a 'masculine' voice. As a Quaker, Skene's leadership was accepted among her community due to their foundational belief in men and women's equality, however, as she is addressing the captors as well as the captives through her poetry, she ventriloquizes masculine Biblical personae as a tool of overpowering the authority of her non-Quaker adversaries.

### VENGEANCE

During this period, Skene wrote avidly and viciously. Even as she writes with the intention to send a message of hope to the imprisoned, Skene employs a vengeful narrative to warn the captors of God's inevitable retribution. A prominent feature of Skene's writing at this time is her prolific use of the language of war and weapons, for example "Come all yee mightie men bring forth your shield / Yee valient ones appeare now in the field." She orates like a captain of battle, using the voice and words of God, who leads this assault. Skene's violent pronouncements are in complete contrast to other Scottish women's religious writings from the early modern period. For example, Elizabeth Melville's most famous work, *Ane Godlie Dreame* (1603), takes the reader on a religious dream-vision journey. Overall, Melville chooses a more introspective and personal style (Giles, 2004, p. 102) while Skene's tone in this period could be called 'bloodthirsty', echoing that of the Old Testament God. However, Mack (1989, p. 85) writes that women were often considered as "an embodiment of the true wisdom of the heart as well as a positive political emblem." Based on this logic, the so-called 'masculine' voice representing anger and warfare is more profound and more powerful when expressed by a woman. If the boundaries of masculinity and femininity are blurred and she can break from gendered characteristics, Skene's poetic voice is liberated (to an extent) from a traditional gendered discourse at the time of her writing these works. From the position of a female leader, she appears to be unrestrained, but perhaps this is only within her community, or while she is vocalising God's ministry. Skene's Quaker contemporaries might be unsure that she is justified in her claim to be an "instrument of divine authority" (Mack, 1989, p. 85) but, through her poetry, Skene makes it very clear that she believes she is an active part of relaying God's divine authority to the oppressed as well as the oppressors.

For example, her 1677 poem 'Not many great nor noble' begins with the genuine threat of the Lord's gathered militia:

And by his arme [army] of power shall gathered be,  
From darknes gross [grows] the shying light to sie

This 'army of power' means not just the small, Aberdonian community of Quakers but all the followers of Quakerism in the world. Skene's warnings of divine retribution towards her individual and local enemies are often twinned with the strength of the devout, global Quaker community in the eternal struggle of 'good' versus 'evil', – the Lamb's War the 'Lamb's War.' She utilises the image of an 'army', which has the effect of emboldening the captives' spirits as well as intimidating the oppressors. It should be noted that the relentless militancy the Quakers' had shown in their earlier days in support of their cause means that these threats of violence could be interpreted as genuine. The contrast of 'darkness' and 'shining light,' images frequently found in both the Bible and Quaker verse, represents the strength of virtue over sin. Skene continues with a stronger promise of battle:

Yea for his spiritual warfare hath train'd bands  
And their provision keeps in his owne hands

This powerful threat of 'spiritual warfare' demonstrates Skene's conviction in the strength and power of the collected Quaker community, who believe that they alone have God on their side. The poem continues:

For everie souldier he hatte weapons there  
For some a battle axe, a sword, a bow  
As hee hath service weapons hee'll bestow

Descriptions of martial weaponry evokes the magnitude of the anger of these early Quakers whose philosophy of vengeance mirrors that of the Old Testament God. This could be termed

‘unfeminine’ imagery, as war and military action in the seventeenth century rarely includes female participants. Aligning herself and her language with an image of ‘masculine’ divine judgement is another way in which Skene’s work from this period subverts gendered conventions. It also reinforces the Quaker’s spiritual and physical roles as members of a ‘gathered army’ and promises God’s vengeance against the captors. Further threats follow in the same work:

For sure the Lord will trouble them at lenthe  
Who still trouble you

[...]

And Pharaoh’s might shall, by the Lord,  
Be overthrowne and left upon record

Skene writes ferociously against those responsible for imprisoning her fellow Quakers as if they are the direct enemies of God from the Old Testament. The inclusion of the familiar comparison of the general enemies of the Quakers to ‘Pharaoh,’ the enemy of the Israelites in the Old Testament, creates imagery easily decipherable to an audience familiar with the scripture. By utilising these “bellicose biblical pronouncements” (DesBrisay, 2004b, p. 168), this validates her own voice as a prophet. In another ‘bellicose biblical pronouncement’ from the same poem, Skene references ‘God’s Judgements on the Nations’ in which:

The Lord will bath his sword in Edom’s blood  
And vengeance recompense on all her brood

The language Skene has chosen is very similar to the passage found in the Bible:

The sword of the Lord is filled with blood [...] for  
the Lord hath a sacrifice in Bozrah, and a great  
slaughter in the land of Idumea [Edom] (The  
Bible, Isaiah. 34:6).

This Biblical prophecy declares that all enemies of God shall be destroyed. Skene harnesses this testimony to mirror her immediate situation and strengthen her warnings against the captors. The closing sentiment of this addresses the suffering universal Quaker community directly:

We have engaged in the holy warre  
And followers of the Lamb accounted are  
Maintaine your ground, lett none beat [heal] from it

Skene, again, disrupts preconceived gendered values through the lucidity and assertiveness of this work. Her ‘battle-captain’ rhetoric strongly juxtaposes spiritual verse by non-Quaker, Scottish female poets. Women in seventeenth-century Scotland were not encouraged to share their feelings especially if they were violent, aggressive, angry or could be interpreted in a way which might compromise their ‘dignity’ (Ross, 2015) but Skene commands these threats fluently. While scholar Grace Jantzen writes that Quaker women poets “encouraged a choice of life over a preoccupation with death” (Jantzen, 2005), this is clearly not the case in Skene’s work. Her poems containing violent imagery and vengeance counters Jantzen’s theory of a gendered preoccupation with either ‘life’ or ‘death.’

### AGAINST THE KIRK

Through the 1670s, Skene’s social activism provoked outrage from the Aberdeen Presbytery as she bravely targeted and reproved specific individuals, pushing against the orthodoxy’s imposed gender boundaries. It was unheard of for a woman to challenge the authority of the Kirk, or the Presbyterian Church of Scotland so directly. In her published sermon ‘A Word of Warning to the Magistrats and Inhabitants of Aberdene’ (1677), Skene ventriloquises the Biblical patriarchy to confront her

personal and public adversaries: “Like Egypts taskmasters ye have increased the tale of Brick and instead of setting them more at liberty ye have added to their bonds” (Skene, 1681). She writes as a superior reproaching her subordinates (contrasting later works such as ‘He said he wold perfect me mor’ (1691) where she narrates herself as the subject of reproach). Through her skill with language, she recognises and utilises the rhetorical function of gender when approaching those outwith Quaker circles (DesBrisay, 2004b, p. 165).

One particular targeted individual was the Presbyterian minister George Meldrum (Walker, 1887, p. 90). Skene specifically invites Meldrum to enter into open debate with her:

Thy queries all I answer: come and sie  
Then shall thou know the doctrine if it be  
Of God or not when thou hath done his will  
Iff whats already knowne thou doe fulfil  
Then with me come, bow down thy neck and take  
The cross of Christ and beare shame for his sake.

To address a minister in this way, with language which challenges and provokes, would have been considered by Kirk contemporaries as entirely offensive (Walker, 1887, p. 90). However, Skene’s courage is effortless – her confidence in this poem’s pronouncements come from her self-assurance and strength as part of the collective Quaker movement as well as her deep knowledge of the Scripture. Her ferocity with the pen as much as her social activism during this period made her infamous in Aberdeen as well as in other parts of the country, namely Edinburgh where her husband was fined due to her ‘transgressions’ (DesBrisay, 2004b, p. 162).

The proclamatory nature of several other works from this period, such as ‘Some lessons learned in the light of Jesus’ and ‘Withold thy foot be not wunshod [unshod]’ suggest that Skene may have used these works to publicly preach Quaker ideas. Still, the act of writing – and of sharing written work – remained just as important as public ministry (Gill, 2005, p. 7). Although Skene’s work was not printed during her lifetime, she may have been writing with a larger audience in mind. It is not clear whether Skene herself aspired to this; as Margaret Edzell (1996) states, “women’s writing was allowed to sink out of sight, while their charitable works and heroic actions were carefully recorded and celebrated in Quaker history.” In the present day, Skene’s poetic legacy is recorded more often by Scottish Quakers than the ‘heroic actions’ of her social activism (*Quakers in Scotland*, 1989, p. 70).

### CONCLUSION

Lilias Skene’s confrontational words and actions as a Quaker leader overturned traditional gender norms among Aberdeen society. The zenith of Skene’s poetic energy comes when she is most politically engaged, in acts such as challenging members of the Kirk, disruptive public preaching, and writing subversive poetry. Having had new power and responsibility thrust upon her in the period of male Quaker incarceration, she was able to act in response to the prejudice, injustice and suffering of not only the Friends in her region, but those Friends in suffering across the country. She was able to engage with ministers and town counsellors through her awareness of gendered voices and Biblical references in her poetry.

Lilias Skene was a formidable woman, with poetic skill and radical sensibilities. The early Quaker movement provided her with many things: a platform from which to preach, spiritual authority and a collective network of support to share in the spiritual and physical trials that came with the Inner Light. She sought a voice for herself, her faith and her community and supported Fox’s reading of the Bible, which allowed for women’s vocal inclusion in Quaker worship and ministry. She

utilised her poetry to respond to her personal environment and circumstances, but at the same time, her rhetorical skill is consistent; her voice resonates beyond the personal or autobiographical. Skene has contributed a literary legacy to a challenging movement. As a Quaker, she exemplified a degree

of literary freedom to exercise her poetic talents while many other women's voices were silenced. I hope this study will illuminate a long-forgotten poet with a unique position, outlook and agenda in the history of Scottish women's writing.

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